

Custodians of the Vines

STORY AND IMAGES BY RICHARD CORNISH

Between Malmsbury and Daylesford, is a dead-end lane that dips and swerves with the lay of the land. Zig Zag Road cuts through the last of the fertile basalt soils before they give way to the hard quartz country near Taradale. On the side of a hill, in the rich red soil, is planted a small vineyard. At just under three hectares Zig Zag Wines is not the smallest vineyard in the region but it is one of the oldest with first vines planted in 1972. The shiraz vines dating back then are thick and gnarled.

New owners are English ex-pats Henry and Harriet Churchill. Both experts in the field of international sustainable food production, they accidentally fell in love with wine when they moved to Melbourne. Harriet is friends with the partner of one of the owners of Bar Liberty in Fitzroy. The fun and funky bar focuses on natural wines and the young English couple became so entranced with the possibilities that wine production brings they ended up in Coonawarra. For two vintages they made wine with Sue Bell from Bellweather Wines. "She has such a great attitude not only to wine making, but sharing it with other people," says Harriet.

Left: Henry and Harriet Churchill with son Albert



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People. It is the word that comes up again and again in the Churchill's conversation. They have worked all their adult lives connecting like-minded people who share the same ideas and values. That is one of the underpinning concepts of sustainability. Harriet explains that without a family here in Australia, and without a network of friends formed over a lifetime to help with harvest, they are pretty much on their own. Now coming up to their second vintage at the winery they are counting on a community of 'farm sharers' to help with the workload. In return for 20 days labour on the vineyard over the course of the year, helpers will have access to a beautifully restored railway caboose for accommodation along with workshops and training in wine making.

We walk through the vineyard. The grass in every third row is quite high and has not been mown. "We are moving towards bio dynamic vineyard management," says Harry. "We are very happy to be working with Gilles Lapalus," he adds, referring to the influential French born winemaker who now lives locally. The tall grass acts as corridors for birds and insects that help keep the balance of bugs in the vineyard in check.



Henry pours a glass of merlot. Despite the red earth, which means there is a lot of iron in the soil, the wine doesn't reflect this. The wines from Zig Zag are very much driven by the fruit. Big bold fruit flavours that are allowed to express themselves. There is a back note of eucalyptus, reflecting the proximity to the

native forest. The wine on sale was made by previous owners and the Churchills will continue to make wine in the same style to look after the loyal Zig Zag wine lovers. Shortly, however, they will announce a second label under which they will make more 'natural' wines

that will focus on natural yeasts and influences of oxidation on the process. In the meantime the young couple continue to focus on growing quality grapes using natural vineyard methods. "We see ourselves as custodians of the land and the vines," says Harriet. "Not the new owners."

Zig Zag Rd Wines, 201 Zig Zag Rd North Drummond. Cellar Door open Thursday-Monday 10am-5pm.

Wines are also available at Cellarbrations at Foxy's Daylesford.

