

Happy in Harmony

WORDS

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PHOTOGRAPHY

Courtesy of Box Grove Vineyard.

From wine writer to winemaker, Sarah Gough is making her fruit sing at Box Grove.

Gough created her first vintage from estate fruit in 2008.

PLOTTING YOUR FUTURE CAREER can seem like a mammoth task when you're a wide-eyed 17-year-old, fresh out of school and yearning to explore the world. For Sarah Gough of Box Grove Vineyard in Tabilk, Victoria, winemaking is now more a way of life than a job, and her passion for the grape has helped to enrich not only her own life, but the lives of others.

Raised in the inner suburbs of Melbourne, Gough spent many a weekend at her relatives' farm in Meredith, collecting eggs, riding ponies and slowly becoming enamoured with the agrarian lifestyle. From the age of 15, she worked in Crittenden's wine store in Toorak, wrapping Christmas hampers and, naturally, listening to people talk about wine. At university, Gough felt uninspired with her studies in French and psychology. She says she "didn't even find the library until halfway through the year", instead preferring boys and listening to the band, Skyhooks. When a change in her major to economics failed to ignite an intellectual fire, Doug Crittenden told her he could help her get into Roseworthy Agricultural College in South Australia to study wine production and marketing, and a new phase in her life began.





Gough started her wine education at Roseworthy College.

Through Roseworthy, Gough learnt about viticulture and winemaking, focusing on the “raw, new science” of marketing. During her studies, she completed several vintages with Peter Lehmann, before returning to Melbourne and working at WJ Seabrook & Son Merchants, where another, informal, wine education took place. After winning a *Winestate* magazine competition, Gough was flown to Adelaide, where she sat next to the renowned Len Evans at the awards dinner. Expressing a desire to gain some more wine-related experience in Europe, Gough jumped at Evans’ offer to travel to France, and look after the guests at his châteaux in Graves and Barsac.

This period in Gough’s life was transformative, not only due to her exposure to wine but also to food; she has fond memories of the vigneron fining their wines with egg whites in early spring and then using the leftover yolks to make hollandaise sauce, to be poured over fresh asparagus from the garden. It made for a change from the “tinned asparagus on brown bread” her grandmother used to serve, she says. Her time in France was meant to last for three months; instead it stretched out to a year, even affording her the chance

to watch the picking and sorting of botrytised fruit at the celebrated Château d'Yquem in Sauternes.



Working as a wine writer at *The Age* lit a fire in Gough.

On her return to Australia, Gough took up the role of occasional wine writer for *The Age*, which soon became full-time – helped, no doubt, by having many contacts in France and the US. In the role, the chance to try some amazing wines “lit a fire” in her, she says. Winning a Churchill Fellowship in the 1980s took Gough to Japan, with an eye to exploring the future of Australian wine in that market; while there, she met Ross Brown (of Brown Brothers Winery) who offered her a job in their marketing department.

After a decade in her marketing role, she'd gained valuable industry knowledge, but was keen to get married and move on to other things. In 1995, after mentioning she would be relocating to a 182ha property in the Nagambie area, Brown Brothers asked if she'd be happy to plant 10ha each of shiraz and cabernet there, based on their knowledge of the quality of the area's soil. Gough acquired the property, originally used for sheep farming, in Tabilk, a short distance from Chateau Tahbilk (they added the 'h' later). Given that Tahbilk had become synonymous with, and celebrated for, its marsanne, Gough looked to its often-forgotten sidekick, roussanne, establishing six acres of the grape.



Having planted many vines and adapted to a life of raising children on a farm, Gough now felt detached from Brown Brothers, an hour and a half to the north-east, and somewhat “soulless” from picking tonnes of fruit and sending it all away. When the Global Financial Crisis hit in 2008, financial markets crashed and the wine industry was immediately affected, with Brown Brothers admitting that her contract may not be renewed due to the current climate. After Black Saturday destroyed lives and livelihoods the following year, with embers from Kilmore landing on their farm, Gough and husband Vivian quickly realised that you “don’t want to put all your eggs in one basket again”.

She spoke to winemaker Matt Fowles, of Fowles Wines in Avenel, about working together and they came to an agreement regarding her fruit: Gough would take all the risk in the vineyard and he would do likewise in the winery. Thus, 2009 became a year of tremendous change. Nagambie cabernet never really commanded a premium, and because Italian varieties were becoming increasingly popular at that stage, the vines were grafted over to primitivo, vermentino and prosecco; around 97% of the grafts survived. Viognier was also planted, to be sold to other winemakers and paired with shiraz, or to be used in her sumptuous, late-harvest sticky.



Since creating her first vintage from her estate fruit in 2008 – in “tiny amounts” – Gough now uses around 25% of the crop for her own wines, with the rest sold as a way to

diversify. The ensuing years have seen her welcome many young winemakers. “It’s really fulfilling to see the wines that people make from your grapes,” she says.

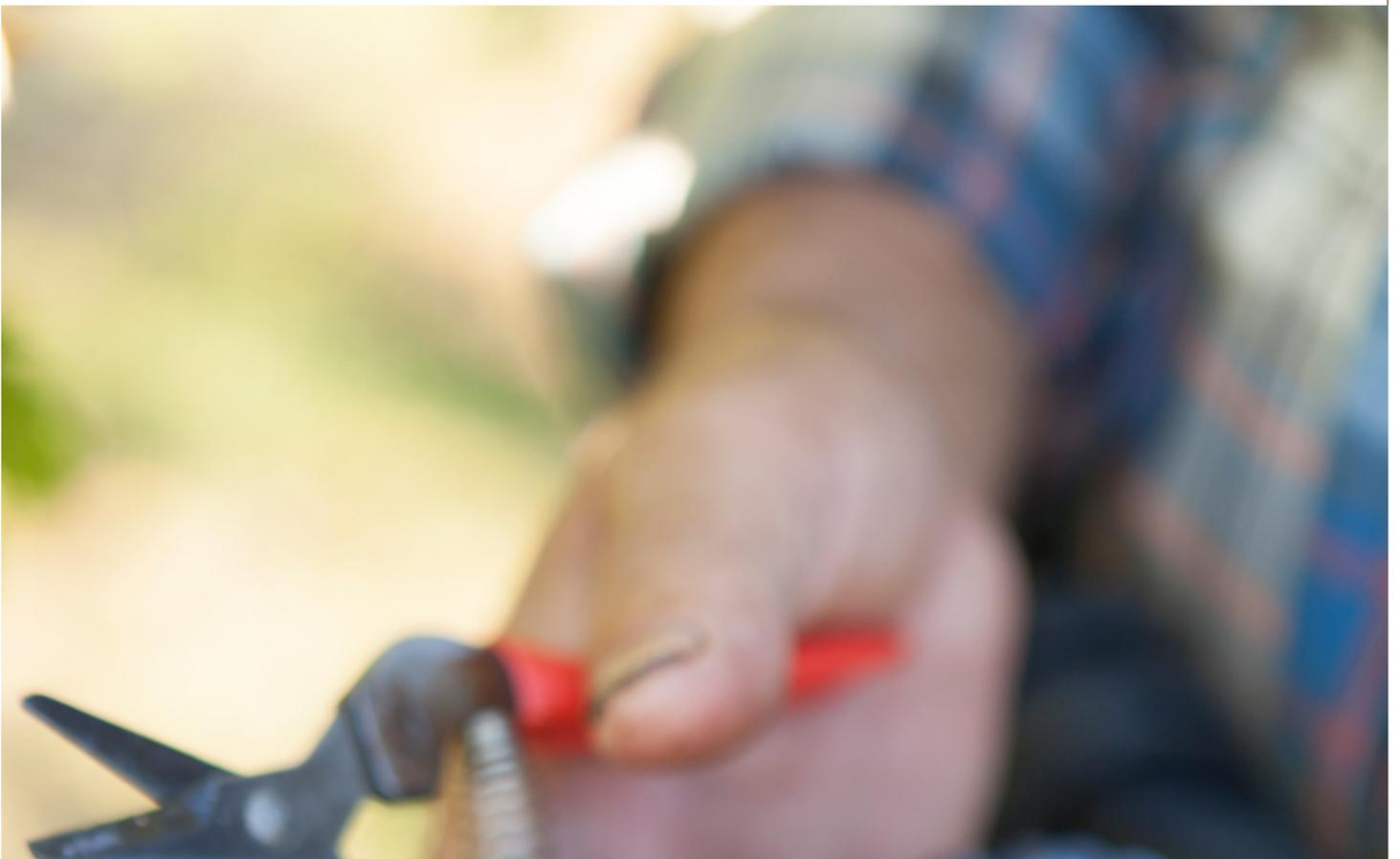
Partly due to her travels and tastes, as well as to the climate, Gough’s list of grapes focuses heavily on varieties associated with the Rhône – roussanne, shiraz, mourvèdre, viognier and grenache – and Italy, including vermentino, primitivo, nebbiolo and negroamaro. Portugal has also recently made an appearance, with small plots of souzão and arinto established, after a fruit buyer was reminded of the country during his visit and suggested she plant some Portuguese varieties; Jen Pfeiffer, of Pfeiffer Wines in Rutherglen, has been using the souzão for her own vintage port for several years.





When you spend enough time with Gough, chatting over several glasses of her marvellous wine, you gain a glimpse into her *raison d'être*: viticulture and winemaking are not just about making and selling an end product but about finding a way to let the fruit “sing”, always trying new things, and not being afraid to make mistakes or challenge expectations.

As a case in point, in 2018 she created an unconventional roussanne as a possible option for blending, made using carbonic maceration (favoured in Beaujolais with gamay), resulting in a light-bodied wine with wax, honey and white pepper that has to be tasted to be truly understood.





Around 75% of the grapes at Box Grove are sold to other winemakers.

What appeals most to Gough about winemaking is “the personalities of the wines and uncovering ... different flavours and finding what foods they go with”. Food is therefore a big part of her personal and professional life, as she operates an on-site *osteria* (a simple and inexpensive Italian restaurant), offering delicacies from local producers, as well as cheese from her cousins at Meredith Dairy.

While her farm and vineyard are not technically organic, Gough has an army of guinea fowl who travel through the vines each morning, eating grasshoppers, acting as great watchdogs, and keeping the sprays to a minimum.



Box Grove produces mainly Rhône- and Italian-style wines.

As it has for many winemakers, Covid-19 has had a dramatic impact, with far fewer visitors this year, except for when Melbourne's first lockdown was eased and many city dwellers were itching to leave the suburbs.

This has led Gough to embrace smaller retailers who truly believe in her wines and to deal directly with the public as much as possible.

She also plans to expand her focus, which means planting more grape varieties, continuing to work with young winemakers in search of quality fruit, and to always keep learning and trying something new. So far, the results have paid off splendidly.



2018 Box Grove Vineyard Primitivo, A\$39

Power. Grace. Balance. It sounds like the mystical force from *Star Wars* but is instead this superb, ultra-ripe wine. Made by drying one-third of the grapes in a silo (like an Amarone della Valpolicella), which concentrates the sugars and flavours, and increases the alcohol. Expect raspberry, clove, pepper, dried fruit and vanilla. It hides its 15.8% ABV very, very well. The 2017 and 2016 primitivos are also excellent.

2016 Box Grove Vineyard Shiraz Roussanne, A\$32

Currently in a sweet spot, this wine has a beautiful mix of primary fruit and aged, tertiary characters, such as blackberry, cherry, raspberry, mint, leather and meat. It has a silky mouthfeel, making it a pleasure to drink, and while it could last for several more years, it might be difficult to wait.

2015 Box Grove Vineyard Shiraz VP, A\$28

Already showing great complexity, this vintage port matches perfectly with rich chocolate desserts or salty, strong-flavoured cheeses. There's a pleasant smokiness to it, over aromas and flavours of prune, Christmas cake, anise, dried red fruits and dark chocolate. It should age well for many years.

