



Sowing for the Future

WORDS

Brendan Black

PHOTOGRAPHY

Courtesy of Wine Unplugged.

Little did Nina Stocker and Callie Jemmeson know when they started Wine Unplugged that it would evolve into the well-known labels Pacha Mama and Cloak & Dagger.



SOMETIMES IT CAN TAKE A WHILE to come around to the idea of becoming a winemaker, even if you grew up around wine and had parents in the industry. Buying land and setting up a vineyard and winery demand much time and capital before any financial benefit is seen, putting the dream out of reach for many.

Callie Jemmeson and Nina Stocker have embraced a different mode of operation, proving to themselves and others that their foray into wine was worth the wait and the challenges.

With a dad like Dave who worked in wine distribution, Jemmeson was no stranger to wine, although she'd never contemplated the field for herself. After completing a degree in psychology and criminology and then working as a chef, she eventually concluded that, while she had a passion for food, she didn't want to remain in the background. Winemaking, on the other hand, involved creativity, science and culture, as well as collaboration, and often dealing directly with the people who consume your product. A decision to change direction was soon made.

Stocker, meanwhile, spent her formative years in Switzerland, growing up in a little village near the French border, where a vineyard was managed by the local co-op. After moving back to Australia, her parents established their own vineyard on the Goulburn River, which they'd visit every week; while other dads would spend their weekends playing golf, hers would tend to the vines, enlisting the help of his daughters. After studying science and arts and contemplating becoming a journalist, her dad (scientist and winemaker Dr John Stocker AO) suggested doing a vintage while she worked at a cocktail bar. A seed was planted.



Callie Jemmeson and Nina Stocker (right) met via Callie's father, Dave.

For both Jemmeson and Stocker, their first wine-related jobs involved cleaning out drains and tanks and spending long hours sorting fruit – and they loved it. Jemmeson ended up working full-time in the lab at De Bortoli, before enrolling in the Bachelor of Wine Science at Charles Sturt University, and then completing vintages overseas.

She stated in her first winery interview that she was attracted to winemaking because of the “romance” (something her employer made sure to bring up later), and not having to be confined to an office or kitchen suited her perfectly.

Stocker was at Wirra Wirra, doing 12-hour shifts and then heading down to the beach with a beer and friend – “heaven on earth”. A post-grad in winemaking at Roseworthy College in South Australia soon followed, then vintages in Barolo, Yarra Valley, Rhône Valley, and Portugal. Stocker had met and enjoyed a good rapport with Dave Jemmeson, and it was while “pumping over this tank of touriga nacional” at midnight in Portugal that he called and offered her a job in New Zealand as an assistant winemaker – which quickly became head winemaker.

Following the stint in New Zealand and after having moved back to Australia to have her first baby, Stocker received another call from Dave, this time with an offer to be the winemaker for his brand, Pacha Mama, which would allow her to have more freedom and not have to be stuck at the winery all the time. Jemmeson, hearing that Stocker was coming on board, jumped at the chance to work with her, and she credits Stocker with having taught her “everything she knows” about winemaking.

Pacha Mama was originally the brainchild of Dave and several friends, and the wines were first made at Tar & Roses in Nagambie before finding their own space. Jemmeson subsequently created the company **Wine Unplugged** (wineunplugged.com.au), under which she and Stocker now make wine for two main labels: Pacha Mama, named following a trip by Dave and Callie to Machu Pichu; and Cloak & Dagger, in honour of the steeliness and acidity of their pinot gris, and the velvety sangiovese (not because of any thriller-worthy happenings).



One of the women's first joint ventures was leasing a winery in Victoria's Strathbogie Ranges, which gave them the opportunity to have more control over the final product, while working with trusted growers. They have tried hard to counter the idea that winemakers need their own vineyards in order to make quality wine, a belief that is foreign in Old-World winemaking countries such as France, where the *négociant* (someone who makes wine from grapes supplied by growers or bottles wines made by others under their own label) is common; it's a practice that is becoming increasingly widespread elsewhere.

Given the burdensome amounts of capital needed to establish and nurture a vineyard before it is ready to produce fruit, having relationships with 14 established growers around Victoria has helped Jemmeson and Stocker immensely. The wines are now made at Rob Dolan's impressive winery in Warrandyte South, a huge facility where many young winemakers have received support to start their careers.

In addition to Wine Unplugged, Stocker manages Brave Goose, the home vineyard established by her father near Tallarook, alongside husband John Day, who also happens to be the viticulturist. The property is stunning, with the drive down to the house and cellar door providing an unmatched view of the surrounding mountain ranges, and the wines are a delight, particularly the viognier and shiraz/gamay.

Meanwhile, Jemmeson's husband, Nic Sandery, is the founder of Molly Rose Brewing in Collingwood, which makes an incredible array of delicious beers.

Stocker is also a contract winemaker for Ellis Wines in Heathcote, as well as a highly regarded winemaker under her label for Naked Wines, Two Pairs, which she manages with her sister-in-law, Kate Day; the name comes from the fact that Nina and Kate's husbands are identical twin brothers.

Jemmeson and Stocker have worked hard to strengthen the image of female winemakers, proving that winemaking and motherhood do not need to be mutually exclusive endeavours. They have supported each other greatly in many ways, making it easier for each to start families and deal with maternity leave. Their partnership involves a great deal of symbiosis; if one was feeling down, the other would help bring them up.



What struck me when speaking with them is that they are driven by their passion for wine, for challenging themselves and for exploring new ways of tackling old problems.

One example is their willingness to try cans for wine – in their case a blend of Yarra Valley pinot noir with Heathcote shiraz. Given that a wine bottle itself is often heavier than its contents, or that sometimes people don't want to open an entire bottle, wine-in-a-can may help to solve both issues – provided the wine-drinking public will get on board with it.

This desire to reshape business models was particularly handy last year when Covid-19 tore through the wine trade, forcing them to adapt.

It was difficult in other ways, too, as Jemmeson had a newborn at home and no family support networks nearby, although new ones slowly emerged in the community. One benefit of the pandemic is that more people are looking to help small local businesses, and with friends and family buying through the website, a wine 'hand-off' might be made at the nearby park, the wines safely tucked at the bottom of a pram.

Apart from the website (and local park), Pacha Mama and Cloak & Dagger wines are available through independent outlets, some from Dan Murphy's, or directly via the Wine Unplugged website.

They're also planning on getting involved in farmers markets so you can try before you buy.

The pair have plans for the future – some easily attainable, others aspirational. One of the former is to source fruit such as cabernet franc and touriga nacional to create limited-release wines and blends, something both Jemmeson and Stocker love to drink. Aspirationally, the pair have a long-term goal to establish an urban winery – something becoming more common – so that they can have an easily accessible home for all of their own wines.

Wines to try

2020 Pacha Mama Riesling, Central Victoria, A\$26

This is a beautiful wine, with pronounced aromas and flavours of orange blossom, nectarine and lemon, backed by searing acidity and a surprising and pleasing weight on the palate, which hides its 13.8% ABV quite well. Don't wait until summer: drink it right now.

2020 The Cloak Sangiovese, King Valley, A\$28

With a rich palate, bright fruit and fine tannins, this is an opulent and more-ish expression of Victorian sangiovese, which should have quite a long life ahead of it. And for only \$28, it packs incredible value into its sleek bottle.

2020 Pacha Mama Pinot Noir Shiraz, Yarra Valley and Heathcote A\$30 (4 cans)

If this is your first foray into wine-in-a-can territory, you will not be disappointed. Bright and ripe red fruits and lots of acid make for a very enjoyable, quaffable drop.

