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The Seeds of Success

WINSOR DOBBIN

Winemaking family makes its mark in the Cowra community over 50 years

The COWRA region's emergence as a premium wine producing area has been closely interwoven with the history of the pioneering O'Dea family, who are this year celebrating their 50th anniversary in the Central Ranges.

In December 1959, David O'Dea, eager to make his mark on the land, purchased 320 acres outside the Central Western New South Wales town that he initially used to raise cattle and to grow lucerne, barley, wheat and a range of other crops. O'Dea's father, Sydney lawyer Cecil O'Dea, had to guarantee a loan to finance the purchase, saying he'd do so only if his son could find a property with a permanent water supply. "Following a search of far west NSW for a property with water I was steered toward the Windowie property, near Canowindra, after hearing from some geologists that there was a large underground river running under the farm," David recalls. ▶

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He'd prepared himself for life on the land with a diploma in agriculture from Hawkesbury Agricultural College, having also studied veterinary science. "I'd work at Windowrie during my holidays, putting all my newly gained lessons into practice," he remembers. "In 1962 I took over full-time farming. One of the first things I did was put down the valley's first irrigation bore in order to get to the water that I knew was there."

Over the next 10 years David and his wife Wizz, a farmer's daughter, purchased a neighbouring 410 acres and immersed themselves in the Cowra community. David captained the Cowra rugby team and later became coach and president of the club.

The family planted vines in 1988 - and the rest is history, with the family's Windowrie Estate rapidly establishing itself as one of Cowra's leading wineries. Today, the O'Deas produce around 20,000 cases under their Windowrie Estate Family Reserve, The Mill, Deep River and Platinum labels - and also sell substantial quantities of grapes to major producers. Their chardonnays have earned widespread acclaim and the family exports to Europe, Asia and North America. "I had always thought that there was great potential for viticulture in the valley," David O'Dea recalls, "and Brian Croser was proving this with his Cowra Chardonnay."

The O'Deas established the first major winery in 1998, expanded their vineyards,



Above: O'Dea family. **Clockwise from left:** Petrina, Steph, Wizz, Dimity, Jason & David.
Opposite: Windowrie vineyard, winery tanks and The Mill winery restaurant.

and resurrected the town's old flour mill as a cellar door and cafe. The Mill, Cowra's oldest building, constructed in 1861 from local granite, closed down in 1905 and sat deserted for over 90 years until the O'Deas restored it by using recycled materials from a range of sources, including bulldozers, train carriages, cattle yards and detritus from Sydney Airport.

"I was away for a couple of weeks during the reconstruction," says David O'Dea. "When I got back, the cattle yards were half demolished. Wondering what was going on, I called Jason, one of my sons, who explained that they'd needed some more timber for The Mill."

Today, The Mill is a cellar door, a restaurant and a tourist attraction, while a state-of-the-art winery was first used for the 1999 vintage. Visitors are able to sample not only wines made from traditional grape varieties, but also new releases like verdelho and tempranillo under The Mill label. Windowrie also hosts the annual Concert in the Vineyard each October, with proceeds donated to the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

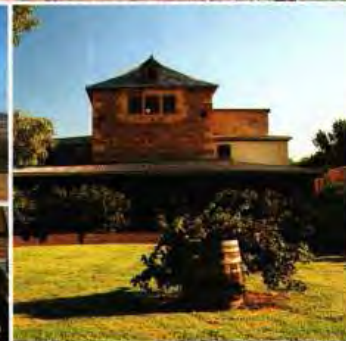


"The last 50 years have been exceptionally rewarding," says David. "I've been lucky enough to work with some fantastically committed people to help build Cowra into a serious winegrowing region, travel the world with our wines, and I'm now enjoying working with my children in the business."

Windowrie Estate is very much a family business, with David, Wizz and children Stephen, Dimity and Jason all involved - as they have been since the first plantings of 30 acres of vineyard. David is an active member of the Cowra community and the Australian wine industry. He has served two terms on the NSW Wine executive committee and is a current member of the Wine Industry Council for Primary Industry.

Son Jason is viticulturist and general manager, while son Stephen is based in China working on the export side of the wine business. Daughter Dimity is the company's European representative, based in Amsterdam.

Jason and his wife Rebecca also make a range of organic wines under the Pig In



the House label - named after the 20 free-range pigs that used to live in what is now their Cowra home. "Prior to us purchasing the 1880s house and planting the vineyard, the property was owned by a pig farmer, and the house was frequently inhabited by these pigs," explains Jason. "As with all of our Windowrie vineyards, the 'pig block' was established using minimal intervention techniques. With such a strong regional commitment to organics and environmental sustainability, it was a logical next step to gain organic accreditation."

The family recently appointed Chris O'Connor, formerly of Swift and Moore and Arrowfield, as sales director based in Sydney - a signal of their intent to grow the business further. "We are very excited to have someone of Chris's calibre working with us," says Jason. "We have been experiencing excellent growth over the past few years, and needed an experienced wine sales professional to focus on supporting these sales and help drive further business."

While Windowrie is best known for chardonnay and verdelho, the family is also excited by the potential of red grapes. "Our first plantings of cabernet, shiraz and merlot are now nearly 20 years old and we are definitely seeing the quality of the fruit improve as the vines age," says Jason. "The yields are, of course, low but the quality is going ahead in leaps and bounds."

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