

WINE

Commanding attention

Jenny Houghton's soldier-inspired vineyard is earning its stripes, writes **Jeni Port**.

SOME years back, Jenny Houghton received an email from an inquisitive Israeli who wanted to know why Lieutenant-Colonel Leslie C. Maygar, an Australian soldier with a Hungarian name, was buried on the World War I battlefields of Beersheba in his country. It seemed a fair question.

If the young man found the ensuing tangle of history, places and names confusing, he would have possibly been more perplexed to learn that Maygar and his deeds in three major conflicts were also the inspiration behind one of Houghton's wine labels.

Her vineyard, Maygars Hill, is a bit of a rarity, one of few in the world named not only after a war hero but featuring a portrait on the label of Maygar in 1903 Commonwealth full-dress uniform. It's a talking point, something the naturally loquacious Houghton doesn't mind indulging.

Sometimes she finds visitors to her winery outside Euroa arrive laden with history books as well as a thirst. "We don't even talk about wine at all," she says.

So, who was Leslie Cecil Maygar and why is there a wine connection?

It goes back to 1997 when Houghton, a flying instructor and a West Australian by birth, bought land close to the Hume Freeway, between Avenel and Euroa, known as Maygar's Hill. It lies in the foothills of the Strathbogie Ranges and is dominated by an impressive outcrop 480 metres high.

The hill is named in honour of Maygar, the son of a local grazier.

An astonishingly gifted horseman, he enlisted in the Victorian Mounted Rifles in 1891 and was awarded the Victoria Cross for his gallantry during action in the Boer War in 1901.

During World War I, he fought at Gallipoli and led the last 40 men out of Anzac Cove. He commanded the 8th Light Horse Regiment in campaigns in the Sinai and Palestine.

In 1917, he was acting brigadier-general in command of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade when he was wounded and died in the charge of the Light Horse at the Battle of Beersheba.

Slowly, as Houghton and her partner, Ian Dickson, planted the



Jenny Houghton in her vineyard in the foothills of the Strathbogie Ranges.

PICTURE: CHRISTINA PROCHAZKA

three-hectare vineyard with cabernet sauvignon and shiraz, Maygar became far more than just some distant historic figure.

"Everywhere I turned when I was planting the vines, his name leapt out at me," she says.

Local people still spoke warmly of him and his compatriots. They were immensely proud of the fact the Euroa area was home to not one but three Victoria Cross recipients.

In Euroa, she shopped at Burton's General Store, run by the family of Corporal Alexander Burton, who was awarded a posthumous VC at Gallipoli, while Houghton's neighbour, Fred Tubb, was the nephew of another VC recipient, Captain Frederick Tubb, who received his honour in the same action as Burton.

Tubb, now 90, told of his family's property, which once boasted a significant vineyard called St Helena.

The more she delved into Maygar's history, the more she liked

him. Then she decided to name her vineyard and winery after him. Would people consider it commercial exploitation? She contacted members of his family.

"I would have only needed one descendant to be unhappy and I wouldn't have done it," she says. But no one disapproved. "The family understood it was recognition for his

The Maygars Hill label speaks of a sense of history.

service and they embraced it. I am grateful to them."

However, not every drinker has approved. One well-known Melbourne wine retailer told Houghton that while he loved her wines, he would not be stocking them because he considered the label unappealing.

"You either like it or you don't," he told her.

Well, I like it. If wines are about a sense of place, the Maygars Hill label also speaks of a sense of history. I like the wines inside, too.

Houghton has proved to be a fastidious grape grower and each vintage she sends her grapes to Sam Plunkett at Fowles Plunkett in the Strathbogies for winemaking.

Her reds are generous and warm and offer a plusher taste than some of her Strathbogie neighbours on higher soils heavy in granite and minerals that produce more of a pronounced structure.

Of the current wines, the '06 shiraz (\$20, cellar door) is the friendliest, a soft, juicy wine bursting with blueberries and drink-me-now appeal. The '06 reserve shiraz (\$34) brings a lift of aromatics and strong, grippy tannins. It's a keeper.

Maygars Hill reds often reveal their provenance with a charming eucalypt-minty lilt. Like the label, it's

Remembering the Brigadier

ANY wine called the Brigadier should, by rights, be strong and bold with established leadership qualities. Which is why Mornington Peninsula vignerons Marshal Caffyn and Jo Pittendrigh chose their pinot noir to commemorate the life of Pittendrigh's father, Brigadier Andrew Arthur DSO. Brigadier Arthur served in the Middle East and New Guinea in World War II. The Brigadier 2007 pinot noir (\$30), while a modest 13.5 per cent alcohol, certainly punches above its weight, with a forceful personality of deep, dark, stewed cherries, dried herbs, potpourri aromatics and a tasty, lingering finish.

The Brigadier 2008 pinot noir (\$30) reveals a less commanding personality, one slightly out of balance and just a little confusing. It is far paler in colour and much sweeter than the '07, with a noticeably higher infusion of alcohol. Drink now.



something you either like or hate. It's there in the '05 reserve cabernet sauvignon (\$34) together with a heightened spiciness and some sophisticated oak handling but altogether lacking in the '05 cabernet sauvignon, which falls a little flat, struggling to meld and become truly interesting.

That's not a problem with the '04 reserve cabernet sauvignon (\$32). Open it and take in a mouthful of a beautifully formed wine, a class act with piercing red and black fruits at the fore, a dusty earthiness and soft tannins with a sprig of Central Victorian mint to finish.

In 2007, in commemoration of the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Beersheba, Houghton released her inaugural flagship, the '06 The Beersheba cabernet (\$45). It has sold out. One was also made last year.

And, finally, what of that young Israeli who took such an interest in Maygar a few years back?

He's now a customer.

Create your own culinary delights

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