

With only six acres of vineyards producing about 1 1/2 tonnes of cabernet and 2 to 3 tonnes of shiraz, Jenny Houghton's Maygar's Hill label is one of the Strathbogie Range's smaller producers.

## smaller vineyard filling a niche



In only its third year of production, its cabernet won gold at the Australian Boutique Wine Maker's Show in 2001. Maygars Hill has since collected a loyal following, plus more medals and a highly respectable 5-star rating in the 2009 edition of James Halliday's Australian Wine Companion.

"We produce a big product – a fairly intense full bodied wine," Jenny said.

"A lot of the market now is going for something lighter – particularly women who want lower alcohol wines like pinot noirs. My wines are going against this trend. I've got a niche market – with six acres I've got a very loyal niche that I've established – every vintage sells out."

Jenny uses no sprays, and only irrigates in high summer.

"Some people go to great lengths with gypsum blocks and probes and monitors all over the place – but I can tell just from walking – with six acres you can walk.

"It's the same with bugs, we don't spray, we squash caterpillars – and

there can be a lot in six acres."

In keeping with the hands-on nature of her small vineyard, all her grapes are hand-picked by family, friends and wine club members during a frantic few weeks in late summer.

"It's a loose arrangement, the cabernet block we can do in a day. We start at seven in the morning. By ten they're ready to go, but by nine you get a new lot. People come and go and there's refreshment all the time. We have a big lunch after picking."

Jenny was brought up on a farm in Western Australia, became a teacher and then followed her passion to become a flying instructor. She met her current partner Ian at an aviation conference in Darwin, travelled for three years and then moved to the Strathbogies. She ran a hot-air ballooning company for 13 years and built bed and breakfast accommodation for her flyers. Then she planted vines.

"We sold grapes for a season, then we crunched the numbers for producing wine and it looked stunning on paper, but of course you forget about marketing and distribution."

Jenny took guidance from long-established Strathbogie growers Geoff

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for yourself



Head Chef Steven Lee recommends Lamb Shank:

Slowly cooked braised lamb shank, served with vegetables and a tomato ragout on top of creamy mash potato.

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Elford from Mount Helen, and Sam Plunkett from Plunkett-Fowles where her wine is now processed.

"Sam Plunkett is a fabulous teacher. We started when Plunketts was really small, he had time to sit down with me. He put three glasses in front of me straight out of a barrel and said 'Now which way do we need to go to produce the product you want?' It's been wonderful.

"We put in a bit of cabernet, and we won our first trophy at the Sydney Wine Show and it went straight to my head."

In just ten years, Jenny's instinctive farming skills, combined with a dynamic work ethic and shrewd marketing has seen the Maygar's Hill label sell from Shepparton to Melbourne, Fiji and New York. But for her, it all comes back to the unique Strathbogie soil.

"We don't know what it is about this patch of dirt. We can have a blind tasting with 60 full bodied reds from Heathcote, Strathbogies, Upper Goulburn and there's still people who can go 'Uh-oh – Maygars'."

Her patch of dirt has also produced three Victoria Cross winners – one of which, Lieutenant Colonel Leslie Cecil Maygar, features on her award-winning label. Maygar won his VC during the Boer War for a dashing horseback rescue of a fellow soldier under heavy fire.

Jenny obviously took inspiration from Maygar's true grit when she was thrown by a cow in 2001 and was out of action for six weeks with a broken shoulder and ribs. She couldn't fly her balloon, and she also had a vineyard to pick.

Then someone offered to buy her balloon business.

"One door closes and another one opens – and sometimes you have to shut the door so you can make your way through the other door.

"I picked that year with both arms in slings. We also had lots of help." ■



Jenny Houghton takes a stroll through her vineyard

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