

Best of both worlds

By Sally Collings

Viticulture lecturer Dennis Vice, from the South East Institute of TAFE, has made good use of his background and watched the market closely to successfully find a niche for organically grown wine.

The Coonawarra* vineyards' management philosophy is based on minimal inputs, and relies on technology, such as local weather forecasts to predict wind and temperature, especially during the spraying season.

"We are putting the cycle of the vines with the cycle of the weather. It's also a matter of getting bums off tractor seats' to be familiar with the lifecycle of vines," Mr Vice said.

Spray technology has been particularly important to the establishment of the organic vineyard, and a newly configured sprayer, with heads designed by the CSIRO, will be used in Mr Vices's vineyard for the first time this year.

He said it had been difficult to control mildew in Chardonnay in previous years.

"I have sold my Chardonnay from 1994 to this year, because I couldn't get good enough infiltration of natural sprays into the canopy," Mr Vice said.

"For the past five years we've had small spots of powdery mildew in the Chardonnay, and you can't have it in the super premium wine so you've got to let it go."

But Mr Vice said the new sprayer and the use of a leaf plucker at veraison had improved the situation.

Other machinery used on the property, included a Clemens undervine dodger which was used to cultivate the mid-row three times a year.

"It automatically retracts and dodges in and out of vines and cuts below the surface so it cuts the roots of the grasses," Mr Vice said.

In addition to technology, other more traditional techniques are used to provide protection for the vines.

Roses planted at the end of vine rows were susceptible to a certain strain of powdery mildew, and provided an early indication vines needed to be sprayed.

And territorial magpies, nesting in old gum trees within the vineyard, ensured other birds didn't eat the grapes.

Mr Vice used a combination of grasses in the mid-row, which was encouraged to provide a natural cover and return valuable nutrients to the soil.

"Being neat and tidy is not what it's all about," he said.

"The aim is to continually have a cycle that's functioning."

Mr Vice said an organic vineyard meant growers had to change their whole approach to spraying.

While chemical costs could be reduced to about one third of a conventional vineyard, most had to be mixed and applied separately because they were not compatible.

In addition, Mr Vice said it paid to have a good relationship with your neighbours as it was important for



TAFE viticulture lecturer and organic grapegrower Dennis Vice, with the newly configured sprayer which he hopes will achieve better infiltration in his Coonawarra Chardonnay vines.

them to spray only when the wind was blowing away from the organic vineyard.

He said organic viticulture was not for everyone because it was more labour intensive but he said it was really well suited to a smaller operation.

And, the rewards had proved worthwhile, he said with "super premium" wine selling in nine countries and returning good margins.

Mr Vice said the overseas consumers had a greater level of consciousness about the benefits of organically grown wine, with people in countries such as Japan believing "you are what you eat".

And he said although the Australian market was still "learning" about organics, he was optimistic this would gather momentum.

While consumers were learning about organic wine, Mr Vice said he was committed to educating more people about organic viticulture, through the TAFE program he taught.

"Being a lecturer of viticulture, I have the opportunity to be in the mainstream of information and I try and pass that on to students," he said.

*** Coonawarra has received interim determination from the GIC but is yet to be entered into the Register of Protected Names.**