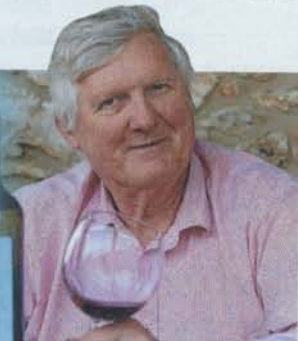


GrapeGrowers & Vignerons

The national voice of wine and viticulture

**Organic
success**

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**Fantastic
Fleurieu**

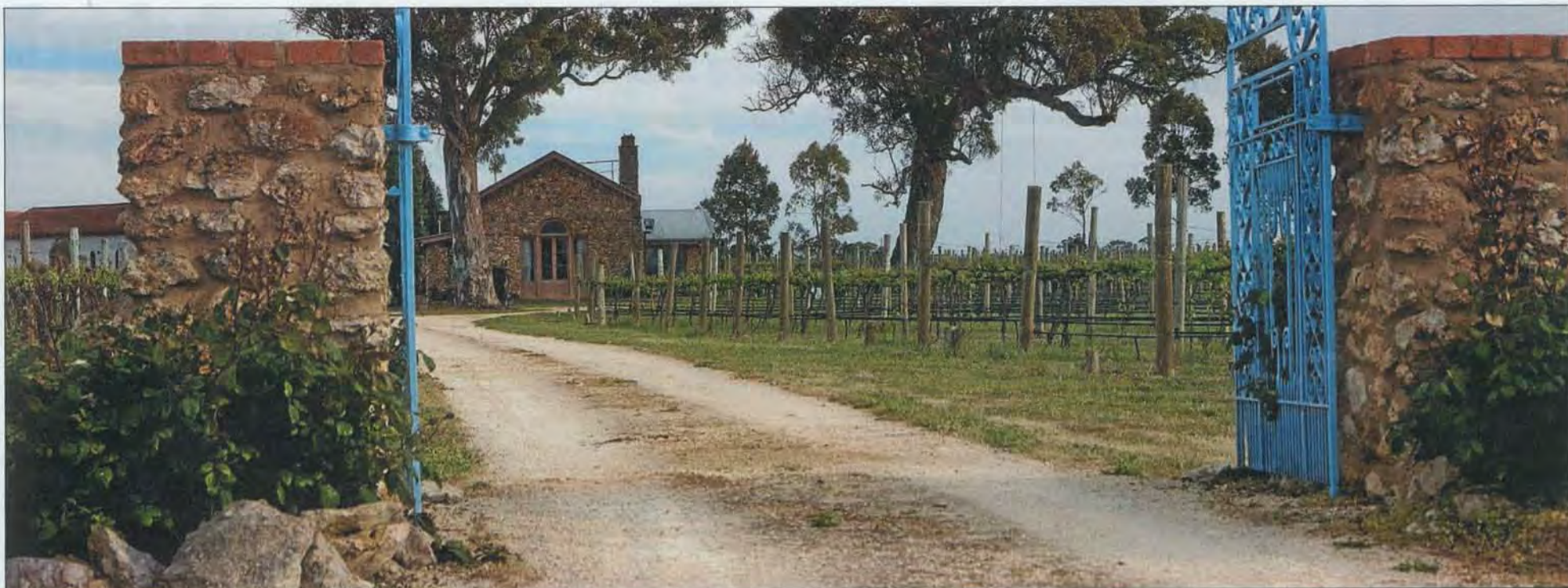
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NEWS DESK

**Rising Australian dollar
hits winery bottom line**

AS the Australian dollar climbed towards and briefly reached parity with the United States dollar,



Highbank Vineyard lies halfway between Coonawarra and Penola, with cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and merlot planted.

Unique biodynamic approach delivers Coonawarra quality

By JACINTA ROSE

WITH a long-held determination to nurture their vines to increase fruit quality rather than yield, Coonawarra vignerons Dennis and Bonnie Vice have taken an unusual path with their viticultural practices.

They have embraced organic principles in their Highbank Vineyard, and while understanding the potential benefits of a biodynamic approach, Dennis and Bonnie have only implemented certain elements of the biodynamic program. Aiming to minimise human intervention in the vineyard, the couple do not believe in altering one of the Coonawarra region's major assets.

AT A GLANCE

- Unusual viticultural approach
- Expansion not a focus
- Asia provides market hope

"Coonawarra's got a pretty balanced soil situation," Dennis said. "With biodynamics you've got soil inoculants that they expect you to put on every year.

"In some ways it's detrimental when you're taking a well-balanced growing media and you start inoculating and trying to build carbon.

"In a lot of situations those systems work quite well, but in ours it's really not necessary, so you have to draw

the line and say – how much time do I spend on this perspective?

"We've tried biodynamics to the point where basically some of the elements of it really don't fit with our environment. We've always stayed steadfastly to the organic aspects of what inputs are made into our property."

Dennis said growing grapes in their vineyard according to organic principles always made sense.

"If you have a young family like we did it's a philosophical thing as much as anything," he said. "We wanted to minimise all of the things we had experienced all over the world as far as contamination and the like, and protect our own family as much as possible.

"There are a lot of less than high standard organic wines that are produced around the world and there was a time where if you had organics on your label it was

a detrimental thing, so you have to be true to your heart as far as what you're doing.

"In any of these profiles, whether it's biodynamic or organics, the tough thing about them is learning how those approaches fit in with the lifecycle of all the other organisms that affect the quality of the grape.

"Once you start to come to grips with that, then the learning process never stops because you're always hearing about something new that's been tried that might be worth giving a go and that might enhance your own operations."

Dennis and Bonnie moved to Australia from the United States in 1986, after living in California and Hawaii. They settled in Coonawarra because it offered the relaxed lifestyle they desired.

"We had a young family – the kids were just two-and-a-half and three-and-a-half-years-old –

so we were trying to find a place that had a good future," he said.

"We were looking for something that was a little bit slower than life in the fast lane in California, so Australia was our pick."

The family established a five-hectare vineyard halfway between Coonawarra and Penola, with cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and merlot planted.

During his years in the wine industry, Dennis has taught viticulture with various educational institutions and was a National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Accredited field inspector – experience which has helped with key decisions in his own vineyard.

"Having taught in viticulture for 18 years all over the country I've really had a chance to see other operations and on a tick list decide what I didn't want to



Dennis and Bonnie Vice have embraced organic principles in their Highbank Vineyard, and while understanding the potential benefits of a biodynamic approach, they have chosen to only implement certain elements of the biodynamic program.

do," he said. "We've been able to focus on what we truly feel is viable for the long-term and I think when you're investing your own family's money that's what has to come into perspective."

"We went to vine improvement at that time – it was during the vine pull scheme – and we selected low to moderate yielding varieties, a lot of which other people were looking the other way with because they were interested in volume and we wanted quality and consistency of style."

"We're probably one of the smallest property owners in Coonawarra, but we're able to do things that the big guys don't."

All wine carrying the Highbank brand is created only using fruit from the family vineyard, with an average of 2000 cases of Highbank wine created each year – a level of production the company is not looking to increase.

"We've always had the philosophy that we're not interested in getting big, we're just very pleased that we've got such a good piece of dirt and we just want to work with what we have and try to make sure we can pass it on," Dennis said.

The winemaking process occurs off-site on a contract basis, but Dennis said finding a winemaker who is dedicated to following Highbank's guidelines was vital.

"Because of our size it doesn't pay for us to own a full-blown winery, so we've worked with some outstanding winemakers around the country," he said.

"You want to find people that are as dedicated as you are as far as following on with the product and following your guidelines and being able to work closely

with them and just use their facilities to do what you'd like to do. You've got to avoid the conflicts of everyone's fruit coming in at the same time because then you can't accomplish what you really want to."

Dennis said Highbank's wines were created to have many levels of flavour.

"What we're trying to do is maintain a style that's very elegant, and the wines are very approachable and soft, yet they've got a lot of length in their palate and a lot of aroma," he said.

"It's a kind of wine that you can sit down and start drinking, and as you drink you enjoy more and more dimensions because the wine tends to evolve."

"The only way you can create something like that is to put the dimensions in from the vineyard and then try to minimise your approach in the winery and do as little as you have to as far as adjustments go. We really shy away from doing anything that isn't given to us naturally like adjusting acid levels."

"It's really wonderful to create a product – maybe an artwork in a way – and have people send you emails and give you a visualisation of where they've enjoyed the wine and how it's complemented their life and their family."

The brand's signature wine is the 'Coonawarra' – a blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc described by critics as true to its soil, and 'fine and harmonious' on the palate.

Highbank wines can be found on the wine lists of some of Australia's finest restaurants, including Sydney's Rockpool and Vue Du Monde in Melbourne.

Dennis said establishing long-

term working relationships with such high-end establishments was no easy task, and required flexibility from the wine producer.

"We hold our wines for a couple of years after they're made so we can give the restaurateurs the advantage of having older vintage wines on their wine list, so then they get better margins," he said. "Of course that's where the long-term relationship develops – if you're considering your clients."

Domestic sales account for only a small proportion of Highbank's sales, with 90 per cent of production exported.

To date, Highbank wines have been sold in 32 countries across the world, with Dennis and Bonnie always searching for the next emerging market.

"We try to anticipate a market and then position ourselves and work along carefully with distributors to keep track of what they're doing, making sure they're servicing the customers that have got our wine and it's working pretty well."

In line with global trends, Asia has been Highbank's most successful market of late, with the brand sold in Japan, Malaysia and Taiwan, as well as six Chinese provinces.

"That's probably been our salvation lately because Europe's been so soft, as has the States," he said.

He believes Asian markets offer huge export potential to Australia's wine producers, especially if wines are tailored to Asian cultures.

"If we can come to grips with matching wines with foods in their cuisine we can go a long long way as an industry," he said.

Details: highbank.com.au

Wines help celebrate Penola's saint

WHEN Australia's first Catholic saint Mary MacKillop was canonised at the Vatican in Rome in October, Australian pilgrims were not the only visitors from Down Under.

The Coonawarra Vignerons Association organised for a donated shipment of 100 cases of local wine to be sent to Rome to coincide with the canonisation – with four cases of Highbank 2005 Merlot included in the shipment.

The Highbank Vineyard lies halfway between Coonawarra and Penola, the town where Mary MacKillop founded the Order of the Sisters of St Joseph.

"We've been tracking Mary MacKillop's process to canonisation for years – this has gone on for seven or eight years now since she was initially put forth," Highbank Wines owner Dennis Vice (pictured) said.

The Coonawarra wines were used to toast Mary MacKillop at a range of key functions, including the opening of the new Chancery of the Australian Embassy to the Holy See by Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd.

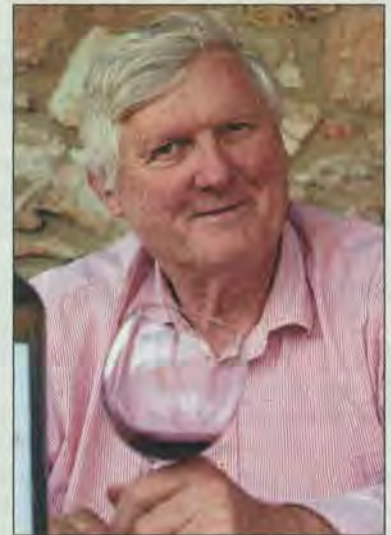
Wines included in the Roman shipment were predominantly cabernet blends, making the Highbank merlot an unusual choice.

Dennis said the selection of the merlot was not only aimed at creating a point of difference for Highbank Wines, but was also a heartfelt reference to a family tragedy.

"We lost our son here about five years ago, and the wine that he always had a preference for, and that he shared with his friends, was the merlot," Dennis said.

He said the chance to have his son's favourite wine included in the celebrations of such a historic moment was 'amazing'.

He praised both the CVA and Australia's



Ambassador to the Holy See – otherwise known as the Vatican – Tim Fisher for their efforts in promoting Coonawarra wine in the Italian capital.

"He's been unbelievable in the support he's given to our region and I think his position at the Holy See was very helpful," he said.

For small producers like Dennis and Bonnie Vice, the ability to join associations like CVA helps boost their marketing power.

"We've been members of the Coonawarra Vignerons – which is the marketing arm of Coonawarra, and handles cellar door sales and international marketing and things like that – for probably 20 years now," he said.

"We're able to go on the coat tail of a large region that does promotion – we're surrounded by big multi-national companies – and with their resources it just helps the little guy out."

International tourist numbers on the rise

Nestled in between Coonawarra and Penola, visitors to Highbank Vineyard (pictured) have compared a stay in amongst the vines to entering another world.

"A lot of the people who come and stay say to my wife that a few days spent here feels like a week elsewhere," Highbank owner Dennis Vice said.

The property boasts two styles of accommodation facilities, with both offering privacy in a scenic vineyard setting.

After establishing their vineyard in 1986, the Vice family were left with large amounts of limestone pulled up during the planting process.

Along with recycled timber, the limestone was used to build the Honeysuckle Rise Cottage and Villa 20 years ago.

The Cottage boasts limestone walls, exposed beams, arched French doors, lead light windows and a stone fireplace, and is perfect for a romantic getaway. The Villa is a two-storey stone building that can be divided into two separate apartments. The upstairs apartment, nicknamed 'Room with a View', offers superior vistas across the property.

Kitchen facilities in both the cottage



and villa double up as a tasting room and temporary cellar door. Tastings are available by appointment only, giving Dennis and Bonnie the ability to balance the needs of their guests with those dropping in for a shorter visit.

Dennis said offering on-site accommodation helped to diversify Highbank's income stream, and also encouraged visitors to spend an extended period in the region, all while boosting the brand's profile.

"It's very popular and it's very worthwhile doing that kind of thing, because it has done a lot of marketing for us with our wines and exposed people to a different lifestyle that otherwise they wouldn't have an

opportunity to see," he said.

Dennis said an increasing number of international tourists – especially those from Europe and Asia – were visiting Highbank and spending time in the Coonawarra region.

"They're no longer just going to Uluru or Sydney to walk on the bridge, but now they're coming out into the country areas," he said. "I think if we really get behind wine appreciation and the appreciation of Australian wine amongst some of these new cultures then we'll really create a new base for tourism."

"What we've tried to purport for years about having wine tourism where people move from region to region – that's really happening now."