

Dulcie's Vineyard

By CAMPBELL MATTINSON

AT THE HEART OF THE MATTER IS A VINEYARD. It's been growing out there on a skinny shoulder of the Warby Ranges – near Glenrowan, in north-east Victoria – since rootlings were transported direct from France and planted there way back in 1890. It's one of the originals, a key piece of Australian vineyard history, yet almost no one has heard of it. If it wasn't for Paul Dahlenberg, it would now be mostly dead.

Not that it's in great health even now. Most of the vineyard is a mess of gaps and weeds and gums. It looks like a shattered rock, blistered, branches tossed like hair, yellow grass far outnumbering green leaf. It hasn't been in proper commercial production, with any kind of consistency, any time over the past 30 years, and while various efforts have been made to revive it, it's been severely neglected for most of the past 15 years. Or more. This through one of the most devastating droughts in the region's history.

This tired old scrappy vineyard now sits lonely, haphazard, rock wallabies bouncing through. Wine people have been known to take one look at it and run a mile. One accidental consultant solemnly advised Dahlenberg, Look Paul, all this place is going to do is suck up all your money for no return.

What am I supposed to do, Paul replied, just sit back and let it die? After it's been growing out on this hill here for all these years?

Dahlenberg doesn't own the place, but ever since he first saw it he's felt a kind of regional responsibility. He first heard of it many years ago, when its then owner Dulcie Brack called to ask him if he wanted to buy her grapes – in his role as manager at nearby Baileys of Glenrowan. He said he was interested, and would come out and take a look when he could.

Well, she said – and it’s tempting to describe her as an eccentric old duck – I’m picking tomorrow if you want them.

Hang on, he said, I haven’t even seen the place yet.

If you don’t come tomorrow, you can’t have the grapes, she said.

We can’t take the grapes tomorrow.

Then I’m not selling them to you, she replied.

And that was that.

Dahlenberg didn’t see the place until many years later, and this is the enduring story of this land. It’s hidden, neglected, you’d never stumble upon it by accident. Not a great many people have ever seen it. You could call it the secret history of the region; stray left or right of the Hume Highway and the trade traffic blows down to nothing and the loneliness beats like a clock. Dahlenberg is still reluctant to show the place to people, for fear of their reaction. He didn’t even show it to his wife for the first two years of him working on it. If you don’t know what to expect of a run down vineyard, it can shock people, he says. He doesn’t mean it like this, but the effect on you is simple: when you visit this beat up old secret it feels like a right of passage, like you’ve been afforded a privilege. It’s the same feeling you get as when someone reluctantly allows you into their heart.

When Paul approached the current owners and asked if he could lease it from them, even they tried to talk him out of it. There were, they said, many other vineyards in the region in much better shape.

But, he replied, none of them were planted in 1890.

The deal was and continues to be done on a handshake. She’s no longer with us, but Paul still calls the place Dulcie’s Vineyard.

When you look at the vineyard today, many thoughts run through your head – but one of them is its gorgeous orchard character. As a landscape it’s a big eccentric garden. Grape vines galore, most of them shiraz but some of them trebbiano, misfits and accidents, intertwined. Right there sharing the vineyard space are 16 almond trees, 1 mulberry, 1 large black fig, 3 nectarine trees, 1 walnut, 1 pear tree, 10 peach trees, 4 apricot trees, 1 lemon and 3 orange trees.

I know this because Dulcie Brack – who was once the mayor of nearby regional town Benalla, her reputation rightly formidable – itemised her vineyard garden in a letter to the late Peter Brown, of Brown Brothers, back in 1988. This letter is typed in courier font, on a manual typewriter that was likely old, even at the time. If you want to know what it’s like to toil away on a hillside somewhere in the middle of stinking hot nowhere – if you want to know how hard the country is out here – then it pays to consider the mood behind her words. Today the old vines are, just,

still going but this scrawny place with boulders jutting through its skin like compound fractures is enough to crack you.

From the vantage of her remote wooden verandah, where she lived alone, the letter Dulcie Brack writes to Peter Brown states in part:

“I have had a dream about those grapes, but last March almost killed me, from sunrise to sunset at 45% heat on the hillsides and burnt black.

“At least I tried, but without someone to rely on, I am lost and tired.

“The dream is now further away than ever.

“So Peter it appears a lost cause. Remember that song “Bubbles”? That’s me. I’m dreaming dreams, I’m scheming schemes, I’m building castles high ...”

Dulcie also notes that she has “bags of vine spray” in her inventory, but she has “not used (it) more than once, when I found it killed off the many Blue Wrens which kept my vines free of pests.

“The kangaroos who come in I will not kill, or allow to be killed,” she writes. “They even come up to the house, and it’s something to look out your bedroom window and see a 7ft buck standing up a few feet from your window, his harem around him with joeys in their pouches. I see no evidence of them destroying anything but know they eat a quantity of grapes.”

Dahlenberg has been tending a section of this vineyard – there’s too much to do to concentrate on it all – since 2009. He has isolated the vines he knows are the oldest, and is hell bent on slowly resurrecting them, and treating their produce with appropriate care. The trebbiano goes straight in with the shiraz, not that there’s much of it. The reason the trebbiano goes in with the shiraz has no truck with fashion, and is simply because “it’s part of the vineyard’s story”. This endeavour is no easy task, nor a fast one.

For all his work Dahlenberg and his four kids (now adults) have retrieved one tonne of grapes from the 2010 vintage, and roughly two tonnes from the 2012 vintage. If things hold this 2013 vintage, he’ll be back to one tonne.

This is heritage winegrowing and making, but most of all it’s pure heart. It’s about a man and his family and their efforts to both keep history alive, and create it anew.

“I kept thinking what a tragedy it would be if we just left these vines to die, 10 percent, 20 percent each year. When we first started working in here we had to wait for Spring, just to see which of the vines were dead, and which were still breathing.”

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