



The apple of our eye

Tasmania has probably never felt so loved. Australian wineries are all over the one-time wine backwater like a rash thanks to the stunning wines coming from the region as well as concerns about global warming making us all think of cooler climates in which to get the advantage in the wine industry. Sherallee Davies, CEO of Wine Tasmania in the Apple Isle, one of Australia's most exciting wine regions, talks to *WBM*.

How have you found working in the Tasmanian wine industry?

I've thoroughly enjoyed my first six months. There are a lot of very positive things happening in the Tasmanian wine sector and producers have been very welcoming and receptive to my involvement. I've spent a fair bit of time travelling around the island to familiarise myself and meet producers, and it's not at all a bad place to be!

Any surprises or shocks?

There have probably been two major surprises I've discovered – firstly, that wine is a 'big' agricultural sector by Tasmanian standards, despite the fact

it represents less than 0.5% of national production – it's all relative! Secondly, the accessibility to state politicians. The wine sector has a strong and collaborative relationship with Tasmanian government departments and with the three political parties, but the direct access to party leaders, ministers and representatives is quite extraordinary and very valuable.

What's the feeling in Tassie about the future of the local wine industry?

There's a great deal of positivity tinged with a little bemusement about the 'sudden' interest in Tasmanian wines. A lot of people have quietly been working very hard over many years to achieve the quality and consistency for which the region is now being recognised. It is indeed a very exciting place to be. I believe the reputation of Tasmanian wine has been built very solidly through the efforts of a smallish number of individual producers – how much can we achieve as we start promoting ourselves as a united group?

What changes have you made?

I got rid of the 'industry' in Wine Industry Tasmania – we're too small to be considered an industry and are now

simply called Wine Tasmania. My major focus has been increasing our collaborative promotional activities and communication, so I've re-formed our marketing committees to develop strategies for each of our target markets, stepped up our media communication and initiated regional samples drops, and lifted direct consumer engagement including through events such as Tasmanian Unbottled and mediums such as Facebook and Twitter. We've just released our strategic plan for 2011-13 and the focus is really to build on what's already happening rather than making wholesale changes.

One of our big opportunities is to present Tasmania's other natural attributes alongside wine, and I've altered our visitor itineraries accordingly. Not long after I started I had consecutive weeks hosting mainland sommeliers and media and included activities such as truffle harvesting and enjoying fresh oysters on a boat off the Freycinet Peninsula to demonstrate Tasmania's focus on fresh produce and natural beauty. Not only does this have quite an impact, it also reflects the suitability of our naturally elegant wines with food.

What are you trying to achieve in your role?

I am trying to assist Tasmanian producers wherever possible through facilitating access to technical and business resources and close collaboration with the Tasmanian Government and tourism industry. I'm also bolstering communication of individual producer activities, stories and achievements and am working to focus our promotional efforts – we could virtually hand sell Tasmania's production and we are therefore in the enviable position of being able to directly target our activities and develop personal relationships with our trade and consumer customers, in Australia and in export markets.

What are the main items on the agenda for Tasmanian wine?

To develop a united presence for Tasmanian wine and consistently communicate with targeted trade and consumers in Tasmania and in mainland Australia (predominantly NSW, Victoria and Queensland). We are also developing our export strategy to prioritise a few key markets/cities and undertake promotion within these target markets.

In 2012, Tasmania will be hosting the 8th International Cool Climate Symposium and a surrounding festival program of events, which is a very large focus over the next 15 months.

What are some of the challenges of the position?

Doing everything that I would like – we have just two full time people at Wine Tasmania and a fairly large agenda, so need to be particularly focused on outcomes. Another challenge is driving two way communication with our producer members, as they are busy people, often single operators, spread around the state.

What do you think of Brown Brothers buying Tamar Ridge?

Brilliant news. Brown Brothers has a long and established wine history, it is a family company with a long term focus on innovation and building wine brands, and has also demonstrated a commitment to winery tourism and growing consumer markets – attributes which are well aligned with the Tasmanian wine sector's own priorities. Ross Brown has confirmed his commitment to the broader

Tasmanian wine sector and our efforts in promoting 'wine brand Tasmania', and I'm thrilled to have Brown Brothers involved.

Are you expecting more mainland wineries to seek out Tasmanian sites in view of global warming concerns?

Wineries prompted to invest in Tasmania due to global warming concerns are the type of investors that would be most welcome – long term, strategic thinkers. I would urge them to do their homework and speak with Wine Tasmania, as the island has a wide variation of conditions across soil, rainfall and temperature – it's all about careful site selection.

What do you think of the Premier's plans to market Tasmania to interstate irrigators?

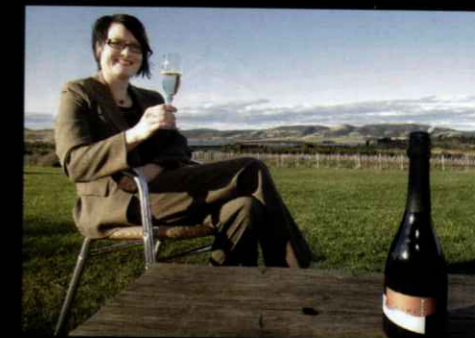
I think the Premier is being very proactive and is certainly looking to drive growth in Tasmania. From a wine perspective, we have consistently been emphasising the need for demand to grow ahead of or in line with supply. Our short to medium term focus is on building markets and price points, rather than rapidly and dramatically increasing our vineyard plantings. There is certainly scope for expansion in the Tasmanian wine sector, indeed it would assist our endeavours to open, build and service markets, however this needs to be carefully managed to avoid imbalance. The positive relationship we have with the Tasmanian Government has enabled us to communicate our position on managed and sustainable growth and we are working on a collaborative economic strategy for wine, encapsulating opportunities for sustainable growth.

How have you settled in?

Really well. I've been fortunate to travel around and see a fair bit of this beautiful and diverse island. There is a great group of wine producers in Tasmania, some of which I hadn't come across prior to moving here, and it's been very enjoyable getting to know them, their wines and their individual stories.

What are your favourite wineries and restaurants?

My favourite restaurants are Smolt in Hobart and Black Cow in Launceston. It's a little tough to ask for favourite wineries...



Tell us about the Cool Climate Symposium?

There have been seven previous gatherings of the International Cool Climate Symposium (ICCS) around the world and Tasmania has been selected as the host of the 8th in February 2012. Wine Tasmania specifically targeted the ICCS as a recognised and credible platform from which we could disseminate results of a major national research project currently being undertaken. Entitled 'Improving the Quality of Cool Climate Pinot Noir and Sparkling Wines', this is an innovative three year \$1.8 million research project funded by a Tasmanian-based consortium* of industry businesses and AusIndustry's Industry Cooperative Innovation Program. With the significant support of the Tasmanian Department of Economic Development, Tourism and the Arts, a Tasmanian delegation attended the 7th ICCS in Seattle to pitch for the rights to host the 8th event. Once we'd explained where to find Tasmania, the delegates were suitably impressed by the professional presentation and Tasmanian imagery, as well as the Tasmanian wine tasting we had during the conference, and voted to hold the next event in Hobart. We are thrilled to have Jancis Robinson MW as our keynote speaker and are expecting 300-400 delegates to attend. Wine Tasmania has partnered with the Australian Wine Research Institute and Tasmanian Institute of Agricultural Research as equal underwriters.

*Consortium members include the AWRI, Tasmanian Institute of Agricultural Research, Tamar Ridge Estates, Flextank, Croplands and Wine Tasmania – representing Meadowbank, Moorilla, Tolpuddle Vineyard, Pooley Wines, Jansz Tasmania, Josef Chromy Wines, Winemaking Tasmania, Frogmore Creek and Taltarni.