

FEBRUARY 2009

\$12.50 Incl.GST

WBMA

Australia's Wine Business Magazine

awbm.com.au

FIRST DROP

Enjoying
their day in
the sun

TEST OF CHARACTER

Winemakers reveal their strategies for '09



FIRST DROP:



Making a splash with First Drop ... partners in crime Matt Gant, left, and John Retsas.

Penny Boothman

Things you might not know about Bob Hawke: in 1955 he entered the *Guinness Book of Records* for downing a yard glass of ale (that's two and a half pints) in 11 seconds at the Turf Tavern in Oxford, where he was a

Rhodes Scholar at University College. Hawke later said he regarded this feat as a major boost for his political career in the eyes of the beer-swilling Australian public.

Why am I sitting in a bar on a Thursday afternoon musing the drinking prowess of a former Prime Minister? I'm not, I'm talking to Matt Gant and John Retsas about First Drop, and the conversation has unsurprisingly come around to booze and boozing. The fact is that even in these times of increased social responsibility and sensible alcohol consumption, there can

occasionally still be a good case for just getting completely pole-axed.

If you haven't seen the First Drop wines, you will. This new venture romped onto the scene just a couple of years ago, and there's much more to come. Matt was Young Winemaker of the Year in 2004, and the inaugural Young Gun of Wine in 2007. In fact it would be fair to say that First Drop is something of an unofficial standard bearer for the Australian young guns scene as a whole.

"It all really began in 2004 with a week in Margaret River," says John. "We started off at Little Creatures, which was awesome, then we ended up at another brewery when we got to Margies, and then to the Corner Bar and that's when the vodka red bulls started. I think the initial idea was formed over the course of the night. We've always talked about making the wines we wanted to make, but the plan was really cemented on the flight home."

First Drop had "a little play" in '04 and a slightly more serious go in '05, but the business really started in earnest with the 2008 vintage, after Matt left St Hallett in mid-2007.

This won't be the first company started from a 'brilliant idea' had one night after 10 or 11 vodka Red Bulls, but sticking to the simple premise that started it all has been the secret of their success so far.

"We've actually had heaps of other ideas that we just haven't put into action for one reason or another," Matt explains. "Early on in the piece we thought about opening a micro-brewery—the Barossa's just crying out for a brewery. But as much fun as that would be, we're winemakers, not brewers, and as much as we like drinking beer, that's not our passion. Then we had another idea to start a custom crush facility for other small winemakers, but we realised that then our own wines would

RED BULLS



style Barossa Shiraz. Look out for future offerings from Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Greece.

“It was always supposed to be—and still is—about making the booze that we wanted to make,” says Matt. “There’s a real thirst for something different out there, genuinely. The way people have been taking up the Arneis and the Montepulciano has been amazing. It’s been all about finding a new path and then sticking to our guns. It’s been very exciting but also very humbling that people are getting behind us, and not only supporting us financially but encouraging what we’re doing.

“I hate the term alternative varietals, but we’ve got to call them something,” he continues. “These ‘alternatives’ have got to be made in styles that are appealing to Australian drinkers, and it’s important for

“We’d rather spend our money making booze than tying it up in capital. As soon as you do that you have to bring someone else in, and that’s when you have to potentially start compromising.”

end up on the back burner. There’s a market for it, and it’s perfectly feasible, but is it really what we want to do? And people have said to me about doing consulting, but then you just end up worrying about someone else’s wines. As nice as it would be to have another income, your focus would be on something else. That’s what it comes back to every time. For every good idea we have, about 68,000 go under the pillow, for sleeping on.”

For similar reasons decision was taken not to start their own winery as a home for the brand, but to make the wines in a contract facility and keep their business options open. First Drop is 50% Barossa, and that’s where their roots obviously lie, but the wines are made at Bird in Hand in the Adelaide Hills.

“We’d rather spend our money making booze than tying it up in capital, because as soon as you do that you have to bring

someone else into the picture, and that’s when you have to potentially start compromising” John explains. “We’ve been very fortunate to fund it this far thanks to the NAB, they’ve been really good to us. But we still play lotto regularly.”

The boys are actually on their third bank manager already, but that’s a different story. Why all this need for flexibility and keeping things lean? Put simply, First Drop has designs on global domination. Even the existing diverse line-up of intelligent blends and alternative varietals isn’t enough for these two: they’ve got to bring an international flavour to the portfolio too. A few prime spots around the world have already been lined up where wines can be made with a little help from some local partners. (For partners, read ‘mates’.) The wines will appear under the Crusader label, in the fullness of time, beginning closer to home later this year with a ‘jovent

them to find their own way—you’ll never replicate an exact copy of a European wine. If you put the European example up on a pedestal and say, ‘that’s what our wines should be,’ you’ll never get there. It’s too different over here, but a lot of winemakers do still do that. I mean, yes, we’ve got to prove ourselves, but we’re not playing catch-up to Europe any more, Australia’s really come of age—especially with Shiraz.

“People are buying First Drop Arneis as a wine in its own right, rather than an Australian copy of an Italian wine.”

There will be 14 horses in the First Drop stable this year. I’m not going to name them all, but labels include Mother’s Milk Shiraz, The Big Blind Nebbiolo / Barbera, Minchia Montepulciano, and a few new recruits this year such as Mother’s Ruin Cabernet Sauvignon and JR Gantos Cabernet / Touriga. Starting at about \$18-20 retail for the Lush rosé, the wines range up to \$75 for



the very small batch, super-premium Fat of the Land sub-regional Barossa Shiraz series and \$100 for their ultra-premium, very elegantly presented, 'we only make about a third of a hat-full,' The Cream.

"The packaging had to be different and each wine had to have its own story and personality," says John. "That's why the labels are so different. The Arneis is probably the odd man out; we needed one straight-bat wine. But that's precisely the point, they're all the odd man out. The question was: what would we personally pick up and be excited by on the shelf? It's got to be a compelling proposition every time.

"Distributors have really embraced the labels, particularly in the Mid-West US. They've not really been exposed to a lot of different stuff, so there's actually an openness and there's this sense of discovery. But some of the more mature markets like New York—or London, particularly—are a bit 'seen it, done it'."

With all the fun they're having making all this booze, you'd be forgiven for wondering when they find time to sell any of it. But they do. South Australia is the naturally their strongest Australian market, although the wines are now well represented in all States—including a surprise following in Batemans Bay.

"It's not about just getting any old distribution and away you go, it's about finding like-minded people that you can get on with," says John. "We said right from the start that we just wanted to work with people we wanted to work with. When you've got people who are equally passionate and motivated, you can really sell some booze.

"I think our wines offer something different to distributors' portfolios, and that's a real selling point. I think it's all just about how we communicate our ideas. We're big in Tulsa. And Wichita. Kansas is massive for us." Side-stepping the obvious Wizard of Oz jokes, this belt of the Mid-West is in fact home to some big universities: opportunities that First Drop has not missed.

"The US is our biggest export market, by far," Matt says. "It's going really well over there, we've actually been thinking of pulling back our exposure a bit. We have a really good distributor in Wichita, LDF—they're actually a beer distributor, which has definitely worked to our advantage.

"We're working on opening up more export markets, particularly the UK. How we've been successful in Australia and the US is getting the wines on wine lists by the

glass, to get people drinking them. But do you think that's going to work in the UK? No chance. It's a lot tougher over there."

As unusual as First Drop has been in cracking the US market in what has effectively been their first year of serious business, they've made impressively long strides in newer markets as well. First Drop now has no fewer than four clients in Shanghai, but they've had to work hard to get them.

"If you don't have good contacts, China is a seriously tough place to do business," John says. "The culture is just so different. It takes 17 dinners or lunches before you even get down to talking business. They've just got to suss you out and get to know you before they'll even think about it. Our first trip to Shangers was completely mad. They made us drink fermented bees—which is apparently a huge honour, but it looks like curdled vomit with bits of bee floating in it; ridiculous alcohol level."

"And they love their private dining rooms over there," says Matt. "So we were drinking this vomit stuff and then this distributor's

lawyer just smacked a bottle of Wolf Blass Black Label down in front of me, and one in front of him, and we had to have a skulling competition through the entire thing. JR escaped because he was outside on the phone at that point. And then the rice wine came out... and then suddenly everything just started going a bit, umm, sideways, and that was it. Game over."

"Actually, I didn't realise how truly legless you were until we had to help you try to walk to the taxi," John adds.

"Thanks. So having spent the night hugging the toilet," Matt continues, "we had to go into their offices the next day. And I just thought it was all over, I'd bugged things up completely, deal off—but instead I got a round of applause from the entire room. Because they'd done it, you see: they'd taken down the elephant. And they've just loved us ever since."

"So it's true that sometimes getting absolutely smashed really is the best thing for business," says John.

And there you have it. These aren't easy economic times to operate in, there are a

lot of well thought-out, well-packaged brands on the market, but even having a good quality wine with a good story just gets you to the starting gate these days. And yet here are two mates, making the wines they want to make, selling them successfully all over the world, and having a good time along the way.

"It was a bit of a leap of faith at the start, but we were confident. We've put in the hard yards, and it's been a lot of work, but you don't mind putting the hours in when it's your own baby. Life could have been so different," says Matt. "It works because we've stuck to what we set out to do: we wanted to make some good quality booze, and have fun doing it. When you've got two people who can spar off each other and bounce ideas around like we do, I know that's what pushes us on. It's just kind of evolved and the basis has always been that we're just good mates. What we do is probably a little bit unconventional, but it works for us. And I think for as long as we can keep it the way First Drop is meant to be, that'll be great."



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