

Pruning to the *tune* of the vines

WORDS OLIVIA JONES

The Barossa is famous for having some of the oldest vines in Australia, vines which are internationally renowned for producing fruit that makes some of the world's most revered drops.

But there is another side to the Barossa's 100-year-old vine story that is less well known. While the winemakers are producing these delicious gems, winning awards and receiving all the recognition, who keeps these ancient vines alive?

36-year-old Tim O'Callaghan and 35-year-old Daniel Rowe saw an opportunity ten years ago, to help the Barossa preserve its 100-year-old vine heritage and set about building a business that was dedicated to the renovation and maintenance of the region's oldest vineyards.

They called the business Schnippenschnitter, a Barossa-Deutsch derivation which roughly translates to "cut or snip" (schnippen) and "smoko" (schnitter).

"Snipping and smoko are the two main activities in a day of pruning, so the name seemed to fit quite well," Tim says.

Even more fitting is the tagline the laid back duo coined for themselves: *We Prune to the Tune*.

"We are notorious for listening to very loud music while we work," Dan says.

"But it also refers to the fact that we are very in tune with the vines we work with—we listen to what they need."

Their approach to vineyard management is broadly organic. Bare essentials is the rule of thumb when it comes to water, pesticides, fungicides, tilling and cropping.



Each and every vine is examined and treated individually and the whole process results in exceptional quality fruit.

"We look at each vine rather than applying the same treatment to the whole block to ensure we are getting quality across the entire vineyard," says Tim.

"Clean cutting is crucial to prevent disease in old vines and we always prune with super sharp snips."

Schnippenschnitter's passion for old vines and commitment to quality has certainly struck a chord with super premium producers.

Since starting the business, Schnippenschnitter has had regular gigs pruning for Rockford Wines, Langmeil's 1843 Freedom vineyard—arguably the oldest vineyard in Australia—Chris Ringland's Three Rivers block in Eden Valley, which produces an internationally acclaimed bottle of wine that sells for upwards of \$600, and a couple of growers around the Barossa who supply fruit to those wineries.

"We're always working on super premium blocks because those producers share the same philosophies we have," Dan says.

"We get a lot of satisfaction from working for people who aim for quality and believe that great wine certainly starts in the vineyard," Tim says.

Both Tim and Dan grew up around vineyards—Tim in the Barossa and Dan in Great Western in Victoria—and they have developed an instinctive sense of quality viticultural management from years of working in vineyards and wineries.

Tim, son of Rockford Wines' Robert O'Callaghan, discovered his interest in vines at primary school when he was taught how to prune in Year Five by his teacher Ron Hermann.

He went on to work in the wine industry as a cellar hand before spending four years in the Northern Territory building houses for Aboriginal communities.

When he returned to the Barossa, he purchased a property in Bethany with an old vineyard in need of some tender loving care. Tim worked at Rockford Wines part time while he began restoring his vineyard and it was around that time that he ran into Dan.

"I was taught how to prune by my grandfather," Dan said. "My passion for preserving old vines was driven by the fact that there weren't any 100-year-old vineyards in Great Western—they'd all been wiped out by phylloxera."

After working in Nagambie for several years, including the 140-year-old pre-phylloxera Chateau Tahbilk vineyard, Dan came to the Barossa Valley in 1996 to continue his love affair with old vines.

"We used to visit the Barossa a lot when I was a kid and I knew that I wanted



"We will keep doing this forever." Daniel Rowe and Tim O'Callaghan.

to end up here one day," Dan says.

"When you have seen old vineyards wiped out you don't take them for granted. That's why I'm so committed to the old vines around the Barossa.

"During the low periods in this industry, like the glut we're in at the moment, people seem to take a short term view and start ripping vineyards out. That gets us pretty riled up.

"There is no glut for the people we work for because they make small quantities of super premium wine from small blocks of super premium fruit, and it all sells."

Schnippenschnitter maintains the labour intensive rod and spur method of pruning, which is ideally suited to producing quality fruit from non-irrigated, dry grown vines.

This pruning style ensures good ventilation in the vine canopy and balanced vigour for even ripening.

"An open canopy also reduces the risk of disease and therefore the need for chemical fungicides," Tim says.

"Minimal use of chemicals in the vineyard is extremely important to us.

"Where possible we will use an under-vine dodger to remove weeds rather than using herbicide sprays.

"On the other hand we prefer not to use tillage in the mid-row which can damage soil structure. Instead we plant cover crops which, although more expensive, provide much longer term organic benefits."

Tim and Dan support minimal irrigation to ensure the highest quality fruit.

"Bore water in the Barossa is increasingly saline, and that damages the vines and lowers fruit quality.

"The answer is simple: don't water! Vines are very hardy. If you manage them properly, they have a good root structure and you get good winter rains, they won't need water during the growing season.

"The key is to cut them back hard enough during pruning. This takes a good eye and a bit of instinct. You need to look at each vine individually and not at the block as a whole.

"Vines don't need much attention. It's no good if they are too soft and a bit of stress is actually good for them.

"The secret is to encourage just the right amount of stress to suck up all the minerals from the soil, and produce the best fruit."

Schnippenschnitter has developed orthodox and not so orthodox management techniques for old vines. There's the "chainsaw and boot" pruning method.

"You kick the crap out of the vine until all the dead wood falls off," Tim says.

"This is actually a very important part of preserving the old vines. It prevents the dead wood from rotting and spreading fungal spores throughout the vineyard."

Using Dan's grafting expertise, they are also currently trialing an underground cleft graft experiment that they hope will achieve vine survival, even when the above ground trunk has rotted and perished.

While Tim and Dan are totally committed to their pruning trade, both maintain a second job.

Dan works part time as a cellar hand for Richmond Grove, while Tim has been developing his wine label, Diggers Bluff, named after his faithful old Rottweiler Digger.

Tim says the pruning and vineyard restoration work has really been a way for him to fund the start-up of his wine label. His small winery now crushes about 40 tonnes a year and most of the fruit comes from Tim's own vineyard.

"We love our wine and we love the full cycle of growing it, picking it and making it ourselves. There is a lot of satisfaction in having control over growing the fruit that goes into the wine you make," Tim says.

"In our opinion you just can't have one without the other. What happens in the vineyard is crucial to the winemaking process.

"You can make a bad wine with good fruit but you can't make good wine with bad fruit."

Looking to the future Tim and Dan believe Schnippenschnitter will last as long as there are old vines to preserve but they would also like to see more young people get behind the movement to preserve old vineyards.

"We will keep doing this forever. The difficult thing is finding more young people who want to do it too," Tim said.