

review



The good apple
the story behind Hillbilly Cider's success

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Hillbilly Cider-maker Shane McLaughlin

Upsetting the apple cart

BY ELLEN HILL

FROM raising sheep and cattle, and growing grapes in central NSW to finding a home for thousands of wind-fall apples in the Blue Mountains, Hillbilly Cider-maker Shane McLaughlin's success is cause to toast.

Just five years old, the label has already upset the traditional apple cart with an innovative vintage cider (the Aussie answer to the French champagne) and an Australian-style scrumpy.

Produced in famous Bilpin apple country in the Blue Mountains region, the range includes an apple cider, pear cider and a vintage apple cider as well as a non-alcoholic apple cider.

An old boy of The Kings School Parramatta, cider-maker Shane McLaughlin spent school holidays working on the land at the family merino stud and cattle sta-

tion at Nyngan. "It was pretty solid holidays going home," he says. "Mine were 16-hour days mustering on horseback. It was hard work but I'm glad I did it."

While at school, McLaughlin took up rowing and competed internationally from 1990 to 1996, during which time he represented Australia in world cup and world championships including winning a gold at the 1994 Commonwealth Games.

After returning to Merrybone in 1997, McLaughlin decided to diversify the family farm at Nyngan using 80 acres of Merrybone's 30,000 acres and planted a vineyard in the midst of drought.

Two years later the first shiraz under the award-winning Canonbah Bridge label flowed and continues to do well internationally.

In 2000, McLaughlin met



THE GOOD APPLE: Hillbilly Cider-maker Shane McLaughlin. **Photos: David Hill, Deep Hill Media.**

his future wife Tessa at Henley rowing regatta in London. Their story involves a boyfriend, a dog, a plane and the

great Aussie Outback. The short of it is that Tessa, the city girl with a promising corporate career, upped sticks to live in a vineyard on the other side of the world with Shane, an Akubra-wearing fourth generation farmer

with a knack for turning a desert into a wellspring.

All was going well for the couple, who managed to place the wine into some swanky city restaurants and export markets in Europe, North America and Asia until the strong Australian dollar made exporting unviable.

In search of a simpler life, Shane and Tessa in 2007 shifted to a bohemian existence on 35-acres with an orchard at Bilpin. In 2010, McLaughlin began researching cidermaking as a way to use countless windfall apples. As with his foray into viticulture, McLaughlin travelled to the great cider areas of the world, Hereford in England and France, to study cider, the making process and talk to experts.

He dug a cellar by hand under his Bilpin home and began experimenting with cidermaking.

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The good apple: Hillbilly Cider-maker Shane

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Before long, the house was filled with casks of cider and the aroma of wild yeast fermentations.

The result was a drop reflective in flavour of the surrounding pristine wilderness of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area and named in honour of fellow mountain hillbillies.

Ever the sportsman who thrives on competition, McLaughlin has forged fresh paths of innovation into the cider industry, creating new ciders such as the Vintage Hillbilly, an alternative to champagne, and an Australian-style scrumpy.

Hillbilly Cider is also the only cider in the world to use the new super sweet and aromatic Julie apple variety created and grown at Shields Orchard at Bilpin.

In his role as Cider Australia treasurer, McLaughlin is also at the industry forefront lobbying to keep the Wine Equalisation Tax (Wet Tax) rebate to help small businesses in the industry which, in turn, sup-

ports agriculture generally.

"Wine and cidermaking is unique in that it is 100 per cent farmer inputs: Everything that goes into Hillbilly Cider products are 100 per cent farmer grown - there's no water, it's just apple or pear."

Encouraging a higher fruit use by cidermakers not only boosts the quality of cider but supports the apple industry, which is threatened by cheap imports, he says.

"Fifteen per cent of the cider industry uses 100 per cent apples, so Hillbilly is in a real minority. In the wine industry it's the other way around."

He supports country of origin labelling which gives consumers an educated choice to support local products, and says the Federal Government's allowing companies to add the "Product of Australia" stamp to their label if products are manufactured in Australia - even if they use imported ingredients, "actually made it worse for us".

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McLaughlin gets a taste of his own product under an early evening sky.

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McLaughlin makes his mark in Mountains



Hillbilly Cider-maker Shane McLaughlin on the tractor with a load of fresh apples.



McLaughlin enjoys a reflective Hillbilly Cider after a long day's work.

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Concentrates are made by boiling whole fruits down, which eliminates all the vitamins, antioxidants and other goodness before the flavours are harvested and sold to perfume and flavour companies.

"What's left is basically 70 per cent sugar where once it was seven per cent sugar - it's liquid sugar.

"You've got absolutely characterless concentrate: it's charmless, which I think is the worst insult you can say.

"So they have to add water back and then it's got no flavour so they have to go back to the perfume companies and buy some flavours and a whole heap of sugar to mask bad flavours."

On the other hand, real cider using 100 per cent apples has similar levels of antioxidants as red wine.

Hillbilly Cider also uses pressurised tanks to trap CO2 so the cider generates its own bubbles during fermentation.

"We don't add sugar, we

don't pasteurise and we don't add artificial flavours.

"We're all about keeping it real and honest - 100 per cent crushed fruit fermented with minimal intervention for an easy bohemian bubble," McLaughlin says.

"We're trying to re-create the experience of biting into an apple."

All Hillbilly Cider alcoholic products have won medals in every Australian cider awards since launching.

The brand was also the highest scoring Australian cider at the 2015 International Cider Challenge in England, bringing home a silver and bronze medal, its pear cider was Best in Class at the 2014 Australian Cider Awards and was voted "best pear ever tasted" on Cider House Rules in 2013.

Hillbilly Cider has a loyal following in the Blue Mountains and beyond via independent bottle shops, local pubs and restaurants.

Go to www.hillbillycider.com.au for more information about Hillbilly Cider and stockists.

Stylish showroom

