

M Magazine



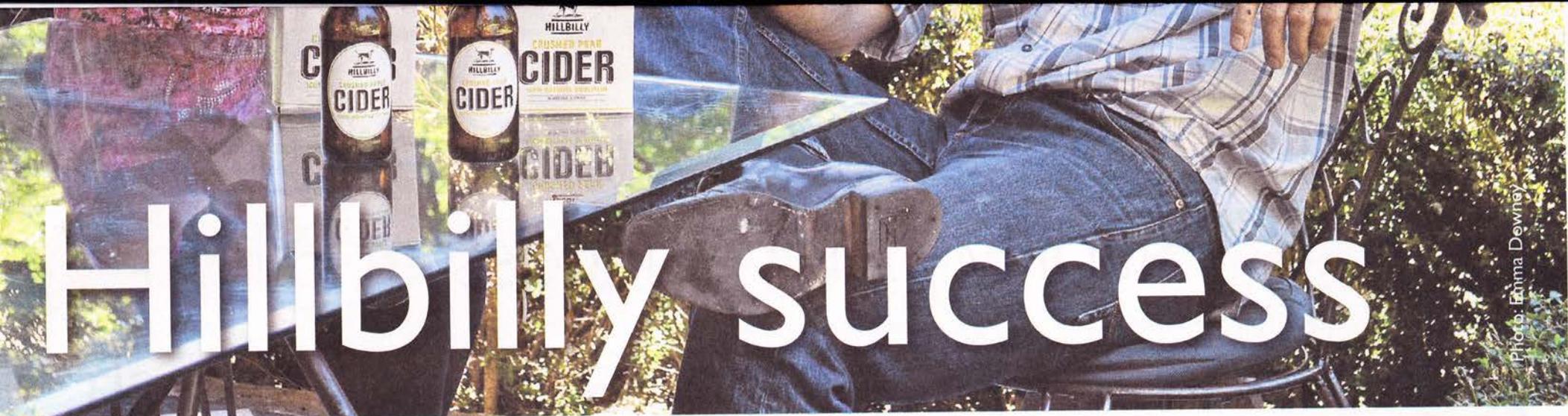


Photo: Emma Downey

Hillbilly success

BY EMMA DOWNEY

WHEN Shane McLaughlin returned to his family's historic property, 'Merryanbone', Warren, in the mid 1990s, he wanted to make his mark on the family business.

The McLaughlins have been committed to wool since the 1800s, but Shane – the fourth generation to live and work the property which is located just north of Nyngan in an area classified as the edge of the Outback.

"I wanted to find my own gig at 'Merryanbone', which I think a lot of blokes need when they return to the family farm," he said.

"I wanted to sink my teeth into my own project"

Shane looked at diversification options, and thinking outside the square, discovered the soil and climate at "Merryanbone" were ideal for growing grapes despite its arid location.

The first commercial vine plantings at "Merryanbone" were made in 1997 and Shane studied viticulture while setting up what was to become Canonbah Bridge winery, named after the former township of Canonbah which bordered "Merryanbone" until the mid 1900s – all that remains today is the old Canonbah Bridge.

The vineyard may not have been the most economical decision the McLaughlins could have made, but today Canonbah Bridge produces 13 styles of wine and exports to eight countries, while the winery's flagship wine – the 2007 Drought Reserve Shiraz – was nominated for a prestigious George Mackey Trophy in 2011 which is awarded to the top wine selected from 14,000 wines submitted for export approval that year.

While they did not win, the nomination is seen as coup for the young winery, which Shane operates with his wife, Tessa.

The only cloud on the horizon for the past few years has been the high Aussie dollar, which has been sitting above parity for most of the past two years, and again prompted Shane to again think about diversification – but this time not in such a left-of-field move into cider:

Wine has been Shane and Tessa's passion for more than a decade, but in the current economic climate – which has seen the contraction of export volume and prices often halved – many enterprises have gone under.

While Canonbah Bridge has stayed afloat, Shane and Tessa (pictured with their two ciders) are hoping their expansion into cider will add another income stream and sales

volume to help ensure the vineyard's future and ultimately compliment their wines.

Previously based in Sydney, the couple relocated to Bilpin – home of the Mountain apple and one of Australia's oldest apple producing regions – about five years ago looking for a much simpler lifestyle.

The location is still within easy reach of Sydney for the work required with marketing of Canonbah Bridge wines, but also gives them a head start on the trip west to Warren and the vineyard.

Shane and Tessa's Sydney friends joked they were becoming "hillbillies" by moving to the mountains, but the couple love the natural lifestyle their small property affords, and the jibe proved the inspiration for their brand name, Hillbilly Cider, which was launched in September.

"We thought a simpler lifestyle needed a simpler drink and cider fitted with that, and there's an element of fun in the name," said Tessa, who moved to Australia 11 years ago.

The label's dog was inspired by a hunting dog owned by Tessa's brother in England and pays homage to her English heritage.

Within the first month of operation their Hillbilly Crushed Apple Cider was awarded a bronze medal in the medium cider class of the

nation's only cider competition – the Australian Cider Awards – which attracts many international entries.

In this case, the gold medal was awarded to a cider produced by Henry's in Herefordshire in the United Kingdom – a company which has been making cider for the past couple of hundred years – while the silver was awarded to a German entry.

The response to the apple cider was so positive Shane started working on another variety, this time using pears, which they launched late last month; both ciders are low alcohol with a bitter sweet finish.

"The Australian cider industry is young, new and exciting – the exact opposite to the wine industry which many might describe as over-crowded," Shane said.

"Cider has undergone a massive popularity revival across the world in recent years boosted by hot summers and clever advertising campaigns in the UK, which have urged consumers to enjoy the drink 'over ice', such as the Magners' 'over ice' campaign in the mid 2000s.

"Australia has followed suit – three or four years ago there were just half a dozen ciders made in Australia – today there would be closer to 100!"

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... is easy to use – both in a pot and in the ground – needs no batteries, gives a quick reading and saves endless unnecessary watering.

Also from Searles is a handy pH Probe Tester that gives a general acid/alkaline reading without the trouble of mixing up a proper pH Test Kit, though the latter makes a

... example, the 9-Pattern Spray Gun with rubber grip retails for about \$32 compared to \$10 to \$12 for the plastic equivalent, but it pays for itself over time as with care it will last for years.

A solar-powered pump is another item that pays for itself once you've braced for the initial outlay.

hour capacity and three different nozzles.

The German-made solar-panel kit can be staked in the ground or mounted on a wall or post for maximum sunlight and operates by remote control. The retail price of about \$189 includes a two-year warranty.

country gardener.

It tells the story of Marcelle's experience of converting a paddock into a family vegie garden and takes you through the whole process from planning and planting to harvesting. Practical, readable and beautifully illustrated, it's a book to treasure forever.

The best presents of all, however, are often the simplest: a pot planted with pansy seedlings for autumn, a cutting-grown bay tree, or even a homemade garden ornament, though you'd need to get your skates on for the latter with only a couple of weeks to go.

* Prices are approximate.

Hillbilly cider success at Bilpin



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Research company, ISIS World, reports the cider market in Australia in 2011-12 was worth an estimated \$300 million with an annual growth rate since the mid 2000s of 19.1 per cent a year, and if the UK market is any guide, this was likely to be closer to 30pc/year today and in the next five years.

"Research shows beer consumption to be on the decline and I think cider and wine are picking up some of this market," Shane said.

"We've found selling cider is a bit similar to fishing with dynamite – people are excited about the product, which is seen as a bit retro and fashionable at present.

"We've not experienced this sort of situation in the wine industry since the early 2000s," he said.

Not surprisingly for a winemaker, Shane loves to work with yeast, and within a short time of their move to Bilpin he'd started experimenting with wild yeast trials using the local apples; he's also spent time in Herefordshire doing vintage work there and gaining useful experience with the production and end product.

And while his wine making background helps as the essence of

cider production is much the same as for wine, Shane also spent a lot of time researching cider history to fully understand how it developed and its production process.

"That's the whole reason history exists – we need to know how something was done in the past to get it right in the future," said Shane.

Initially Shane and Tessa joined in what turned out to be a short-lived partnership in a cider brewing enterprise – during which he produced four ciders – before striking out on their own.

The Crushed Apple and the Crushed Pear ciders are Shane's fifth and sixth ciders respectively and use all local Bilpin fruit, which is crushed at Appledale near Orange.

The apple cider was well received on its launch and has gained a strong following across the mountains from restaurants and independent bottle shops and plan to maintain the "boutiqueness" of the operation.

In mid September Shane and Tessa began marketing the cider at farmers markets at Blackheath, Castle Hill, on the Northern beaches, Marrickville and Leichardt, and said they loved the feedback by such close contact with their customers.

"Doing the markets we see who drinks our product and they come

in all ages, occupations, both men and women," Shane said.

"You can't pigeon hole the cider drinker."

It takes 3.5 apples to create a 330 millilitre bottle of Hillbilly cider which made it difficult for the McLaughlins to justify trying to grow all the apples they would need for the venture, so instead they buy blemished, third-grade fruit – which would otherwise be thrown away – from local orchardists instead.

They are also using a new variety, called the Julie and developed by Bilpin orchard Bill Shields, which has never been used in cider before.

"We don't use concentrates or add any sugar to the process, and there is no added carbonation – we achieve that through fermentation under pressure to capture the natural carbon dioxide," said Shane. "We're making a real cider, which is also gluten free."

Shane said the brewing process was akin to making sparkling wine with the end result producing a fine bead like the popular bubbly.

"We're using culinary apple varieties which produces a light, refreshing drink made for summer, and different varieties will give a slightly different flavour to the end product," Shane said.

"Grannies are a lot sharper and less sweet, while red varieties are more sweet.

"To make a complex cider you need to use different varieties in the mix to achieve the desired sugar, pH and acidic levels."

Developing the pear cider was harder as Shane said it was difficult to get pears to the correct ripeness for the process and achieved a low juice yield (despite how messy it is to eat a ripe pear).

"Apples tend to ripen at much the same rate however only a small amount of pears reach the perfect level of ripeness for making cider at the one time – the rest will be either under or over ripe," Shane said.

"Pears also lack nutrients so they're harder to get through fermentation than apples – generally, the pear ferment takes longer because pears contain high levels of unfermentable sugars called sorbital, which gives the palate a rich slightly sweeter finish."

Always looking for something new, Shane has started trial work with a third, "heavier" style, this time a still apple cider which he's tentatively titled "under the house wild ferment" because he's literally working on it in a cellar under the house.