



the ties that wined

Vineyard pioneers Hermann and Agnes Seifried proved the doubters wrong. The company turns 40 with a strong family blend to its product, Geoff Moffett discovers

The winter sun is shining on the Appleby vineyard of Hermann and Agnes Seifried and there's a welcome inside the winery office from a golden labrador with a hearty tail-wag and an insistent, prodding nose. Apart from Oscar – Hermann's dog – there are other signs that this is no stuffy, pretentious corporate winery.

A baby's rug lies on the office floor, but the part-time occupant, five-month-old Gabriele, granddaughter of Agnes and Hermann, is currently in someone's arms. Yes, this is a homely winery, Nelson-style. It's also where the South Island's commercial wine industry began. Or more precisely, it was on a piece of land up the road on the corner of Moutere Highway and Sunrise Rd in Upper Moutere where Hermann and Agnes proved the naysayers wrong.

Forty years ago the determined young couple in their early 20s planted 4ha of grafted stock as the first of their children, Heidi – Gabriele's mother – lay in a carrycot in the shade. No South Island winery has grown grapes continuously for as long as Seifried Estate. And now – like almost all Nelson wineries – it is a true family business, with offspring Heidi, Chris and Anna all involved.

But a family dynasty was far from the minds of Hermann and Agnes in 1973 when they were being knocked back by banks for a loan for their first land and told they were mad to think a vineyard would flourish in Nelson's climate. A loan was eventually found – at a steep rate of interest – and by their first

vintage in 1976 the Seifrieds proved that Nelson could produce top-quality wine. In doing so they showed the way for other Nelson grape-growers and wine-makers, creating a vibrant local industry. Nelson is now gradually emerging from the shadow of neighbouring Marlborough as a wine region in its own right.

From that first small vineyard, Seifried Estate has grown to become Nelson's largest producer. Seven separate vineyards cover more than 200ha on a range of soil types from Motueka to Brightwater. From the initial production of a few tonnes of grapes, the winery had a grape crush this year of about 2000 tonnes.

Agnes and Hermann met at the Mt Robert skifield. Agnes was starting a teaching career at Nayland College and Hermann had arrived from Austria via South Africa, where he'd worked on a vineyard in Paarl. With a degree in viticulture and oenology from Weinsberg University in Germany, Hermann had been employed by the NZ Apple and Pear Board in a new venture to make apple wine.

But he soon set his sights on making wine from grapes, undeterred by locals who told him the Nelson climate was too cold. "They were amazing really," says daughter Heidi. "No-one wanted to lend them money and everyone said they were mad." The young couple put in long days and nights as they established their first vineyard.

"Hermann was still working in the cannery and during vintage I'd come out from Richmond with a bunch of ladies who helped us pick the grapes," says Agnes. "I'd put Heidi in a carrycot under

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– Agnes Seifried

1 Hermann and Agnes at the Altrusa Riwaka Wine Festival c.1980 2 The family at the winery in Redwood Road, Appleby January 2011





3 Agnes planting in an early vineyard in Upper Moutere in 1974 4 Hermann laying blocks for the first winery in Upper Moutere, 1974 5 Heidi and Chris, Vintage 1980 6 Agnes pruning apples which were later replaced with grapes. Heidi age 3 years behind the trusty Hillman Hunter 1978

the grapes or in the back of our VW. We picked the grapes and Hermann would arrive at 6 o'clock or when he'd finished his day at the cannery and we'd process the grapes until 10, 11 or 12 o'clock. We'd head home and start preparing for the next day."

Their first awards for Gewürztraminer and Sylvaner varieties in 1976 showed the Seifrieds they were on the right track. Two more children – Chris and Anna – were born in following years and new vineyard land was gradually added to the estate as their wine found a ready market in Nelson and the South Island. People were starting to acquire a taste for the fruit of the vine.

Anna and Heidi remember a grassroots marketing strategy. "Mum and Dad would load up the boot of the Hillman Hunter and stop at liquor stores and pubs and anywhere wine was sold." Agnes says distribution was also by Newman's buses. "There were no couriers in those days and Hermann would go out to the bus with a pallet of wine – 50, 60 or 100 cases in the back of the bus and off they'd go to depots for collection."

With no computers, Agnes assiduously put together a mail-order scheme and still has the address books for some of the 4500 people the winery eventually had on their database. In those days it was a novelty to drink a wine from Nelson, and particularly one that was any good, she says.

Seifried Estate has come a long way in 40 years and Agnes says the children's presence in the business influenced that

expansion. "To think that all the kids decided on their own bat to come back is not something we could have imagined. They all went off and did their study and worked overseas and just drifted back slowly, and I don't think we'd have grown the way we have if that hadn't happened."

Heidi has a dentistry degree and also a viticulture/oenology degree. Chris, now the chief winemaker, has a wine science

degree, while Anna has a commerce degree and a post-graduate wine marketing degree and is sales and marketing manager. Ask any of them about the new generation of Seifrieds taking over the business, however, and you soon get the message that Hermann still calls the shots.

Says Chris: "He tells everyone the kids are taking over but he has the final say on pretty much everything. Ultimately he's still in charge. He's talking about slowing down a wee bit but I'm not sure if he can do that," Chris laughs. "He just seems to thrive on the next challenge. It'd be quite easy to have the same vineyard and do exactly the same thing year after year but one challenge after another presents itself so he sort of thrives on that."

Hermann has always been hands-on. He built the first of the stainless steel tanks and still has the work done on site. Chris says Hermann played a big role in building a new winery in the mid-1990s, instead of just hiring a contractor to do the job. Heidi says it's probably the reason why the business is so

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– Chris Seifried says dad Hermann is still in charge



7 Chris and Heidi discussing strategy 8 Anna with a pallet of bottles 9 Hermann with friend Oscar 10 Hermann getting advice on grape ripeness from Chris's Daniel and Amelia, April 2013

self-sufficient and unusual among wineries by not only growing grapes and making the wine, but doing all its own grafting, having its own nursery, its own workshop, bottling line, and doing its own distribution.

I ask Hermann about Agnes' strengths. "A good communicator," he says. "Anybody who has a problem goes to see Agnes, whether it's ill health or family strife." Says Agnes: "When you've got a staff as big as we have (35 permanents and at least as many part-time workers at pruning and harvest time), pastoral care is actually quite a big issue. They're our biggest asset."

Hermann says the business expanded considerably in the 1990s with the building of a restaurant and a new winery and acquisition of more land. "Those were the heydays when the exchange rate was \$1.52 (to the US dollar) and we did extremely well. We exported for \$100 a case. Today we'd barely get that much. Everything has gone up: energy, insurance, rates, wages, excise tax." In the '90s, the business could expect a return of around 15 percent on investment. "Now it's around 4 percent," says Hermann.

While all five of the family are working hard in the business, no-one is complaining. They are proud of the family business and couldn't imagine a different life. Chris says the diversity of the wine industry is exciting. "As well as the winemaking, I also enjoy working with HR, IT and label design. You are dealing with foreign currency. You're getting on a plane and doing a dinner at one of Gordon Ramsay's restaurants in London. Then Hermann's ringing up to say one of the tractors is bogged, so you deal with everything."

While economic times are difficult, Chris sees a good future and growing recognition for a Nelson "brand". In recent weeks Seifried

Estate has had visits from agents from Britain's biggest supermarket chains, including Sainsbury's, Marks & Spencer, Waitrose and Tesco. "That's pretty bloody exciting in little old Nelson." Chris says these supermarkets now want to stock Nelson wines on their shelves along with wines from Marlborough and other parts of the country.

Seifried wines are also on sale at Harrods and Selfridges in London. That's a breakthrough Chris attributes to the success of the winery's Sweet Agnes Riesling, which has won the top trophy for sweet wine in the "over £10" category at the prestigious Decanter World Wine Awards three times in four years. Anna, who travels on business to many parts of the world, says the wine industry is incredibly competitive with so many brands and wines. "You are trying to show importer-distributors and their sales reps why they should have Seifried wines at the top of the list when they have a huge portfolio of wines from France, Italy, Spain, Chile, South Africa, Australia and so on."

One of the family is likely to be somewhere around the world at any one time, she says, not just promoting the label but staying in tune with wine trends. But the family agrees that Nelson has a point of difference to offer. Most of the exports are to the UK and Ireland, the US and Australia, but also to several other emerging markets.

Will the Seifried Estate dynasty continue? There are already four grandchildren – two each for Heidi and husband Mark and Chris and his wife Susan. "We will be surviving", Hermann declares. Says Agnes: "Very soon the destiny of the business will be in the kids' hands and it probably depends on what they want and how the market changes, but I don't think it will change a lot. It will always be a pretty hands-on, family-run business."