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# SOUTH ISLAND LONGEST ESTABLISHED VINEYARD GOING STRONG IN NELSON

Legendary for doing everything themselves, Hermann and Agnes Seifried have not let up on their work ethic even though Seifried Estate is now the largest producer in Nelson and the three Seifried offspring are fully involved, Anna Seifried tells **Charmian Smith**

Hermann Seifried, now in his mid-70s, is still first in the gate in the mornings and last to leave at night, putting in a solid 60-plus hours a week, according to his daughter, Anna Seifried.

Hermann's appetite for work is legendary in wine circles. An experienced Austrian winemaker, he came to Nelson in 1971 to make apple wine for the NZ Apple and Pear Board, but two years later was planting his own vines in the Moutere Hills, the first commercial vineyard in the region, and, the Seifrieds claim, the first in the South Island still in existence today. Their inaugural vintage was 1976.

He and his New Zealand wife, Agnes, did everything themselves, grafting their own vines, planting their vineyards, making and selling their wine, and even constructing tanks and other equipment. The many naysayers who kept telling them it couldn't be done only

spurred them on faster, Anna said.

"Mum and Dad are very much considered pioneers of South Island wine growing. They got stuck in and did things. The machinery that wasn't available was made on site.

"Dad engineered the tanks and self taught himself to weld. And an engineering friend from Motueka made their first grape harvester which is still in use in a boysenberry farm not far from here."

That propensity for doing everything in house continues.

"We are one of - if not the only - winery in the country who oversees every step of the process ourselves. We have our own nursery, vineyard development, we look after the grapes, we harvest, we process the grapes here, we bottle on site, we load containers and then we have a sales team in New Zealand."

With 340ha of producing

vines, they grow all their own grapes, apart from two contract vineyards, and have just planted a new one.

In the early 1990s the winery and cellar door moved from the Moutere Hills to a large, purpose-built complex on the plains near Rabbit Island and a restaurant, Harvest Kitchen, opened alongside the new cellar door. Now, almost 50 years after its inception, Seifried Estate is the largest winery in Nelson, and the three Seifried children, Chris, Heidi and Anna have all been involved for almost two decades.

"I don't know what else I would do that would be as interesting and broad, changeable and exciting as wine," says Anna.

With a post-grad in wine marketing from Adelaide University, she worked in Australia for a few years until her parents offered her a position in sales



**1. Agnes and Hermann did everything themselves** - here they are grafting their own vines in 1973.  
**2. Agnes and Hermann** in their cellar door, 1979.

and marketing. If she didn't take it they'd recruit someone else and if she wanted to come home later there might or might not be a job for her, she said.

"It wasn't quite that blunt, but I came home and the deal was I had to do a harvest, get my hands dirty, so I spent the first six months in the winery. Then I spent the next two years shadowing Mum as she started handing things across to me. She did everything before."

Agnes is stepping back a little, but she is still at her desk - or computer at home - every day looking after RSE (Recognised seasonal employment) and immigration. Hermann now spends much of his time managing the vineyards.

Anna's older siblings, Chris and Heidi, are both winemakers, Chris looking after the operations side and Heidi, also a part-time dentist, looks after the laboratory and compliance.

"Fortunately - I think for us in terms of our family dynamics - we've always got on very well. The three of us are all quite close in age. Mum and dad were working all the time so us three kids entertained ourselves in the vineyard or making huts out of old wine cartons in the warehouse.

"I think we all have the same work ethic, born of the same ink. It works very well. Seifried's in good hands for the next 20-30 years - I hope," she said.

"We get together about once a week, often on a Sunday night for a family dinner. We all sit down and talk about what is happening this week and who's coming and who's away and anything of note that's happening.

"Conversation is constant, not necessarily about winemaking but when you are really living and breathing wine, then if you are not talking about how the grapes are looking or what they are doing or how that new tractor's performing, you are talking

about what the foreign currency is doing, how's that relates to whatever's affecting sales in different markets. But other than that we operate independently."

Finding seasonal staff has always been a challenge that has worsened since Covid closed the country's borders. A big reliance for seasonal staff has been on backpackers on their working holiday visas, as well as groups of RSE workers who would come for a period, and overseas winemakers and cellar hands would to help over the harvest period.

Four of their RSE workers have been with them over two years now because they were not able to return home, and another half dozen are shared with a Hawkes Bay apple firm.

"If labour wasn't such a problem, if we had people who could help us, the sky's the limit. But at the moment our thinking is about harder and smarter and faster. We have quite a lot of technology already."

Seifried Estate wine is widely available in retail which has been a saviour during Covid, she said.

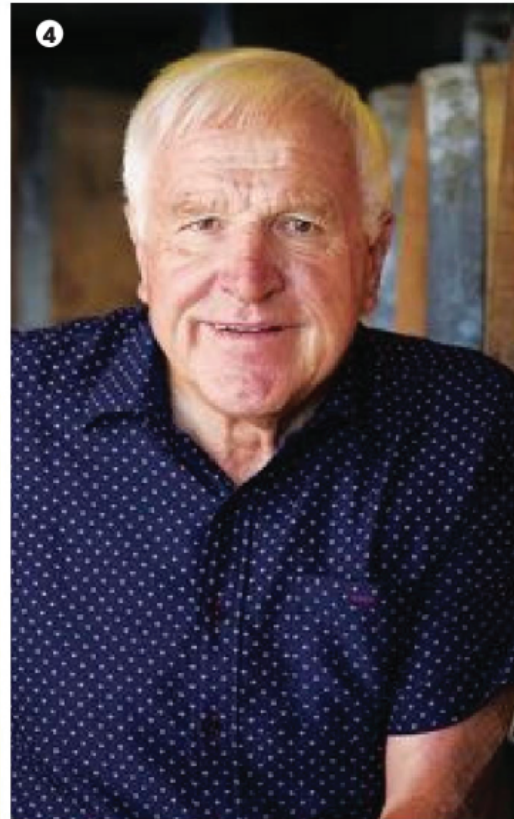
The epidemic has also made them rethink their need to travel overseas to visit their markets.

"We've had two years at home now and it has certainly made us reflect on the need to return to such frequent travel. While there are definitely advantages to be face-to-face, it has shown some inefficiencies with business activity that can often be done over Zoom"

About 50% of their wine is exported, most to the UK, but in the last couple of years, Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine had grown into important markets. However, the war between Russia and Ukraine has obviously disrupted that.

Besides the grape varieties widely grown in Nelson such as chardonnay, pinot gris, riesling, pinot noir and sauvignon blanc, the Seifrieds also produce a floral gewürztraminer, a savory syrah, würzer (a fragrant cross between





**3. Two winemakers in the family:** Heidi and Chris Seifried.

**4. Hermann Seifried.**

**5. The Seifrieds.** From left, Hermann, Agnes, Anna, Chris and Heidi.

**6. In good hands for the coming decades:** the Seifried siblings, Anna, Chris and Heidi.

**7. Living and breathing wine:** The Seifrieds, clockwise from top right, Hermann, Agnes, Anna, Chris and Heidi.

**8. Chris Seifried** checks the barrels. **9. Heidi Seifried-Houghton** in the laboratory.

**10. Seifried Estate's Cellar door today.**

**11. Hard at work,** Anna and Chris Seifried.



gewürztraminer and müller thurgau planted on their oldest vineyard Redwood Valley), the Austrian white grüner veltliner, and a dark, rich zweigelt, also an Austrian variety. There's also the iconic Sweet Agnes riesling, a late harvest riesling that's left on the vines until the grapes have almost dried, intensifying the sweetness and stone and citrus flavours.

But it's their crisp, juicy, tropical sauvignon blanc that's doing best for them at the moment, Anna says.

"It's been doing very well in front of the judges, and you can often find it for as little as \$16 in retailers. We really strive to make wines that represent value for money, and that we are proud to put our name on."

Seifried has several tiers of wine, from Old Coach Road and Seifried Estate which are widely available in supermarkets, to the single vineyard Aotea range and Winemaker's Collection which they consider the pinnacle of the vintage, but are still under \$50.

[seifried.co.nz](http://seifried.co.nz)

