

By Yvonne Lorkin

THE
PAST
LIVES
OF OUR
**WINE
PEOPLE**

Simon Waghorn

One of the most common things I'm asked by people is: "How did you get into wine?"

And then I watch their eyes glaze over as I attempt to condense the first 24 years of my life into a story that somehow segues into a full-time immersion in wine without making the listener scoop their own eyeballs out with boredom. Yet, over the years of getting to know people in this business, I've been inspired and intrigued by the backstories, the past lives, the convoluted journeys some have taken before settling into a life in wine.



Ian Hunter

Ian Hunter grew up in Dunedin and Central Otago. "Back in the days when all the roads in Wanaka were gravel and houses only cost five grand!" he laughs. These days, he's winery production manager for Marisco Vineyards, and he's the first person that sprang to mind as soon as I'd decided to research this story.

I met Ian in 2000 when I was running the cellar door and restaurant for Sacred Hill in Hawke's Bay's Dartmoor Valley. Summer was looming, I couldn't find a chef and panic was setting in. "Hey, there's this guy who's working for us while studying at EIT", suggested David Mason, Sacred Hill's owner. "He used to own a restaurant down south – good chef, apparently – he'd be your best bet". At the time, Ian was none too happy about it. He just wanted to learn how to make wine and he was over cooking, but I begged, and that summer we rocked it. I sold lots of wine, he created a great menu and managed to pass his

chemistry papers – so all was good with the world. Ian was 43.

"My first jobs out of school were at the freezing works in Dunedin, then as a pot washer in a hotel in Queenstown, where I thought I was going to have a career in Alpine skiing. After that, I spent a couple of years working in a fish hatchery in Wanaka before joining the film industry as a caterer in 1981". Ian then spent the next 20-odd years feeding the rich and famous "all over the place".

His film work intermingled with a couple of attempts at being a restaurateur "with varying degrees of success", but it was during that time that he caught the wine bug. "It was in Wanaka with my first restaurant that I met a very young Tony Bish who was making wine at Rippon while finishing his degree. I lent a hand at Rippon for their 1987 vintage and I remember lots of long lunches and enjoying some great wines out of Rolfe and Lois' cellar. It was about then I recall thinking, "this is pretty cool", but it would take him another dozen years to do it for real.

It's a big call to take on a whole new study/career path in your 40s. However, Ian's motivations were many. "In an attempt to break away from the film industry and the desire to do something else, I sold up and enrolled in the Wine Science degree programme at EIT in Hawke's Bay as a mature student. Why? Well I loved drinking wine and I wanted to learn how it was made. It was a huge challenge. I also wanted to know if I still had a brain that could function academically. I really



Bruce Taylor

approached it with the mindset of 'Don't fail here Ian', and don't be afraid to ask dumb questions in the lecture room".

Fifteen years on, he's living and working in Marlborough (where he never thought he'd end up) and is relishing his 'lifestyle choice'.

"Let's be honest, if it's a fortune you're looking to make, then look elsewhere. My skill set from managing the logistical issues involved in the delivery of great food into difficult locations on film sets have carried into what I'm doing now – that's taking charge of a winemaking facility and everything and everyone in it and ensuring we produce great wines and deal with our day-to-day issues with the best possible outcomes. I have a great team, and for me it's all about the people. Your team look to you every day for motivation and guidance and that's a challenge sometimes. If I weren't in this business? I'd probably be lying on a beach somewhere under a palm tree trying to invent a mechanism for complete happiness!"

These days, he's up to his eyeballs in bottling runs and malo ferments in his role as winemaker for Tohu Wines in Marlborough's Awatere Valley. But for the first 30 years of his life, Bruce Taylor was solely focused on completing his BA in History

and trying to get his head around resource consents and compliance as a legal property officer with the Waikato District Council.

Working closely with Bruce is Jonny Hiscox, vineyard manager for the Nelson arm of the company, Whenua Matua (Aronui Wines). A UK native, Jonny came on board with Aronui to initially convert a 33-hectare block of gorse into a viable vineyard. But prior to carving out a career with secateurs, he was a professional slicer-dicer as a master butcher back in England. Needless to say, Jonny is the go-to man at the Christmas BBQ – and he's always got something to say about the state of the meat raffles at the local RSA.

Although it may confound you to understand how someone could chuck in a scintillating study path in the physiology of seaweed to embark on a career in wine, that's exactly what Simon Waghorn did. The owner of Astrolabe Wines had completed a science degree in botany at Canterbury University before starting his masters in Environmental Sciences.

"The masters was part natural resources and part phaeophycology (the study of brown kelp), and at the time I had a notion about farming seaweed for extracts. Is anyone doing that in NZ yet? Anyway, it was 1981, and while at uni I joined the wine club



Jonny Hiscox

and worked weekends and between lectures at a large liquor merchant. This provided the income needed to supplement my student lifestyle of mainly booze and vinyl records. The store had quite a few quality imports, and I enjoyed many good wines and malts at staff rates!"

By chance, Simon saw a flyer for a post-grad diploma in wine at Roseworthy. "At that stage, I couldn't see much future in my studies; I figured I'd be a bad scientist or a worse teacher. Wine seemed pretty cool and left-field, and as I'd acquired a taste for it I decided to drop out and pursue winemaking as a career." A glowing reference letter to Robert Hill-Smith from Tom Maling (now at Constellation Brands) – who was in a senior role at Quill Humphreys, the



Trading a city suit for a wine country lifestyle – such as Gisborne – appeals to many professionals.

“Let’s be honest, if it’s a fortune you’re looking to make, then look elsewhere.”

– Ian Hunter

liquor merchants in Christchurch – landed Simon a cellarhand job at Yalumba in 1982. Study at Roseworthy followed, and by 1986, he was married with a baby and assistant winemaker at Te Kauwhata with Cooks.

“I kind of got into it by chance at a time when most winemakers were from family traditions, and it wasn’t really on the radar as a career option,” shrugs Simon. “It was around the same time as Kim Crawford, Brent Marris, Mark Robertson, Kate Radburnd and Neill Culley were all getting their qualifications at Roseworthy. It was a real “sliding doors” moment for me – I can’t imagine what my life would have been like if I hadn’t dropped out of the seaweed thing...”

The sleepy hamlet of Waimate sits on the border of North Otago and South Canterbury, a world away from the stress involved in setting up satellite communications systems in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan (all the ‘stan’s basically), but for civil aviation expert Gary Dennison, it’s home to his Point Bush Estate vineyard project, and he’s loving every second of it.

His career has always been in civil aviation – satellite communications, working in the Pacific for NZ Civil Aviation, then for the International Civil Aviation Organisation (run by the United Nations) and later the International Air Transport Association. Gary’s work took him to Mongolia, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Somalia and similar hotspots and hardship territories until 2005, when he and his wife Ann decided that life just wasn’t challenging

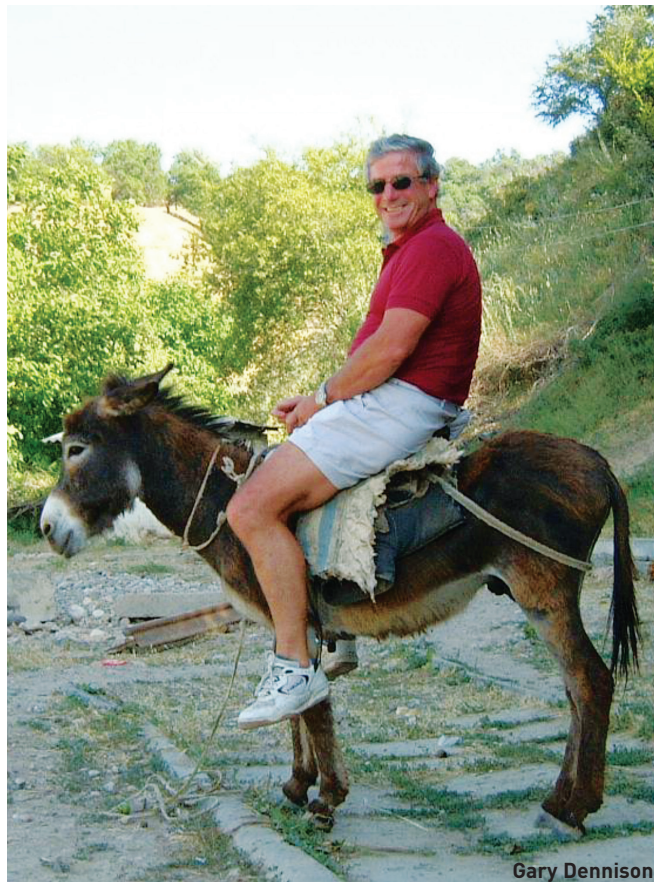
enough, and that it was time to return home to New Zealand to really extend themselves by taking up winegrowing.

“I was born here in Waimate, and our little frost-free paradise is one of the wine world’s best-kept secrets,” says Gary. “[Romeo] Bragato missed a few winegrowing gems and Waimate was one of them.”

Gary had previous experience making wine in Libya, and initially, they planted their vineyard simply to sell the grapes. However, the wine course Gary was doing through EIT included winemaking, and due to their isolation, it made sense to add winemaking to the mix of study. They established the winery and also recently opened ‘Vines’, a new restaurant and tasting room on the property.

Gary still continues to do consultancy work for the UN, and he reckons the stresses of both occupations are similar – “although managing staff over here is more stressful”, he adds, “and keeping all balls in the air is a worry at times”. But the Dennisons have no regrets about launching into this new life.

“We’ve met a great bunch of like-minded,



Gary Dennison



Gene Walker



Patrick Stowe

caring and sharing people, and if we weren't doing this, we'd be traveling the world spending the kids' inheritance," Gary laughs. "There's nothing more satisfying than sitting down to a meal or a picnic and drinking your own wine."

People often say wine is art in a bottle, but for Gene Walker of Gisborne Gourmet (the company responsible for The Family Company Wines, Waimata Cheeses and First Press grape juices), art was very much his life and first love. "I grew up on a Hawke's Bay farm and went on to design school in Wellington before moving to Gisborne to open a high-end dealer gallery," says Walker. It was while working in his gallery he met Chelsea Thorpe, daughter of Gisborne winemaker John Thorpe when she opened The Winemaker's Daughter Café across the road.

"I did my Masters of Arts in Art Management, had two babies (Chelsea did actually), then decided to move on from art, and I've now done four vintages with John and we've set up Gisborne Gourmet – and so on."

In my quest to find out more about the past lives of New Zealand's wine people, I was surprised to learn how many had come from the health sciences.

From well-known world leader in neurology, Ivan Donaldson CNZOM, founder of Canterbury's Pegasus Bay, to geologist-turned-neurologist Lance Blumhardt of Waiheke Island's Jurassic Ridge – there's definitely a common thread. Patrick Stowe of Rimu Grove's transition from cancer diagnostics and therapeutics to wine was a well-planned change.

"Prompted by the fact that my heritage was from the Napa Valley, I'd always aspired to be a winemaker, but got side-tracked into medical research."

After travelling to NZ in 1990, Patrick returned to California and met up with some old mates who were making wine in the Napa Valley. Thus began a "training" period of 10 years making wine on a small scale. "We had the gear and expertise and I received lots of good experience. I also spent

many weekends at the UC Davis oenology library researching clones, viticulture practices, climate charts and soil maps. Having the background in research was (and is!) a real asset when planning the vineyard and winery."

Another key to Patrick's successful transition was befriending another local winemaker (and scientist) named John Montero. "He was mad keen about New Zealand and Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Gewürztraminer, which are the varieties dear to my heart. His help planning the winery and assisting during the first two vintages at Rimu was invaluable. He's now started his own vineyard and label in Central Otago (Ellero Wine). If Patrick's wine journey hadn't worked out, he reckons he'd most likely have continued his career as a medical research scientist. "It was exciting and gratifying work, and way more lucrative. You have to love winemaking as most don't make any money from it," he says.

Daniel Schwarzenbach began his professional life as a senior medical laboratory scientific officer at a large hospital in south London



Richard Brimer

Awatere Valley

before replacing his labcoat for a Swandri on the other side of the world. "I was disappointed with the way the medical industry was heading," he shrugs. "I began looking for another career option, and the wine industry seemed a perfect choice." So he returned to New Zealand in the 1990s to study viticulture at Lincoln, followed by his wife Ursula, who gave up a life looking after the rich and famous in five-star hotels in the Swiss Alps, to plant grapes in Nelson's Tasman district and build a gravity-fed winery.

Schwarzenbach had always enjoyed drinking wine and found it naturally fitted with his microbiology and biochemistry skills. "I really enjoy working outside and always wanted to own my own business, so it's great. Nowadays, I can't imagine still working in a medical laboratory. Plus, bringing up my children in a rural environment also has its advantages.

The parched landscape of Australia's red centre couldn't contrast more with the green lushness of Nadine Worley's

surroundings as winemaker for Mudhouse Wines in Marlborough. Yet, nursing was the original calling of this South Australian native who specialised in paediatrics and worked for many years in Alice Springs.

"The children were heart-warming and the families were lovely, but their living conditions were atrocious," says Nadine.

"A lot of the children I treated had third world diseases. It was remote, eye-opening and, ultimately, soul-destroying".

Being a ward nurse, according to Nadine, was incredibly tough work, "almost equivalent to a hard day's work during vintage". She was young and naive and becoming very worn down, so decisions had to be made. Was she going to dedicate her life to nursing? Or take a leap of faith and join the wine industry where her friends were having loads more fun? "I left nursing, travelled through Australia, visited more beaches than wineries, studied oenology for four years at Adelaide University and began my career

working in Victoria, Adelaide Hills, Italy and Oregon." And she has never looked back!

Another nurse, Beth Eggers, decided to get back to the land when she bought a bare block in Nelson's Upper Moutere Valley back in 1991. She was a fifth-generation descendent of German immigrants who'd settled there back in the mid-1800s. Agriculture was in her blood, having been brought up on a hop and sheep farm, but nursing



Nadine Worley



Heidi Seifried-Houghton

occupied her career path prior to planting grapes. "I'd nursed in New Zealand and the UK – and I continued nursing right up until 2001 in order to finance the development of my farm," says the owner of Himmelsfeld, which celebrates its 25th birthday next year. "Once a nurse, always a nurse", she says, "the vocational change just meant I was nursing vines, not people".

The Nelson wine industry appears to have attracted many mid-career jumpers. Heidi Seifried-Houghton, of Seifried Estate, started her professional career as a dentist. After working in New Zealand, Australia and the UK as a dentist, she decided at the ripe old age of 25, in 2001, to head back to university (this time Lincoln) to do a post-grad diploma in viticulture and oenology. She now shares her time between being a dentist in Motueka one day a week and working as a winemaker for the family business Tuesday to Friday, all while juggling three small children under the age of five as well!

"Her background in science gives her an eye for detail," says Heidi's sister Anna, "and so these days she runs our winery laboratory and is responsible for all Health and Safety, Sustainable Wine



Dominic Maxwell

Growing New Zealand and all other accreditation and compliance issues, which go with making and selling wine around the world."

Another Nelsonian, Lars Jensen of Richmond Plains and Te Mania Estate calls himself a "corporate refugee". "I had to flee the corporate clutches to give meaning to my life and save myself," he says. Having completed a Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting and Marketing at Otago University, Lars worked his way through the likes of AXA, AMP, Telecom and Netway IT, but he found himself yawning.

"Looking back, the seeds were sown early on," Lars muses. "It was bad, flat beer at Uni that drove me to wine. Those dreary and often warm brews made Bakano and casks of Velutto Rosso look really tasty!"

Saving lives of a different kind was the domain of Jill Chapman, now of Terrace Edge. "I had a major career shift from care and protection social work to managing our family winery," explains Jill.

"Along with our son Pete (viculturist), I pick up on all the sales and do some marketing, admin, HR, cellar door and anything else that needs to be done – as you do in a family business. I miss my old job though!"

Social work was a tough, demanding, highly rewarding and very meaningful job for Jill. "It actually took a couple of years for me to find any real meaning in what I do now, compared to the importance of the job I previously had, a job where I improved the lives of children. But I do love the "freedom" that running your own business affords – making my own choices and making things happen without having to go through layers of bureaucracy! Also, managing my own time is a real plus – I can work at 7am or 10pm if I want and do some family stuff during the day".

Just a few kilometres away from Jill's Terrace Edge vineyard in Waipara is the domain of Dominic Maxwell, winemaker for Greystone and Muddy Water wines. Tall, tanned, ruddy of cheek and stubbly of jaw, he looks like he's been in vineyards all his life. "Don't tell anyone (er, ok), but I was once confined to a desk in an office tower on the Strand in London," he says.

The corporate gig was a natural progression for Maxwell, having studied commerce and management at Lincoln University straight out

of high school. "I was interested in how businesses ran. Plus, once I ended up in London, I needed a decent-paying job to fund my social life and travels – so I was a suit." However, Dominic couldn't shake his hankering for a life in the outdoors, and eventually traded his tie for a chainsaw, working for a well-known London tree surgeon.

"The boss was slightly insane and the days were short and cold, so I knew I needed to get back down under. The one bright spot in that job was working the home gardens for Simon and Yasmin Le Bon. It goes without saying they had a sweet pad, including an awesome recording studio in the basement."

Dominic had been exposed to viticulture by working in vineyards in his university holidays, and would enjoy the odd bottle of wine with his flatmates. "I guess the seed was sown back when I was studying commerce, I just didn't know it then. Once I got to London the whole world of wine seemed to open up. The range and selection of wines available to buy in the city was phenomenal and it was so easy to travel around Europe to visit wine regions," he says.

"I realised one day while I was trying to comprehend a screen full of numbers that I wanted to be creating something that was actually tangible, and by that

stage my interest in vineyards and taste for wine had developed to such a point that I thought, 'Someone has to be behind these wine. Some lucky person is making a living out of growing and making wine. That's what I'm going to do. I'm gonna make my newfound passion my job'."

That desire to live an outdoors life and be self-sustainable was the catalyst for Italian couple Alessandro and Wilma Laryn to ditch their respective careers as a high school maths teacher and commodities trader and set out for a new life.

Both in their 40s and with a little daughter, they felt ready for a new adventure in a more natural environment. Wilma also wanted a vegetable patch. An exploratory tour of New Zealand confirmed it was the place for them; Christchurch looked like the quintessential European town, and a 23-acre property with a Mediterranean-style villa was also up for sale, just 15 minutes from Cathedral Square. "Too small for a farm and too big for a lifestyle block", said the locals. "Perfect!" said the Laryns.

After being granted permanent residence in 1996, the Laryns moved into their new house.

Wilma started growing her veggies, and the rest of the land was diversified into an olive grove, some forestry and 13 acres were planted in Pinot Gris.

Since 2003, the Cracroft Chase brand preserved its European soul by making dry, long-matured Pinot Gris in the French style. More importantly, harvest time is a neighbourhood event attracting hoards of friends and family – Italian style.

Winning the 2014 Champion Wine of the Show trophy at the 2014 Air New Zealand Wine Awards for his Legacy Chardonnay had Vidal Estate winemaker Hugh Crichton scratching his head about whether he'd ever have experienced anything comparable to that high if he'd pushed ahead with a career in accounting instead. Methinks not. "When I left school I studied commerce at Canterbury University, majoring in marketing and accounting. From there, I landed a job with the National Bank in Wellington in a department tasked with targeting the youth market.

"It was the late 80s, Saatchi's were rolling out brilliant campaigns and it was an awesome time, great fun," he says. "Then as you did back then, I went to Europe, worked on boats in France, did



Alessandro and Wilma Laryn



Hugh Crichton

some backpacking around South America, but eventually got sick of sleeping bags and strict budgets. So when I got back to London, I decided to get serious and make some money. A permanent temping job came up at the Securities and Investment Board in accounting – and that was fine, it served a purpose. But it was never going to be my life. I never looked at any of my roles and thought, 'This is my future'. In fact, I never looked at any of my old bosses and thought, 'I want your job'.

Hugh was only on a two-year working visa, so some decisions had to be made – did he want to stay in a suit and tie forever?

"At that time, I was really getting into wine. I mean, London is probably the greatest place in the world to buy wine, so I thought, why don't I have a crack at making it? I enrolled in

Plumpton College in West Sussex, which was a bit like EIT in that it had a small micro-winery and vineyard. It was very practical and hands-on. From there, I managed a small four hectare vineyard in England and worked with a flying winemaker. By then I was hooked." After working vintages in Europe, Hugh came home and did three vintages with James Millton in Gisborne. "That really cemented things for me." Hugh then enrolled in Lincoln as an adult student, and along with Pip Goodwin (now CEO at Palliser), did the post grad course. Hugh went straight to Vidal Estate to work with Rod McDonald.

"I think people who move into this industry later in life bring a wide skillset, more so than those straight out of school," Hugh muses. "The real challenge in life is to find what you love."

IN SHORT...

An eye for all things beautiful and having a strong career in fashion design in the 1990s has stood Claudia Weersing of Pyramid Valley Vineyards in good stead for helping create one of New Zealand's most sought-after boutique brands.

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Sir George Fistonich, owner of Villa Maria, was told to take a trade and became a builder, but followed his passion for wine anyway. Think of where our industry would be if he hadn't chucked his bandsaw in for barrels?

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Tony Forsyth of Te Whau Vineyard and Restaurant originally trained as a psychologist before becoming the managing director of NZ's largest human resource consultancy. "I chucked it all in at the age of 50 to create Te Whau with my wife, Moira."

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Andrew Nimmo of Hihī Wines in Gisborne originally worked for 10 years in the commercial electricity sector in the UK, South America and Italy. He then moved to New Zealand, did his wine training at Tairāwhiti Polytechnic in 2002/03 and didn't waste any time starting his own wine label in 2004.

"The real challenge in life is to find what you love." - Hugh Crichton

