

## MARRIED TO THE JOB

Wine making is a competitive business. But what if one of your chief competitors is your spouse?

By: Dorian Wild Photos: Paul Foley

**It's harvest time in the Hunter Valley and winemakers Dan Dineen and Sarah-Kate Wilson are just about dead on their feet.**

They've been putting in 12-hour days for the past month and there's another four weeks to go. Up at five, supervising the picking, talking to grape growers, keeping an eye on the grapes as they go into the crusher and into the vats, checking the yeast, monitoring sugar levels, checking the acidity – the work goes on and on.

And all the time with an eye on the weather. All it takes is one serious downpour and a whole year's work can go pear-shaped.

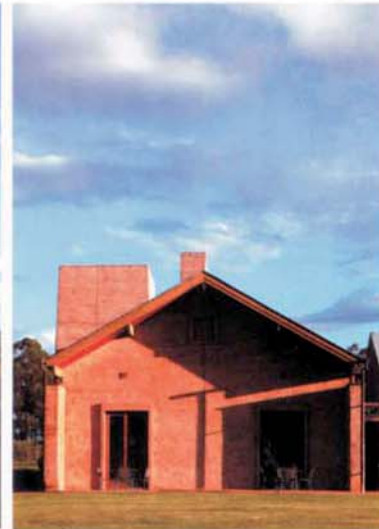
"This is the downside to wine making, no question about it," says Dan, tall, burly, open-faced and an easy smile under a shock of thick dark wavy hair. "You get to

the stage where you look forward to the day it's all over and you can have a normal life again.

"The way things are at the moment, you go to friends for dinner and they talk about books, plays, what's on telly, what's happening in the world – all the usual things – and all you can talk about are yeasts, sugar levels and ferments. It makes you very boring."

"It's certainly very hard work," says Sarah-Kate. "Wine making may sound glamorous but this is the time when it gets really physical. By the end of the day you've had it; you're ready for bed. And by the end of the harvest you're exhausted. Drained."

It's a lament you hear again and again around Australia's 1600 wineries at harvest time. But for Dineen, winemaker with Tower Estate, and Wilson, winemaker



Above left: Tempus Two Pokolbin Vineyard, where Sarah-Kate works. Above right: Tower Estate, where her husband, Dan, is based.

with Tempus Two, there is a big difference. They're married to each other. There's no escape.

You'd think it would get them down – being married to someone in the same industry and doing the same job and talking the same language – but it's not the case at all.

"The advantage is that I have a wife who understands the problems that I face on a daily basis – I mean, she's facing them herself – and we can discuss things and bounce ideas off each other," says Dineen.

"When I do feel I'm too close to it and need a break – when I think, 'I'm only making wine. It's not that important in the scheme of things. To many people it's a luxury anyway' – when I feel like that I go to the pub and have a few beers with the boys and talk to a tractor driver about the footy or whatever. That way you can clear your head."

They married in January after meeting six years ago when Dineen joined the prestige Brokenwood Wines as assistant winemaker after a vintage in Languedoc, in the south of France, near Montpellier. Wilson was in a more junior position. "It was sweet justice in a way," he says.

"I was assistant winemaker with McWilliam's Mount Pleasant wines at Lovedale in the Hunter a couple of years before, and Sarah-Kate's CV came across my desk.

"She'd attached her photo to it and it was a very good photo and a very good CV and we had a vacancy and I thought, 'It would be nice to have her working here!'

"Mount Pleasant at that time was a male-dominated operation, so I suggested to Phil Ryan, the chief winemaker, that we take her on. As it happens, Phil was thinking of employing a woman – but he had his daughter in mind.

"So Sarah-Kate went somewhere else and there she was at Brokenwood when I came back from France. As I said, sweet justice."

Sarah-Kate has a red ear. Dressed in work clothes – old jeans, jumper and well-worn Blundstones – her long

blonde hair is pulled back revealing a huge red circle on her left ear, all the way from the top to the lobe. "Oh God!" she laughs, "Not again!" "The wines have been talking to her," says Dan.

Wines talking? Hello? "Our red wines are going through malolactic fermentation," explains Wilson. "That's the secondary fermentation that takes place when the harsh malic acids in the grapes are turned into softer lactic acids.

"They bubble away like mad – going sort of snap, crackle, pop – and you've got to pull the bung from the barrel and put your ear to the hole to hear that everything's going to plan."

Dineen and Wilson are, without question, two of the hottest young winemakers in the Hunter Valley. Bright, well-educated, eyes on the future and feet on the ground, they're spearheading the industry's Generation Next.

He has won two major trophies so far this year; she is one of the most exciting things that's happened to the wine judging circuit. They've both come to the attention of some of the most influential names in Australian wine.

She's 29, he's 36 and the wines they're making are sublime. Their wineries are boutique operations producing premium wine that sells at a premium price. But the owners are no dilettantes. They are in fact among the toughest, most experienced names in the game.

Tempus Two is a joint venture by Brian McGuigan (McGuigan Simeon Wines) and Bill Roche (Roche Group; Hunter Valley Gardens, property developers and former global owners of Nutri-Metics cosmetics).

The company is run by Lisa McGuigan, Brian's daughter. When Lisa said she wanted a top winemaker, Sarah-Kate was his only choice.

With golden references from McWilliam's and Brokenwood, Dan was hand-picked for his job by the



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legendary Len Evans. Tower Estate's ringmaster, Evans put the operation together with syndicate of mates to make the best regional varietal wines (wines from a single grape variety from a single region) in Australia.

Bill Roche is a syndicate member (so are celebrity seafood chef Rick Stein and former News Ltd boss Ken Cowley). Brian McGuigan is on the executive committee. So while Dan and Sarah-Kate are "deadly" rivals, making wines that compete for the wine-drinker's dollar, they're also related – in business and in wealth, as their marriage vows might have said.

"The only extra vow I thought of putting into the marriage vows was 'Thou shalt not make better wines than your husband,'" laughs Dan as we swirl, sniff and take a mighty sip of Sarah-Kate's Tempus Two 2000 Vine Vale Shiraz, not long in the bottle and not yet with a label.

Not that Sarah-Kate set out to be a winemaker when she signed on at Otago University after leaving school in New Zealand. "My parents have a small winery at Mt Maude but I went to uni to do medicine," she says.

"I did my first year but soon discovered that you had to be really studious to do medicine – your head's never out of a book. It was really hard work and I wanted to enjoy my university days. So I swapped to Lincoln College and did wine."

That's something else they have in common – they both dropped out of their first choice at uni. "I was doing architecture at Adelaide and soon realised I was only ever going to be a very ordinary architect," says Dan, who did his wine studies at Roseworthy – the Oxford and Cambridge of the Australian wine industry.

"What I like about Dan is that he has this calm self-assured manner," says Sarah-Kate. "He's a terrific winemaker and excellent on theory too. He thinks through at every stage. When he does something, he knows what the result is going to be.

"He even likes it when things go wrong. Sometimes I think he's really happy then. He can sit down, work

through the problem and find out why it went wrong – he loves it."

"Sarah-Kate's strength," says Dan, "is that she has a fantastic palate. I spotted it when we worked together at Brokenwood. Ian Riggs, the chief executive and chief winemaker, was so impressed he pushed her to become a wine show judge. She was an associate judge in Adelaide last year and a full judge at Rutherglen. She also did the NSW Boutique Winery Awards.

"When she's judging a wine she's quick and decisive and she can keep it up for wine after wine. This is very important on the judging circuit when there are dozens, sometimes hundreds, of wines to judge. She also knows where each wine sits relative to the others."

"We had a laugh about that," says Sarah-Kate. "When I was judging in the Boutique Wineries Show (a blind tasting, all the wines were in brown paper bags) I really liked this particular chardonnay. I mean, it was so much better than the others. Anyway, I pushed for it with the other judges – really pushed for it – and turned them to my way of thinking. When we took the paper bag off – it was Dan's wine! You should have heard the comments! 'Yeah, yeah, that's right. Vote for your husband's wine! How much did he pay you?' All that sort of thing!"

Sarah-Kate jokes that the biggest downside of wine making for her is that she's out of step with women her age. "They're all talking about the latest Collette Dinnigan dresses and I'm raving about my new stainless steel fermenters." In fact, the downside is the weather.

"You watch the grapes coming along and smile with delight that things are looking really good and you've had rain at just the right times. Then – and this is a very Hunter Valley thing – just when you're about to start picking there's a downpour and your sugar levels drop and that's it. You only get so many chances to make the perfect wine, a wine as good as it can possibly be. The rest of the time you just do the best you can with what you've got." □