



WORDS MARK CHIPPERFIELD PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID RICE

MAN DESTINY

After four years as its executive officer, Mark Pearce has taken over the reins at Kellermeister Wines in Lyndoch, one of the Barossa's oldest boutique wineries. He tells Mark Chipperfield about his plans for the winery's future – and how a European cycling trip changed the direction of his life.

Some of us have jobs. Others pursue high-sounding professions. And then there's that special category of human being who has a 'calling' – an admirable obsession which drives their every waking moment. Half an hour into our interview, it's clear that Mark Pearce, the young and ambitious owner-winemaker of Kellermeister Wines, is just such an individual. "Wine is not a scientific exercise when we're drinking it," he says, leaning across a big wooden table in the winery's modern cellar door. "It's all about romance, fun, subjectivity, the food you're eating and the occasion."

In late 2012, Pearce bought Kellermeister from its founders, Ralph and Val Jones. At just 32 he therefore finds himself at the helm of one of the Barossa's most respected boutique wine brands – and one which has carved out a strong consumer following with its Wild Witch, Storyboard and retro labels; under his direction Kellermeister has also been producing a Barossa cider, another popular tippie.

"I'm commonly referred to as being a bit eccentric," he says with pride. "I take a quirky perspective on things. I find normal really boring. We don't have big budgets to spend on PR and advertising, so we need to tell our story through our wines. That's why we hold so many events in the winery – when people go home they know we are not just another in-house supermarket brand."

Bristling with ideas about where he might take Kellermeister over the next few years – he has already introduced a new small-batch label, Threefold Farm, to its established range – Pearce is also determined to respect the legacy of Ralph and Val Jones who lured him from Wirra Wirra in 2009 to become their chief winemaker.

"We are one of the oldest boutique wineries in the Valley," he explains. "There weren't a lot around in 1976 when Ralph Jones came out of Orlando Wines. Ralph wasn't a young man at the time but he felt

he could play the [role of] curtain raiser in the Barossa. That philosophy remains to this day. It's essential that we maintain that focus as a winery."

As an artisan winemaker Pearce believes that Kellermeister needs to make the most of this sense of heritage, while building on its long-standing relationship with some of the Barossa's finest grapegrowers. Producing nondescript wine for the mass-market is not an option.

"We're trying to make wines that are really true to the Barossa – and with our home vineyard Threefold Farm range we're also moving in that biodynamic and organic direction," he says.

"And working closely with the growers is a focus that I've had for the past couple of years now. Let's face it, these guys know more about their vineyards than anyone else. Luckily, we're not a multi-layered company, so this type of interaction just makes perfect sense."

Australia is a crowded and often cut-throat wine market. It poses special challenges for smaller producers such as Kellermeister. But Pearce believes there is a bright future for boutique wine brands which can master e-commerce and deploy the latest marketing techniques, including social media, while not ignoring old-fashioned 'face time'.

"We're lucky. We're small enough to still have an artisan philosophy while being large enough to produce enough wine for everybody to enjoy them," he says. "That's quite unique – and quite an advantage for us when we're looking at new export markets, such as China."

Unlike most of his contemporaries in the Barossa, Pearce does not come from a family which has been growing grapes or making wine for generations. One of six children, he grew up in suburban Adelaide and studied commerce at university before joining global consultancy PricewaterhouseCoopers. Later, Mark and his wife Susanna spent a year working in London and it was during their European sojourn that he really caught the winemaking – or at least wine tourism – bug.



Above: Mark and Susanna with their children (from left) Rupert, Anne and Hugo at the family vineyard Threefold Farm, which is planted with the Barossa's three most notable grape varieties: Shiraz, Grenache and Mataro. Each planting is named after one of the three children. Right: Hugo, Rupert and Anne playing in the late afternoon sun.

"I really discovered the beauty of food and wine in France," he says. "We would often head off to the Continent on weekends. We went cycling through the Loire Valley ... experienced the beauty of the countryside and the culture of food with wine. That really captivated us."

There were later cycling trips to the Mosel region in Germany, where he also fell in love with its crisp Rieslings. This enthusiasm is reflected in the winery's current offering of Eden Valley Rieslings, while the new Jack Bobridge Track at the bottom of Kellermeister's driveway is a pleasant reminder of those European cycling holidays.

Pearce believes that the Barossa needs to put more emphasis on this unique sense of place – and is a great fan of the *Barossa. Be Consumed* campaign being run by the South Australian Tourism Commission and clearly aimed at Gen-Y travellers in Sydney and Melbourne.

"I think the word is finally getting out about the great food and wine of the Barossa," he says. "When people venture up to our winery for the first time they quickly realise that we have great wines, friendly service and beautiful views – things you can't replicate anywhere else."

Apart from looking at the Barossa from the perspective of a relative outsider, Pearce also has an unusual weapon in his viticultural armoury: an excellent head for figures. I wonder which is stronger – his hard financial head or his softer winemaking heart?

"I'm like a horse with a bit in its mouth. I'm intrinsically a creative person, interested in the romance of life itself. In the context of wine it's all really intuitive," he says

"But my financial background and training gives me some insights into the consequences of what I'm doing."

But Pearce rejects the notion that great winemaking and successful business practice are mutually exclusive. In a world of mass-market consumer goods, there will always be a demand – and thanks to China's emergence, a growing one – for hand-crafted wines with a strong regional and cultural identity.

"My whole attitude to life and wine is that quality comes first. With every decision to do with winemaking, the fundamental objective is quality," he says. "Yes, there needs to be some discipline around that decision-making process, but I'm much more focused on the value of what we're doing. Wine is as soft as it is hard. It is more art than science."

Integral to his vision for the winery is creating a unique culture among his staff at the winery – one which rewards passion, individuality and a deep sense of involvement. Pearce regards this 'care factor' as being essential to building any long-term, sustainable wine and hospitality business in the Barossa.

"I was talking to [brand consultant] Paul Henry recently and he made the remark that culture tops strategy. In other words, the most brilliant strategy in the world which is poorly executed will still lead to failure," he says. "If there's a commonality among all my team it's that the care factor is very high. We never expect perfection, we're human after all, but the care factor has to be kept at the highest level." **BI**

Kellermeister Wines, 1561 Barossa Valley Way, Lyndoch. Ph: 08 8524 4303; kellermeister.com.au. The cellar opens daily, from 9.30am to 5.30pm.

