



The Don's Spanish mission

For a man in semi-retirement, Mitchelton's former chief winemaker spends a lot of time messing around with grapes.



HUON HOOKE

WINE

Foreign influences ... winemakers Narelle King and Don Lewis, enthused by Spain.

Do happy people make happy wine? Don Lewis lends credibility to the theory. Never seen without a smile on his whisky dial or in anything but a good mood, Lewis is in semi-retirement after more than 30 years as chief winemaker at Mitchelton.

And he seems to be having more fun than ever. Having several exciting projects on the go undoubtedly has a lot to do with it.

He spends a quarter of his time in Spain, where he has made wine on and off since the early 1990s (remember Solana?), in the past three years becoming involved in a company called Merum Priorati, based in the town of Porrera in the Priorat region.

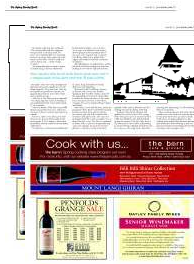
He was recently seen toting around an unlabelled bottle of impressively rich, gutsy red blended from Priorat grenache, carignan, shiraz and cabernet.

He's on the board of Endeavour, the

Valmorbida family wine company that produces Alta Adelaide Hills sauvignon blanc, Catalina Sounds Marlborough sauvignon blanc in New Zealand, Rockbare wines in McLaren Vale and a host of other stuff yet to hit the shops, such as nebbiolo, sangiovese, tempranillo and pinot grigio from Heathcote. (The Valmorbidas once owned Mitchelton.)

He has his own vineyard, Crystal Hill at Nagambie, not far from Mitchelton and, like Mitchelton, beside the Goulburn River in Central Victoria. It has five hectares of shiraz, tempranillo and albarinho – for six years he has produced a humungous shiraz (the '02 is 15.8 per cent alcohol) "which I have rather immodestly called The Don," he grins.

And somehow he also finds time to spend a third of his life at Mitchelton, where he is a consultant to chief winemaker Toby Barlow – and works full-time during vintage.



But Spain really has him enthused. "The century-old bush-vine carignan and grenache is amazing stuff. I've never seen anything like it in Australia. It grows on steep, rocky slopes in a soil known as licorella, which is really not soil at all but rock – a kind of slate or schist."

Accompanying him on trips to Spain is Narelle King, a former Mitchelton winemaker who now works at Balgownie part-time and seems equally keen on all things Spanish. They even have a hot tip on a good local producer of jamon, the Spanish ham that the rest of the world seems unable to copy.

And how is The Don's grip on Spanish? "I'm taking Spanish classes in Bendigo. I can understand it but I can't really speak it," he confesses.

Only one barrel of The Don Crystal Hill Shiraz was produced in 2002, and if you can track it down it will set you back \$132 a bottle.

However, there is one Don Lewis wine that you can procure fairly easily, and I much prefer it. It's a ripper: a robust but beautifully smooth central Victorian shiraz called Trust.

It's about \$37 a bottle and is distributed by Mezzanine (phone 1300 136 561). At 14.5 per cent alcohol, it has a spicy, almost gingery aroma (perhaps due to the 4 per cent viognier) and a smooth, rich, fleshy almost sexy palate that's supple and balanced and has a measure of elegance.

The label depicts a sundial from a wall in the town of Porrera, though the wine has nothing to do with the Spanish activities

of Lewis, King and Barlow. It's both distinctive and appealing.

Merum Priorati is building a winery in Porrera, but Lewis is not terribly optimistic that it will be ready in time for the impending 2006 harvest. Meanwhile, it makes the wines elsewhere in the same town. Set up to sell wine to the US, the company for now is mainly selling in Spain and Britain.

Back home, Lewis and his wife, Jenny, are passionate about their Crystal Hill vineyard. It takes its name from quartz crystals: the ancient, gravelly soil is ribbed with ironstone and quartz reefs. The vines are unirrigated and the yields are paltry: two or three bunches a vine. The Don is composed of shiraz with 10 per cent tempranillo and 4 per cent viognier. In 2005 the Lewises planted 1.2 hectares of Don's favourite Spanish white variety, albarino, and he's looking forward to playing with that.

So that's what the greying but still sparkly Don Lewis is up to. The young bloke who grew up on a vineyard at Red Cliffs near Mildura, who hated picking grapes in summer ("fun for a day, but it's the worst job in the world") and pruning in winter ("being whipped around the ears by a cane on a freezing, frosty Saturday morning was infuriating") is still mucking about in vineyards.

After swearing when he left home that he would never, ever work in a vineyard again, he has spent more than 35 years in them. "Look at me, a happy grapegrower, still making wine and getting immense pleasure and satisfaction from working in my own special vineyard and moulding the fruit that it produces into a unique wine."

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Tower of strength ... Mitchelton's distinctive cellar door.