Viticulturists labelled for their efforts

By Matt Byrne

Two South Australian wineries have joined a growing trend to acknowledge the contribution of their viticulturists on their wine labels. Chapel Hill Winery, from McLaren Vale, and Browns of Padthaway now proudly display the signatures of their viticulturists - Rachel Steer and Michael Schreier, respectively - on some of their wines.

The Chapel Hill wines to currently feature the signature of chief winemaker Michael Fragos and Steer are The Chosen House Block Shiraz, The Chosen Road Block Shiraz and The Chosen Gorge Block Cabernet Sauvignon. The ‘signature wine’ for Browns of Padthaway is the 2010 Glendon Park Vignerons Reserve Sauvignon Blanc.

Chapel Hill Winery chief executive Marc Allgrove summed up the decision. “You cannot have great wine without great grapes,” Allgrove said. “Great teamwork between Rachel as the viticulturist and Michael Fragos, the winemaker, should be recognised. It’s a team that grows the grapes and makes the wine, so we wanted to acknowledge everyone involved.”

Allgrove said the team ethos of Chapel Hill extended to the tastings. “We all chip in and get behind the bar,” he said. “If Rachel is available, she will take people down to the blocks, walk them through the vines and provide hands-on information from the person responsible for the quality grapes they produce.”

He said Steer, who joined Chapel Hill four years ago after extensive experience at a number of wineries, including Coriole, had “a major input into our wine production”.

“Since Rachel has been on board there’s been a noticeable difference in the quality of wine we’ve produced,” he said. “You can’t make great wine from rotten grapes, but you can make bad wine from great grapes, so both roles are crucial. Discussion between Rachel and our winemakers Michael Fragos and Bryn Richards goes on daily, often hourly.”

“The Chosen Gorge Block Cabernet is a great example of the difference Rachel has made. This was a single block of Cabernet that four years ago was being sold off in bulk. The quality of the fruit became so high we decided to keep it separate. That has to be largely due to the improvement in managing The Chosen Cabernet,” Allgrove said Steer was suitably humble in everything she did.

“And very humble when we told her we wanted her name to go on the label too,” he said. “She was very happy to have her name recognised on one of the finest labels in our range, and we believe it was completely justified.”

He said the label helped tell the unique story of McLaren Vale and Chapel Hill too.

Chapel Hill Wines viticulturist Rachel Steer relaxes with a drop of one of her co-signature wines.

“Our story is one of single blocks producing quality fruit, being crafted into unique wine by very talented people,” he said. “Combine the people responsible with the wine that goes into the bottle and you have a far more compelling and complete story. We have 15 different wines and three of those have Rachel’s and Michael’s names on it together.”

Sue Brown, of Browns of Padthaway, said viticulturist Michael Schreier, who has been with the company for 20 years and is also her husband, had earned his place on the label. “This new wine recognises excellence in viticulture and highlights the importance of the fruit source and hard work put into the vineyard which is imperative to producing quality fruit and a quality wine,” Brown said. “Michael’s signature gives the wine personality and acknowledges management of a critical factor to producing premium quality wine that otherwise may go unrecognised.”

Brown said the decision had been made pre-vintage in January 2010 to produce the label featuring Schreier’s signature.

“The wine itself is a new product, developed to offer an alternative to the popular Sauvignon Blanc style from New Zealand.”

She said customers were becoming “more health conscious” and the label helped respond to increasing interest in from where and how the wine they drink is sourced.

“Importantly, Michael is very happy with the wine style which has been developed,” she said, adding that Schreier had been very proactive with the packaging. “He incorporated a
reference to the vineyard as a HACCP food safe vineyard on the back label and packaging into six-packs meeting modern standards,” she said.

The strength of family is a key component in the success of Browns of Padthaway, which supplies premium fruit to larger Australian wine companies as well as provides grape harvest contracting and grape transportation.

Former Yorke Peninsula farmers, Donald and Glenda Brown founded the company three decades ago. Now their three children, Sue, Andrew and David, and their spouses Michael, Lisa and Caroline all work in every aspect of the business.

“Producing our own family wine label was a long-held dream and we are proud of what has been achieved with Browns of Padthaway wines,” she said. “Putting Michael’s signature on the Vignerons Reserve highlights the hard work out in the vineyard that contributes so much to the quality of our wine. It gives the wine story more personality and acknowledges the critical factor of vineyard management.”