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Vaughn Dell's precious wine legacy of Tasmanian pinot and chardonnay

Vaughn Dell's dream has been left to his widow to realise. But the local industry stands ready to help, as our wine writer knows from all too personal an experience.

By NICK RYAN



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Vaughn Dell's vineyard in Tasmania's Pipers River region is a vision sketched in sap and shoots, the physical manifestation of a dream calmer heads might call "fevered". It's also a legacy left too soon. Vaughn Dell passed away in his sleep on May 20, a latent frailty of his heart cutting short a life just beginning to meet the high standards he set for it.

He was 39 years old.

Even untrained eyes could see this vineyard was different. In conventional vineyards, vines are shaped around a fruiting wire that sits about a metre from the ground. Vaughn's vines sat much lower, a mere 40cm above the dirt. It would be easy to suggest Vaughn was being blackmailed by the local chiropractor. It was populated differently, too.

Many Australian vineyards have been planted with function and finances front of mind. Rows wide enough to fit tractors, vines generously spaced in order to maximise yield and help pay for those tractors.

But Vaughn filled his vineyard with vines the way nature filled Freddie Mercury's mouth with teeth, cramming in more than reason would deem necessary.

The great vineyards of Burgundy average 10,000 vines a hectare, twice the density of most Australian vineyards. Parts of Vaughn's vineyard were planted at densities equating to 11,000 vines a hectare. Casual observers of viticulture's vagaries might conclude that more plants mean more grapes, more wine and more money.

They'd be wrong. A hectare planted with 10,000 vines will produce roughly the same quantity of grapes as one planted with half that, the competitive environment of a close-planted vineyard imposing natural limits on yield.



Dell at work at Sinapius.



Dell with wife Linda Morice and daughters Esme and Clementine.

But Vaughn's winemaking ambitions always seemed estranged from financial motivation, and he felt that pay-off was in the quality of the fruit and the way it helped him draw finer, more detailed lines in the map of this little patch of Tasmania he wanted to chart with his wines.

One look at these crouched and cramped vines and you start to understand that for Vaughn Dell a back was something you made a rod for, then tried to break it.

“Vaughn believed if there was a better way to do something, then that’s the way we should be doing it,” his wife Linda Morice says.

“He was driven by the desire to do something better.”

The pair had dated as teenagers, but their lives had been entwined even longer. Linda’s mother was pregnant with her when, as the local midwife, she brought Vaughn into the world. The couple were living in the Great Southern region of Western Australia when they decided to return to their native Tasmania, to raise a family on the island that had nurtured them, and to make a distinctive mark on a nascent wine industry. “Vaughn had been a little disappointed with the wines he was seeing from Tassie and became convinced a different approach might pay off,” says Linda.

“He was perfectly happy to stand out from the crowd.”

Joe Holyman watched the development of Vaughn and Linda’s vineyard, and the Sinapius wine brand that grew from it, with more than a little interest.

They were relatively close by, a half-hour or so, and he too had returned to his native Tasmania determined to put his mark on the island’s winemaking landscape.

“Vaughn was bloody headstrong and determined to do things his own way,” says Holyman.

“There are those who might say I share similar traits, so it’s probably not surprising that I connected with him and what he was trying to achieve.”

That shared sensibility will now need to be called upon in ways nobody was prepared for, or really knows how to manage.



Dell's 'adherence to difference helped deliver a beautifully distinctive vineyard'.

Holyman is part of a small team of winemaking friends and neighbours, including Peter Dredge of Dr Edge and Fran Austin of Delamere Vineyards, who are working with Linda to keep things moving on the winemaking front.

There's plenty to do. The immediate task is to provide the care and attention required by the embryonic wines of Vaughn's last harvest. That's not an easy baton for anyone to grab, but there are a few, small gifts from fate that will help. "Pretty much everything that needed to be wrapped up to process the 2020 vintage had been done," says Holyman.

"Vaughn had finally put everything to bed the day before he died. It's pretty poignant timing. He'd even numbered all the tanks for the very first time, he'd always just kept that stuff in his head. He's really helped us out there."

But while the primary ferments had been completed under Vaughn's eye, there's still plenty to do. In fact, what remains is the real tricky stuff. "The puzzle pieces are all laid out, these guys just have to work out the picture Vaughn had in his head,"

Holyman says. “It’s quite the winemaking challenge. They’ll have to approach every decision not as ‘what would I do’, but as ‘what would Vaughn do?’ ”

And what will Linda do?

“Linda’s more than capable in the winery,” says Holyman. “But she’s got a million things to worry about right now and I know what’s happening with the wines is right up towards the top of that list. Our job here is going to be giving her the space to deal with all the other shit that comes with this, at least knowing that, together, we’ll all get the wines to where they need to be.” Holyman knows this is important work. “When you’ve got all these dickheads swanning around, buying a bit of fruit here and there, making a few cases of crap and calling themselves ‘winemakers’, you need more Vaughn Dells, people prepared to put in the hard yards, to lay it all on the line and to never waver from a singular vision.” But the problem with visionaries is they can be pretty terrible at sharing what they see in their heads.

Sudden loss brings with it shock, and it’s only when it starts to recede that the true weight of what has been snatched away can be measured. “I just wish he spent a bit more bloody time keeping track of things,” Linda says.



Dell among the vines.

“We’ve got something like 30,000 vines on this place and as we’ve planted over the years I would be suggesting to Vaughn we might want to tag the rows so we know

exactly what's in them and he'd always say, 'Why do I need to do that, I know where everything is?' I've got a pretty good idea about most of the stuff in the vineyard and winery, but there's always a few things popping up where I just say to myself, bloody hell Vaughn, just what were you thinking? And don't ask me how to handle the fancy new low compaction tractor he'd just imported from Italy, I haven't got a damn clue," she says with the kind of laugh that occasionally steps in to give you a break from the tears.

Linda wraps up the conversation because there's a lot to do. The girls are getting to go back to school after the holidays and she needs to get dinner on early before running them to basketball training. While Vaughn's absence is felt keenly in the winery and vineyard, the hole that can't be filled is by her side and around their daughters.

"We'll get there," says Linda, even if nobody's exactly sure 'there' is just yet.

Vaughn Dell's determined adherence to difference helped deliver a beautifully distinctive vineyard and wines that clearly reflect it.

It's a vision that now must outlive the man who first had it. With the goodwill of many, the hard work of a few, and the love of the three girls who will miss him most, it hopefully will.

Vaughn's friends and admirers in the wine industry have contributed to a wine auction that will raise funds to be held in trust for his daughters Esme and Clementine. The Australian Wine community's willingness to help its own in tough times is one of its greatest strengths. This author knows that well. Ten years ago a similar auction was held to assist me in much the same situation in which Vaughn's family find themselves now. It was an enormous help to me, so I know that participation in this auction will do the same for them.

The auction runs until July 26. Details at [langtons.com.au](https://www.langtons.com.au)

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Tasting notes – Sinapius the Brave