

# Making wine ... or making a winery?

*Grapegrower & Winemaker* talks to four winemakers to gauge their opinions on the value of utilising custom crushing facilities.

Chris Herden

FOR THE FARMER who has plenty of grapes but no winemaking skills, or the winemaker who needs extra space to handle expanding production, using someone else's winery facilities makes sound economic sense. The 'custom crush' option enables potential wine producers to engage in an industry where the cost of doing business continues to rise.

"To establish a winery is a very costly exercise – it's a preference we would prefer to avoid," says Marty O'Flaherty from Rockbare Winemakers. Rockbare's exclusive range of Chardonnay and Shiraz is processed at Project Wine (formerly the Langhorne Creek Winery), a state of the art grape processing, winemaking and storage facility located on a 50-hectare site in Langhorne Creek. The client-based operation has more than tripled in size since it was established in 1999 and currently crushes as much as 10,000 tonnes per vintage. It is strategically positioned within an hour's drive from some of South Australia's best known wine regions.

"Essentially Project Wine allows us the flexibility of having a winery without the headaches and costs associated with owning one," says O'Flaherty. "We plan our fruit intake and wine specifications

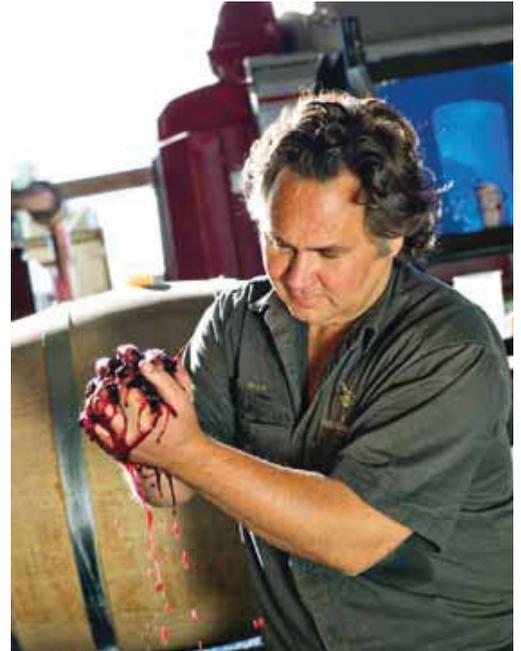
with them. It's literally akin to having our own winery without the hassle of dealing with administration, human resources and maintenance, and this allows us to invest more in fruit contracts, oak purchases and, most importantly, marketing our brands. Plus we know exactly how much each tonne of fruit will cost to process."

Not having to oversee a winemaking facility also allows O'Flaherty more time out in the vineyard.

"We have pretty much unlimited access to the facility," he says. "Once we've made our winemaking decisions we are free to put our energy elsewhere into the business."

Sometimes a virtual winemaker will wangle a deal with an established winery which has more capacity than it needs for its own production. According to Project Wine director and senior winemaker Paul Zerella, legitimate custom crush facilities operate in a more rigid manner.

"There are a number of wineries who say they provide contract processing but this is often simply a way of filling up their facility and spreading their costs. While many of these wineries have the equipment to provide what is required,



Naturaliste Vintners' senior winemaker Bruce Duker assessing maturity of 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon. "We place special emphasis on trying to understand the wine matrix."

they often don't have the expertise or the mindset."

Zerella's wine business experience is vast as is his dealings in custom crush practice. As managing director he presided over the rebirth of the Haselgove Wines brand and the development of the contract processing business known as the McLaren Vale Custom Crush.

He says Project Wine's clients decide to what degree they want to be involved in the winemaking protocols but most make a deliberate choice to leave the winemaking to the Project Wine team and concentrate their efforts and resources in developing and marketing their wine brands.

"We have some larger customers who process their grapes and take the resultant juice/wine to their own facilities but the majority of our customers are grape crushing to bottle-ready wine, which includes analysis, additives, filtration and storage. Many have their own winemakers regularly on site directing Project Wine staff. Others prefer our team to manage the style, and some limit their input to vintage intake and bottling specifications."



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