

Living the Vineyard Dream

There's something very appealing about vineyards and many of us have flirted with the idea of owning one. **Misha Wilkinson**, shares her experiences with *MillionaireAsia* in how she and her husband Andy are turning this romantic dream into reality in New Zealand while they live in Singapore.

So why would any rational person choose to go into a business in a location that's a 10-hour flight from where they live, a sector of the agricultural industry which is particularly prone to good and bad seasons (and in a marginal area at that), attempt to grow the most temperamental grape variety in the world, all while knowing it's going to be at least 8 years before you see any returns coming from the business?

The answer is that a rational person probably would not choose to do it! Owning a vineyard requires passion, commitment, patience, lots of cash, and knowledge about at least one leg of the "three-legged stool" (more on that later).

Pinot Noir: "The Holy Grail"

Our project started early in 2002 when Andy and I were looking to make a substantial long-term invest-

ment in New Zealand. Andy was born there, and it just happens to be one of the most beautiful places in the world. We looked at various options, but nothing really excited us until we visited the stunning Central Otago wine region in New Zealand's South Island. This region is acknowledged by wine experts as one of the few places that produce world-class Pinot Noir – a variety that is often referred to in the wine world as "the holy grail". At 45 degrees south, it is also the most southerly wine region in the world.

We were introduced to Robin Dicey, arguably New Zealand's best viticulturalist, and his stern warning at the outset was: "The wine business is a 3 legged stool – you have to know something about grape-growing, winemaking or marketing. What is it you know?" We enthusiastically announced

PHOTOS BY TIM HAWKINS



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MISHA WILKINSON

“marketing” to which he responded, “Right – then let's talk”.

At that point, the challenge presented itself – making New Zealand's finest Pinot Noir. We looked at a few options including fully and partially established vineyards, but when you set your goal so high, it means a 'no compromise' commitment on quality is required from the outset. So, we started from the ground up, so to speak, spending two years to find the perfect location for Misha's Vineyard, which we found on the spectacular terraces overlooking Lake Dunstan.

Lucky "8"

These terraces are in an area where many Cantonese settled in New Zealand during the gold rush of the late 1800s. Remnants of the alluvial mining can still be seen in the gullies on the vineyard. There is also a recurrence of the number 8 as the vineyard is located on State Highway 8, just 8kms from the nearest town on land that was originally known as sheep run 238. There are also 88 kms of vineyard rows which are aligned, by chance, in a direction of 288°. This gold-mining history and its links with Asia gives us a very auspicious site that we believe bodes well for a vineyard and its wines.

It's been over five years since our initial meeting with our viticulturalist, and we now realise the importance of

MISHA'S VINEYARD SITUATED ON THE ON THE EDGE OF LAKE DUNSTAN



MISHA'S VINEYARD PICKING CREW FOR THE TRIAL HARVEST WAS PREDOMINANTLY ASIAN.

FEATURE

his early advice. Many amateur vineyard owners fail before they've even produced their first wines. Developing a vineyard requires solid planning, financial resources to cover unexpected events and a specific skill set that contributes to running or developing the vineyard business. Just having the romance and passion about wanting to live the vineyard dream, isn't enough.

Biggest Challenge: Time

Overall, the biggest challenge we've faced so far is the amount of time that Andy and I spend apart. Andy runs a US software company across the Asia Pacific region which has him travelling out of Singapore most weeks. And for the past three years since relinquishing my corporate marketing role, I have spent 30-40 percent of my time in New Zealand managing vineyard operations. The rest of my time is spent remote-managing the vineyard from Singapore. When we are both full time in the vineyard business we will spend summer on the vineyard through to harvest, and the rest of the year based in Singapore so we can focus our sales and marketing efforts in our primary markets in Asia.

For those who dare, a vineyard investment can be great fun and the most fulfilling adventure of your life. There are some long-term financial models on vineyard operating costs available to help guide you. You will also need to have patience as it takes many years of hard work before you get any tangible result. However, your vineyard will have your friends talking and you will without a doubt be the envy of your local wine club.

Life-changing Experience

Our financial and emotional commitment to the vineyard has increased each year and it has now become the most important venture we've ever undertaken. Little did we think what started out as a search for a good investment would lead us to something that was going to change our lives so dramatically.

We now eagerly await our first vintage in 2008, which after spending a year in oak barriques, will be released in 2009 – 8 years after the commencement of our dream. Cheers! ■



FROM TOP: MISHA & ANDY IN THE VINEYARD WITH THEIR VITICULTURALIST, ROBIN DICEY (ON LEFT); MISHA AND WILLIAM DOING QUALITY CONTROL OF THE PINOT NOIR GRAPES DURING THE TRIAL HARVEST.