



rural resilience

words and photos:
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HOW DOES A WINERY BECOME A SHOWCASE FOR RESILIENT REGIONALISM.

“Ecological entrepreneurs” was what David Britten and Melissa Boughey of west of Denmark winery Moombaki were tagged. And with that tag came a visit from students as part of Murdoch’s Resilient Regions course [see breakout]. Nice but usually their cellar door is the kind wine traveller’s dream of - slightly out of the way, charming, and the chance to chat with the winegrower-owner. David and Melissa probably like it this way too. So the arrival of 30 students at one time to hear them talk about what they do was initially intimidating but ultimately valuable.

“The good part was it gave us the opportunity to reflect on what we’d done in the 17 years since we first came here. Planting trees, fencing off the wetlands ... We actually had to talk about [our vineyard

and property], when you’re immersed in it day-in day out you’re always looking at what needs to be done and not what you’ve actually achieved,” says David.

As you turn off the gravel road into the winery, it’s a catalogue of their work – north-facing vines on the left, native trees on the right, buildings of timber and stone, and wetland in the distance. It makes for the start of a convincing claim for recognition of the work they’ve done.

They self-effacingly laughed at being labelled ‘ecological entrepreneurs’ but it is well deserved. Their winery is a very tight but creative balancing act between ideals and pragmatism; living within the environment but not subject to its every



NICOLE HODGSON, LECTURER IN THE SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAM IN THE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES AT MURDOCH UNIVERSITY EXPLAINS THE RESILIENT REGIONS COURSE.

The Resilient Regions course is quite a new course, running for the first time at the beginning of 2010. It was developed to introduce sustainability students to ideas of bioregionalism, resilience and sense of place, all in a regional setting. Myself and Professor Glenn Albrecht run the course at Murdoch University in partnership with Louise Duxbury from the Centre for Sustainable Living in Denmark.

There is increasing consumer demand for sustainable agricultural products and the concept of sustainability in this context is quite well understood by most. However, it’s fair to say that the concepts of bioregionalism and resilience are probably less well understood in relation to agriculture.

Resilience refers to the ability of a system to bounce back from a shock or disturbance. How agriculture can adapt to a changing climate is one important dimension of resilience in agriculture. As for bioregional, a bioregional approach to agriculture would better reflect the ecology, economy and culture of the region and would result in locally distinctive products that are appropriate for the regional ecosystem.

To make these concepts meaningful, we take students to Denmark for a week, staying at the Centre for Sustainable Living, and travelling around the region to visit a number of businesses and projects. The food producers we visit are chosen on the basis of their passion and enthusiasm, and importantly, their production methods and

business approaches that demonstrate aspects of sustainability, resilience and bioregionalism – what could be called eco-entrepreneurship. So in the Denmark region, we’ve visited Moombaki Winery [see main story], Daisybrook Farm - a biodynamic farm growing rare breed sheep and herbs, and the Albany Farmers Markets.

Feedback from students and people in the region on the course has been fantastic, and we hope to make it an annual event. It’s primarily aimed at students studying Sustainable Development at Murdoch University, although in 2011/12 we are hoping to open up a few places to any interested individuals.

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whim in carving out a productive business that supports them and their children.

"It's not just about the vineyard, its about the tree plantation, improving all the native habitat - the birds and keeping the wetlands healthy. For us we have to maintain that in a clean environment and in an organic as possible way. Otherwise we mistreat the system," says Melissa.

They bought the 105 acre farm 17 years ago after they sold their small, freeway flanking

home in West Leederville. "There wasn't much here, just a bit of remnant bush. The house that was here was built in the '20s. Probably around the house was four trees and that was about it," says Melissa.

The house has been renovated and recently added to with a combination of passive solar design, coated windows and a roof whose design is more typically seen in large cool rooms. Around the house is a vegetable and herb garden as well an apple and macadamia orchard.



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“What it had for us was a couple of things: a mixture - it wasn’t just a bush block and it wasn’t completely clear. Building in the middle of a forest is madness [bushfires]; at least around us is a buffer zone.” says David.

“Water was a big factor. A tributary of the Kent River feeds into the wetlands below our house. It’s our pride and joy. You can talk the talk but if you’ve got a healthy population of fish, frogs, marron, longneck turtle, spoonbills nesting as well as all the other water birds, you’re probably doing something right.”

On the northern slope of the vale that makes their farm are the trees they planted.

“We put in all natives - red tingle, yellow tingle, river banksias, marris and we put in a full spectrum of understoreys, midstoreys, and flowering shrubs - so we turned it into a forest rather than a plantation,” says David.

The timber appears also as a feature of their wine cellar/studio/former carport whose posts David sourced from a neighbour’s plantation and jarrah slabs that make up the floor, milled with a chainsaw mill.

The grapes, although just one part of a larger picture, are the key part of the farm. They’ve been a great success for them, attracting premium prices, being recognised as a Halliday 5-star winery, and gaining consistently strong recognition. This, of course, takes work. Their approach is a combination of some of the best organic principles, while at the same time recognising the restraints that can exist. David says making great wines starts in the vineyard.

“We stay away from insecticides and we stay away from the nasty stuff but occasionally we’ll use something that isn’t [organically] certified. But we don’t use it year in year out,” says David.

“He asks if I want to go for a walk and we end up wandering up and down the vineyard rows looking for snails. “He’s got container with a lid on it,” says Melissa.

“We’ll wear a bit of damage on the vine from insects. Spray them out and all it does is kill the beneficial insects you want there as well,” says David.

“Mildew etc. can all be controlled organically. Sunshine and airflow are the most successful fungicides available, which we try and do but some years we might have to spray. Rather than try and bludgeon nature into submission, we try and make it work for us.”

There are other elements too and they are crucial ones in the life cycle of grapes - water and labour.

“We did irrigate initially to get the vines established but the vines are old enough now, the roots have found some moisture to keep them alive. We would water if we had to, in a heat wave with a few days of 40°C but that’s microdrip where you’re basically keeping it alive. That’s all you need, you don’t need a lush jungle. I want those small berries, concentrated, you don’t get that from irrigated vines,” says David.

And for labour for getting the grapes off the vines, it’s all done by hand.

“I think with handpicking, you’re taking that whole bunch. Machine picking shakes those berries off the bunch. The berries get squashed and they start oxidising. It’s imperative you get that fruit as quickly into the wine as possible, but when you hand-pick, there’s no urgency. Most winemakers would give their left testicle for hand-picked fruit,” says David.

“But it comes at a premium – trying to get enough pickers. This year wasn’t bad. We had a bit of time but some years, a front might be coming in and you know you’re going to be dumped on with rain. And you might only have 48 hours to get the fruit off.”

“Our pickers always come back. We care about them and feed them. They get a good feed and they take a few bottles home. It’s a pretty festive occasion,” says Melissa.

The final question is how they fit into the larger community and David gets the final word.

“Firstly we’re a local business. We provide a really good experience for visitors who come into the region, a really positive endorsement of the region. I find most people who come here take away not just a bottle of wine but an expression of the region and a sense of place.”

So here’s to the long game. 🌟

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