



MARIA AND DAVID IN THE VINEYARD

St Fiadres

HEAVENLY FARM PRODUCE

BY WENDY MORRISS

DAVID AND MARIA ANTONIE PRODUCE BEEF WINE, SEASONAL VEGETABLES AND HOMEMADE CHUTNEYS, RELISHES AND SAUCES, ALL FROM THEIR SCENIC, SMALL 12-HA FARM IN GIPPSLAND.

The endearing and industrious couple both work full time while striving to build their farm business into a full-time career. David, who once worked on a family grape farm in Mildura, works for a farm machinery company in Warragul and Maria, originally from South Melbourne, works in Melbourne as a food technologist.

They purchased their Neerim South property in 2006. It now comprises 2-ha of bush, a small rainforest area, a 1-ha vineyard, ½ ha of vegetables and the rest is pasture for their Black Angus cows and calves.

The year they purchased the property, they planted 500 Sangiovese vines by hand and the following year they planted 500 Shiraz vines. "We dug every hole," Maria said. "There was a drought and we didn't have a lot of water but once a week we watered by hand giving the 1000 plants up to a litre each."

David said they purchased all the grafted vines from Fussy Britches Grapevine Nursery near Mildura. "We told him the soil type and climate we had and he told us what root stock to get so that's what we ordered, because he knew his stuff."

They now have Shiraz and Sangiovese vines, which are their two main varieties and a smaller lot of Grenache and Tempranillo vines that are just for blending.

The couple produced their first wine, a blend of Sangiovese and Shiraz in 2012. Then the following year with a larger crop, they were able to produce the two separately.

"Last year was our first year of blending the Grenache and Shiraz and this year we blended the Tempranillo with Sangiovese, which we are looking forward to tasting shortly," David said. "The Shiraz and Grenache blend is our first full-

bodied wine and we are pretty happy with it. Most of our other wines are nice but lighter. The wine is made by Gippsland winemakers. We have a liquor licence but we don't have a licence to make wine on the property and we are not winemakers."

They launched their range of wines early this year after getting their licence in order and completing a few training courses. "David is very proud of what we've achieved from our small vineyard," Maria said. "We now pick 2.5t of grapes and produce more than 2000 bottles of vegan and gluten friendly wine a year, which is pretty exciting."

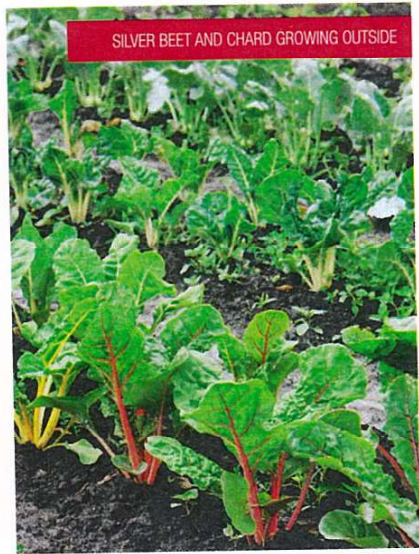
Maria has a degree in applied chemistry and majored in food science after attending Swinburne University for four years. For the last 25 years, she has worked for a German-based company developing food products for the three major supermarkets.



SOME OF THIS YEAR'S ANGUS CALVES



A RANGE OF DAVID AND MARIA'S WINES



SILVER BEET AND CHARD GROWING OUTSIDE

She applied her skills to producing preserved food on their own property and has now developed a range of 15 chutneys, relishes and sauces that they sell with their wines at several Gippsland markets and a few local retail outlets.

David initially started growing vegetables after establishing the vines so they would have fresh produce for their own consumption. Maria said he then grew more seedlings and more vegetables and one year ended up with an abundance of chillies. "He bought them to the house and said what are you going to do with this Maria, so I started looking up recipes and putting ideas together. The first thing I made was chilli jam and our friends were the guinea pigs."

She said being a food technologist was an advantage because she knew what labels were needed and the ingredient and nutritional information required to sell products commercially.

She made some chilli sauces and a few chutneys then hand printed some labels and took them to a market in Cowes to test their value. "People really enjoyed them, they also really loved our fresh vegetables and the business grew from there."

The preserved condiments are all produced only from the vegetables they grow and Maria said their chilli sauces are particularly popular especially their green chilli sauce, which is made from jalapeño chillies and has a mild flavour that isn't too spicy.

"One product I have a lot of respect for is our sweet tomato relish made using David's grandmother's traditional recipe. It took a little while to perfect it as I had to convert pounds to kilos and grams and we have done very well with it. I've also developed a zucchini relish that stems a bit from what I learnt while making the tomato relish."

Her pickled eggplant and eggplant chutney are made using traditional European style recipes and she still makes the original chilli jam that sells well.

"I promote the products as condiments as well as ingredients that can be used in cooking or marinades. I have also developed a nice tomato kasundi, which is a fiery Indian-style sauce that people enjoy and I used it in a cooking demonstration at the Warragul Farmer's Market to make chilli con carne. I had a recipe handout so people could make it at home and I sold all the kasundi."

She said each season they try to grow a variety of chillies because people that like chillies, like their sauce hot. "In our sauce we have jalapeno, habanero and cayenne chillies." She has also developed pickled cauliflowers with a hint of lemon, some cracked pepper, bay leaf and small amount of garlic as well as curried cauliflower, and a home-style tomato sauce.

St Fiacres

"I really get excited when David brings in the vegetables he's grown," she said, "like our first pick of zucchinis. It's a real buzz. I also love getting feedback from people that purchase our products, I really do. I love talking about them and teaching people how to use them, and I love learning from them how they've used our products."

"I know the ingredients that go into commercial food, but the ingredients in our products are only what we grow on the farm with a few basic additives like sugar, vinegar, a little bit of salt, herbs and spices and that's it."

She said there are new laws coming into Australia for labelling products with the percentage of Australian ingredients. "Ours I'm proud to say, are 80 – 90% and I can't wait to get the labels redone to show that."

The farm isn't certified organic but David and Maria farm using organic principles. They have nine grass-fed beef cows that produce calves each year. One animal a year is used for their own meat and the rest are sent to market. "The original plan was to use them for making small goods because that's what I develop when I'm working," Maria said. "People like quality small goods especially beautiful salamis and real smoked bacon that's not just flavoured, but the food regulations are more stringent and we haven't had the funds to go through all the procedures and processes yet but there is a demand for it."

David and Maria named the farm after St Fiacre who grew up in Ireland and then lived and gardened in France during the 15th century. He is the patron saint of the French commune Saint-Fiacre. He is also the patron of those who grow vegetables, medicinal plants and gardening in general. "I always think of Dave as being St Fiacre because he has such a green thumb and he loves growing vegetables. We are not very religious people; it was something that just grabbed us because it had a meaning and we wanted the farm to have a meaning."

Apart from the Gippsland markets, David and Maria also annually take their produce and food products to the Garlic Festival in Meeniyan, the Italian Festival in Mirboo North and the Thorpdale Potato Festival.

"Next year we'd like to also try some Melbourne markets," David said. "because for us to be able to stop working and farm full time, we need a large volume of people to purchase our products."

Photography by Wendy Morris



MARIA WITH SOME OF THEIR HOT CHILLI SAUCES



PART OF THEIR ANGUS HERD



DAVID AND HIS INDOOR VEGETABLE CROP