



MICHELLE Heagney



John Cassegrain, of Cassegrain Wines in Port Macquarie has welcomed winemaker Michelle Heagney to his growing team. Michelle has worked at some of Australia's most famous wineries including Penfold's and she is relishing the opportunity to work with new grape varieties that are close to her heart.

You have a substantial history in the wine industry – what has brought you to Port Macquarie and what do you like about the area?

I was presented with this great opportunity to work as the senior winemaker, assisting John Cassegrain, the chief winemaker at Cassegrain Wines. I grew up in Armidale and have been working in various winemaking roles in South Australia for the last 8 years. I'm really excited to have moved back to New South Wales and be closer to my family origins.

Like a lot of people who have come to live in Port Macquarie, I used to come here from Armidale for family holidays throughout my childhood. We loved the beaches and atmosphere of the seaside. I'm pleased to see that the beauty of Port Macquarie is unchanged and happy to see the growing array of great restaurants and cafes and a fantastic food and wine culture.

> What originally got you interested in the industry and what formal training have you had?

Well, it's a bit of an embarrassing story but I found myself out of part-time work while I was at university when my father sacked me from my job at my parents' paper shop. A friend from Uni was working at Rosemount Estate in the Hunter and wasn't able to continue, so I filled-in for her in the winery cellar.

I was bitten by the bug from the moment I stepped into the cellar and fell in love with the winemaking process. My father and I have patched things up since then.

My formal training consists of a Bachelor of Rural Science from the University of New England, Armidale. I then went on to study a Bachelor of Wine Science at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga. I have also recently completed a Certificate IV in Business – Frontline

Management.

> You join the Cassegrain team as a Senior Winemaker assisting John Cassegrain. What are you looking forward to in the role?

I'm looking forward to quite a few things. John Cassegrain is very well respected in winemaking circles, so I believe I have some great learning opportunities here. I am delighted to be working for a family owned winery.

This type of environment will allow me to be very hands-on and presents me with the opportunity to be involved in a much broader way compared to working in a corporate winery environment.

I am excited about the challenge of working with new grape varieties, particularly the cool climate New England fruit, as that is the region I grew up in. James Halliday, one of Australia's most respected wine writers, believes the New England region has a lot to offer.

The Chambourcin, which is grown very successfully here in the Hastings River, is a variety I am looking forward to exploring further.

> How does the Australian and local wine industry stack up on the national and international stage? What are our strengths?

The Hastings River region is fairly unique in the sense that we have a humid maritime climate. The Hastings only received its GI (Geographical Index) in 1999, so in effect we are considered to be an emerging wine region. That said, we certainly have a strong presence in the Australian and international wine industries.

Cassegrain's method of sourcing grapes from a variety of regions means that we can offer a broad range of blends. This allows us to compete

on the Australian stage by satisfying consumer demands for choice and quality wines at good value.

In terms of the international stage, Australia has always done well in "New World" winemaking which is generally a cleaner, fresher, crisper approach to winemaking. Australian wine producers offer a more drinkable style of wine and are generally more adaptable to providing consumers with what they prefer to drink.

Cassegrain has developed significant relationships in the international market, particularly in Japan where we have exclusively supplied wine to the Japanese bullet train for 20 years.

> Having worked with some well-known Australian wineries such as Rosemount, Penfold's, De Bortoli's and as the chief winemaker with the Watson Group in South Australia, how will your experience with the different grape varieties there help wine production here?

I have had the privilege of working for some well established and respected wineries. I've worked onsite where they make the iconic Grange at Penfold's. I've come from a background of winemaking using grapes from multiple regions, giving me experience in this approach. I've also had the opportunity to work on several different styles of making Semillon and I'm eager to adapt these techniques to the Hastings River Semillon grapes.

> What is a typical day in the life of a winemaker?

An exciting aspect of winemaking is that there really isn't a typical day. It depends on the time of

year and which "hat" the winemaker is wearing.

Before vintage, the winemakers are often out in the vineyards inspecting, assessing and tasting the grapes before harvest. This is when we are wearing our "farmer's hat".

Our multi-regional approach here at Cassegrain means not only monitoring our vines in the Hastings River but also travelling to vineyards in other regions such as New England, the Hunter Valley and Tumbarumba.

Vintage, roughly February to April, is our busiest time of the year as this is when our carefully selected grapes are harvested and start arriving at the winery from our local vines and from vineyards in other regions.

The winemaker's role during this time is to direct the fruit "traffic" through the cellar with lots of tasting and smelling of fruit as we go. The white grapes are sent to be pressed while the red grapes are sent directly to the tanks "on skins" to start the fermentation process.

Throughout the rest of the year, we winemakers are often found in the lab pouring over barrel samples of each wine blend for analysis to monitor levels of alcohol, acidity, pH and so on. This scientific facet of winemaking is really enjoyable.

Our days are also spent tasting, smelling and determining the readiness of each wine to be bottled – tough life I know. We then work with the production team for the bottling process to begin.

Winemaking is really a greatly varied occupation. We rely on our senses a great deal.

> What is your favourite variety of wine and why?

I love Chardonnay, it's a really workable variety, always interesting and is adaptable to many styles. It's a wine which can be enjoyed with or without food. Everyone's taste is different, so it's a matter of trying wines to find ones you enjoy.

> Thank you Michelle.