

# AIMING FOR THE TOP

By Julie Wilkinson Baarrooka Alpaca Stud, Victoria

**In the first year they bought the farm and put up a shed and revelled in their ownership of this piece of paradise; in the second year they built a dam and planted grapes, and no rains came and the vines withered and died; in the third year they replanted the grapes and built another shed, they spread water on the land, the grapes grew, but the sheep and grasshoppers came and partook of the vines; in the fourth year they planted more grapes, fixed the fences, built another shed and built a house and the vines grew bountifully; in the fifth year, they harvested their grapes (and built another shed); in the sixth year they bought alpacas and they grew into a herd of wonderful character and much enjoyment; and they saw that it was good. In the seventh year they released their own wine. And they saw everything they had made, and they saw that it was good.**

From a chance discussion in a busy city coffee shop, came a realisation that we shared the same unspoken dream to live on the land (mine to breed alpacas, my husband Russell's to plant a vineyard and make wine) and our destiny was set. From that day we started the search to find the ideal property for ultra-premium viticulture. We analysed climatic and topographical data to identify potential locations and then went looking – our search took us to the Atherton Tablelands, the Sunshine Coast hinterland, South Gippsland, Margaret River and then finally, to the Strathbogie Ranges. In fact, when we began looking at properties in that area, we were unaware that substantial viticultural development in the Strathbogie Ranges already existed – rather, we had decided that climatically, it was the place to be. The Strathbogie Ranges are in North Central Victoria, to the east of the Hume Highway about halfway between Melbourne and Albury, and run from Seymour in the south to Benalla in the north. Not only is it becoming renown as a cool climate wine growing region, but it is the area where many of Ned Kelly and his gangs' escapades took place.

For a time, the commitment to setting up a vineyard and the fact we only spent weekends at the farm forced the buying of alpacas on the backburner. However, I continued to read and dream about them. On moving to the farm full time in 2001, I decided that as a compromise, I should buy the children two wethers as pets (sure, who was I trying to kid!). Of course, before the wethers had even arrived, I was off looking at suri females and was beginning to put together a breeding herd. I had realised the money I was saving for a cute little sports car, which would be ruined on our gravel roads, would be better spent on alpacas. I also decided I would aim for the ultra-premium product (we perfectionists don't have much choice!) so went about buying the best suris I could find. In four months I had purchased seven females – coloured animals through Pinjarra and white from Pucara – and I didn't stop there. I now have 200 animals and am embarking on an Embryo Transfer (ET) program to more quickly improve the quality of the herd.

The property of 320 acres now has 80 acres under vine, with the remainder agisted to a neighbour for sheep grazing, or used to run the alpacas and hand-rearing beef/dairy calves. We then purchased a further 320 acre property across the road. This has some great remnant vegetation which we would like to rehabilitate and expand (and a great house site!) while the remainder currently supports 100 Angus and beef/dairy cross breeders. While we have been significantly



Julie Wilkinson, Russell Synnot and Pinjarra Firebird taste test a Baarrooka red.



The beautiful scenery of Baarrooka Vineyard and Alpaca Stud in the Strathbogie Ranges

affected by the drought, the presence of numerous seeps and springs in the Strathbogie Tablelands meant that we continued to have water and some green pick for much of the summer.

From the outset, we agreed that we would aim to produce **THE BEST** in wines and alpacas. To even have a remote chance of achieving this, one must make all the right choices – from selection of land (cool climate wine/ultra-fine merino country), the right rootstocks/breed-stock, the right aspect and vine management (or pasture and animal management), the right time to pick the grapes (which sire to use), the multitude of decisions in making and maturing a wine through to how to promote and market the product (wine, alpaca, fibre or alpaca product) and at what pricepoint. We are not saying that we are the best, that we are making all the right decisions, or that we will achieve our goals, but we are using all our skills and knowledge (as well as that of others) to take us closer to those goals.

Although we both have scientific backgrounds (we worked together as environmental scientists for over 15 years) and I grew up on a dairy farm, we continue to seek out as much information as possible about viticulture, winemaking and alpaca breeding through publications, seminars and conferences, the internet and, most importantly, others within the industry. The learning is on-going and striving for continuous improvement is the challenge that keeps us inspired.

The early results of my breeding program are very exciting, both in the paddock and in the show ring. I like to think that my careful selection of foundation females will allow me continued improvement in quality every generation.

We released our first vintage of white and red wines in 2002 and opened a cellar door in January 2004. So as our life of rural repose unfolds before us, we know we will never be tempted back to the bright lights of the city.

For more information, visit [www.baarrooka.com.au](http://www.baarrooka.com.au).



Baarrooka was awarded First, Second and Fourth in the Junior Female Fawn class at the 2004 National Show.