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## Corkscrew trellis improves quality in Grenache

Wayne Elson admits he's come up with some quirky ideas before, but the Barossa grapegrower believes his unique vine trellis – inspired by the Romans – is producing some of the 'best' Grenache in the Barossa.

### Kellie Arbuckle

Nine years ago, Wayne Elson had a thought: how would the quality of Grenache grapes rate if the vines they grew on were trained upwards? The inspiration came from pictures in an old magazine, which showed vines spiralling upwards during Roman times.

“The Romans of old Pompeii knew what they were doing,” said Elson, who believes the images, possibly published in a past issue of *Grapegrower & Winemaker*, were of vines around 79A.D.

So, Elson thought “why not” and set out to create a vine system to train vines to grow vertically at his Roenfeldt Hill vineyard, at Greenock, in the Barossa Valley. Nine years later, and Elson's creation – the Corkscrew Vine Training System – is in full ▶



Farmer Johns viticulturist Shaun Falkenberg and grapegrower Wayne Elson, at Elson's Grenache block.

The beauty of the system is that the vines open up like a ballerina's dress, allowing air and sunlight to shine on every bunch

*Wayne Elson, Roenfeldt Hill*

production. With the combined help of six hard-working pruners and a touch of his very own "tender love and care", Elson's Grenache grapes from his 1.2 hectare vineyard are ready for winemaking. They have just been sold to Teusner Wines and are expected to be used in its Grenache blends, Avatar and Joshua. The grapes will also go in Elson's new family label, Roenfeldt Hill Corkscrew Grenache, in 2012.

Elson says his Corkscrew system has allowed him to stand out in the crowd, which he says is becoming increasingly important – even for growers – in the current Australian wine industry.

"Creating something that's different and new... that's when you can ask for the price you deserve. You become the price driver rather than the price taker," he said.

Teusner Wines winemaker and director Kym Teusner says Elson's Grenache was one of the best parcels he had seen.

"The quality is very good. There's great flavour, great colour and it's just really clean fruit," said Teusner, who first bought grapes from Elson last year for his premium Grenache blends.

According to Elson, other growers are showing interest in his innovation.

"A lot of people have heard about the system and drop by to see it. They are in awe of the quality of grapes every time," he said.

Elson says his Corkscrew system has helped him intensify the



Elson's Corkscrew vine training system allows the vine to spiral upwards, resulting in greater distance between bunches.

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## grapegrowing

flavour of his grapes and reduce disease caused by humidity and overcropping.

“The beauty of the system is that the vines open up like a ballerina’s dress, allowing air and sunlight to shine on every bunch,” he said.

“Because the vine spirals up along the stake, bunches have more space between them which increases airflow. This helps spray penetration and reduces the likelihood of mildews and mould setting in.

“The system has shown benefits too in that the height above the ground reduces the risk of frost damage.

“Grapes are also protected from sunburn because of the cylindrical shape of the canopy.”

Elson says the system also offers safety benefits because sprouting of the vine starts at about 700mm above the ground and dripper lines are out of the way, facilitating easier access underneath the vine.

“Picking and pruning takes place between knee to shoulder height, which minimises bending and occupational health and safety issues,” he said.

Training the vines to spiral like a corkscrew – hence the name – also maximises spur position choice and helps to avoid excess shading of the lower canes and bunches.

Elson made his Corkscrew system using stakes made from plastic grocery bags, rubber ties, vineyard clips, wire, PVC tape, timber posts and specially-made spring hooks.

The stakes are planted in every vine and the timber posts are planted every 30m. Elson says the stakes provide strength and resistance to wind, termites and rot because they are made from recycled plastic bags.

“The stake adds to the engineering of the vine. Normally what stands at 1.25m, in the wind it would simply bend over and break off if not supported,” Elson said.

The dripper wire and support wire are held in place using standard vineyard clips. The support wire is located about 1m from the ground, the same as a trellis wire. The dripper wire is located about 250mm from the ground.

Elson initially relied on a neoprene rubber strip (a rubber tie) which, when doubled,

snapped into the vineyard clips, enabling the young vine to be gently trained against the stake. Elson later used PVC tape and a specially-made spring hook to grip the stake, while providing a mechanical means of holding the last spiralled cane.

“You have to use tape to tie the next wrap onto the stake otherwise it will fall down,” he said.

Farmer Johns viticulturist Shaun Falkenberg worked with Elson throughout the grapegrowing process. He says Elson’s system is one-of-a-kind.

“Growers are always manipulating their trellising systems by introducing catch wires and foliage wires but there hasn’t been anything quite significant as this,” said Falkenberg, who believes it’s the closest grapegrowers have come to creating a bush vine.

He says this is beneficial because “even-ripening will give better flavours in the fruit which will translate into the wine”.

“The system gets grapes off the ground quicker while providing a good open canopy and reducing disease and pest pressures,” he said. Though Elson’s system has gained good feedback regarding the quality of his Grenache grapes, the system does have its limitations, including overall cost.

“It is unlikely large vineyard operations could afford the extra capital outlay and the labour costs required in the early years of training the vines,” he said.

According to Elson, the system requires hard labour and persistence in order to get the quality right.

“Pruning is the critical issue because it’s important to get the spur positioning right and the bud quantity right. I really try very hard to ensure that the pruning is done to a tee,” said Elson. Both Elson and Falkenberg say the system is primarily suited to boutique vineyards.

“There’s a place for everybody and it just shows that if your small and pay attention to detail and aim for that top 5 per cent of quality, you’ll succeed,” Elson said.

Falkenberg says the system would suit red



Elson’s Corkscrew Vine Training System allows the vine to spiral upwards resulting in greater distance between bunches.

over white varieties.

“I think it would suit red varieties, such as Mataro and possibly Shiraz, because white varieties need more canopy to shade the fruit to prevent sunburn,” Falkenberg said. “It depends on the soil type. It would be suited for lower vigour soil such as heavy clay soils.”

He says while yields may be lower, the quality is definitely there.

“Yields are lower but at the end of the day it’s just about targeting the premium end of the market.”

He says the fact that the Corkscrew system is adaptable and can be reverted back to the conventional trellis system at any time is also a benefit.

Elson says he is “delighted” that people are showing interest in his Corkscrew system and will gladly provide information to other growers, so long as they attribute his system on the final product.

“If other people want to follow the system then good on them,” said Elson, who will use the system for Mataro and Zinfandel in the future.

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