



## THE ODD COUPLE GROSSET AND TOOLE

In the DC Comics universe, Brainiac and Superwoman (should such a character properly exist) would doubtless be mortal enemies, but Sarah Ahmed finds them living side by side in a more earthly setting

Dubbed “Brainiac” by industry insiders, after the Superman comic-book character with a “twelfth-level intellect,” winemaker Jeffrey Grosset commands great respect among his peers. He is Australia’s foremost exponent of Riesling, and his epic championing of Stelvin closures has contributed to one of the biggest revolutions in the history of wine: the demise of cork’s monopoly and the rise of the screwcap.

### A dynamic duo

So, who wins Mr Grosset’s own respect? At the top of the list is his partner, winemaker Stephanie Toole, whom he describes as a “Superwoman” for her ability to juggle the demands of family life with winemaking at the highest level for her own winery, Mount Horrocks. And this is no glib stereotype—if you have met Toole, you can well understand why Grosset holds her in such high esteem. While diplomas

in Agriculture and Winemaking from Roseworthy provided the platform for his renowned technical proficiency, Toole is a self-taught, intuitive winemaker. Grosset’s approach is obsessive, sometimes cautious, while Toole is pragmatic, sometimes impulsive.

As they say, opposites attract, but not, it transpires, when it came to the prospect of making wine together. Their supposedly “legendary competitiveness” is one explanation as to why it never occurred to this dynamic duo to collaborate professionally. While neither is short of ambition, Toole says they “talk openly and try to have fun with the competitiveness.” Confiding that they play up the competitive image, Grosset says the reality is that they are both very independent-minded—a factor that he identifies as the key to their successful relationship over the years. He explains: “We don’t agree on everything, but we support each other. We

don’t delve too far into each other’s businesses unless we’re asked! And we have kids who help keep it all in perspective.” There is also a professional aspect to their independence, in that although Toole has her own tanks and barrels, she has sub-contracted crushing facilities and cellar space at Grosset’s winery since the mid-1990s. Grosset emphasizes that their independence is “critical to the integrity of our wines. Our vineyards are separate and this tracks into the wines.”

### Differentiation

Grosset is well qualified to talk about provenance, since his reputation was forged by his groundbreaking decision to bottle individually Rieslings from the Clare Valley subregions of Polish Hill River and Watervale in 1981 (and every year since), rather than blending them. Surprising, then, that his formative winemaking years were spent making high-volume, multiregional blends at Lindemans’ state-of-the-art Karadoc winery in Murray-Darling, a vast region that accounts for around 20 percent of the national crush. Grosset admits that he had wanted to pursue his career with Clare Valley Riesling specialist Leo Buring, whose sales manager, a family friend, sparked his interest in wine. At the age of only 15, he became an avid collector, storing bottles in a fireplace cavity in his bedroom. In the event, with Philip Shaw at the helm, Karadoc turned out to be an excellent training ground in which to develop his technical skills. Although Grosset says it could be frustrating trying to keep up with Shaw’s “superactive brain” and to implement his “wild ideas,” the experience showcased Grosset’s precocious talent, and at the tender age of 26, he was appointed chief winemaker, in charge of Karadoc’s 25 staff and five winemakers.

Despite the kudos and financial rewards, Grosset decided to cut and run when Lindemans cranked up production to 60,000 tonnes while cutting staff by 25 percent—“the spark had gone.” With an eye to setting up on his own, he had already purchased in Clare Valley an old dairy depot ripe for conversion into a winery and enrolled on a diploma course in Law and Accounting. Having identified Riesling as “the standout” variety, Grosset negotiated fruit sources in Watervale and Polish Hill River and was given free rein to manage the head of his management school’s Polish Hill vineyard in return for fruit. In so doing, he encountered the distinctive “hard rock” (slate and shale) soils that led him to vinify separately the fruit from Polish Hill and that from Watervale, with its “soft (limestone) rock.”

Since their launch in 1981, Grosset’s Watervale and Polish Hill Rieslings have become a New World paradigm for terroir. He believes that they are such transparent examples of subregionality because they stand direct comparison. “The winemaking follows the same pattern

and is in its purest form, with no oak, no extended time on lees, and no malolactic fermentation,” he says. “From the moment you crush, you’re on a potential downhill”—but this is precisely where the technical skills honed in his Karadoc days have stood him in good stead. Interestingly, Grosset admits he was “not aiming to make a statement about terroir” and confesses: “I was surprised by the immediate critical acclaim for Polish Hill.

It was so distinctive that I thought it would need some explaining.”

Unsurprisingly, he has long since invested in his own vineyards (his Rieslings are now 100 percent estate-grown) and has also pinpointed other special vineyard sites, realizing their potential for great wines—red, as well as white. The isolated, lofty

Gaia vineyard at Clare Valley’s highest point is the source of his acclaimed

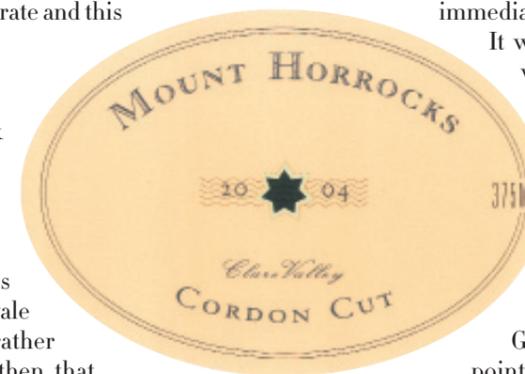
Cabernet Sauvignon blend of that name, and vineyards in the cooler Adelaide Hills account for the subtle intensity of his Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

### An independent spirit

Having come to wine after Grosset had made his name, and with no technical grounding, Toole has shown formidable grit and determination, not to mention natural talent, in carving out a name for herself and Mount Horrocks. The New Zealander attributes her pluck to a working-class background where, she says, “you just got on with it.” This attitude served her well in her 20s, which she spent globe-trotting with her ex-husband, working on a prawn boat, as a cocktail waitress, and as a casual farm laborer. During a spell in London, she enjoyed her first serious exposure to wine through her sister-in-law, who worked for a wine merchant, and when Toole finally settled in Perth, Western Australia, in 1986, this newfound passion led to a career in wine.

Starting out in bottle shops, Toole went on to manage sales for Leeuwin Estate, the iconic Margaret River winery, before her independent streak took hold and she set up as a wine wholesaler. It was in this context that she came across Grosset, whose wines she listed. Toole says she had been a long-standing fan of Polish Hill Riesling, the 1987 vintage of which remains vividly etched on her memory. By the time the couple met in 1991, Grosset had heard about Toole, whose reputation preceded her. Known for her passion for selling wine and her love of Polish Hill, she was also the biggest seller of Grosset’s Semillon. Aside from their shared interest in wine, both were divorced, and the chemistry was instant. A year later, Toole had sold her business and upped sticks to join Grosset in the Clare Valley, South Australia. The following year she gave birth to the first of two children, Georgina; Alexander followed in 1995.

Toole recalls that, despite Grosset’s critical acclaim, these early years were tough because of his divorce



All photography courtesy of Grosset Winery/Mount Horrocks



Named after the Greek goddess of the Earth, Grosset's Gaia vineyard is planted at the highest point of the Clare Valley

settlement, so both of them were effectively starting over—“We worked our butts off!” She remembers lugging hoses around while 12 weeks pregnant to help Grosset during the notorious 1993 vintage, when the river broke its banks. But the buzz of the winery appealed to Toole, who, in July of that year, pounced on the opportunity to pursue her own project, buying Mount Horrocks, another Clare Valley winery for which Grosset had made the wines for some years. At one in their approach to winemaking—which Toole describes as “first and foremost about the site, then the interpretation of the fruit, so we don’t build the wines up”—Toole appointed Grosset as her consultant for the first two years. He defines this role as “being around to cover the big gaps, and to explain the principles of winemaking and the different options for Steph’s decision.” He is quick to point out that Toole made it clear from the outset that she was making the wines. He ruefully recalls how, having gauged how much risk she was taking using stems, foot-treading, and skin contact for her Shiraz, Toole dismissed his views, intent on chasing her preferred Rhône style. Still, with no formal viticultural or winemaking training, Toole says she could not have had a better teacher, given Grosset’s attention to detail and insistence on quality. He repays the compliment, reporting, “Steph has a great palate and was a remarkably fast learner”—which is just as well, says Toole, since Grosset takes it for granted that everyone will be operating at the same high level.

That she so palpably measures up is, one senses, an inspiration to Grosset. In awe of her energy and focus—

Toole returned to work four days after giving birth to Alexander—Grosset proudly recounts tales of her go-getting. His eyes widen with amazement when he recalls how, getting up one morning, she announced she was going to buy the land and cottage across the road from the winery in Auburn to plant a dedicated vineyard for Mount Horrocks’s Cordon Cut Riesling. Even though neither was for sale, Toole got what she wanted and, two years later, in 1998, had similarly persuaded the powers that be to sell her the dilapidated old railway station that now functions as her cellar door and a café. Toole, who also makes a dry Watervale Riesling, Shiraz, Semillon, and Cabernet Sauvignon, pragmatically observes, “I recognized early on that Cordon Cut was my USP and would generate profile. [...] I know it’s only a dessert wine, but so’s Yquem!” And it paid off. Referring to the first crop from the new vineyard, Australia’s *Wine* magazine announced, “You’ll never see a better example of this technique than from the 2000 Mount Horrocks Cordon Cut.” The 2005 vintage graced the Queen’s 80th-birthday celebrations and a celebration of Opera Australia’s 50th anniversary at Buckingham Palace. When Toole was nominated for the *Gourmet Traveller* Australian Winemaker of the Year in 2007, the Cordon Cut was described by the chair of the judges, Peter Forrestal, as “one of Australia’s best dessert wines.”

### Success and responsibility

Riesling has been good to both of them, and their success has in turn raised the profile of Clare Valley, for which the

variety is a trump card. In 1998, Grosset won two important awards: the inaugural *Volvo/Wine Magazine* Australian Winemaker of the Year and International Riesling Winemaker of the Year at the Riesling Summit II in Hamburg. He feels strongly that a measure of responsibility comes with success. To that end, he has loaned his credibility to the causes of label integrity, Stelvin screwcaps, and environmental sustainability. Being Grosset—with “an obsessive attention to detail,” as Toole puts it—he has invested considerable time and, latterly, money in them.

Grosset’s first taste of campaigning came in 2000, after Toole pointed out to him that legislative changes designed to improve label integrity would not extend to Riesling. Grosset says it spelled disaster if the term “Riesling” could still be used on export labels for wines made from lesser varieties like Sultana and Pedro Ximénez. Approached by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation for a statement, he expressed concern that the government appeared to be compromising the reputation of Riesling to appease a couple of large companies. Within 24 hours, to Grosset’s relief, the law was changed, though he unexpectedly found himself threatened with legal proceedings by the Winemakers’ Federation of Australia. Although it blew over, Grosset says, “I learned how difficult it can be for an individual to make a stand.”

Nonetheless, Grosset waded into deeper controversy when he led the charge in favor of Stelvin screwcaps over cork closures and contributed to Tyson Stelzer’s manual for winemaking with screwcaps (*Taming the Screw*). Although he is proud that Stelvin “was researched by Australians, introduced by Australians, and has taken the wine world by storm,” he confesses to being “taken aback” by the ferocity and relentlessness of the cork industry’s response. Because dealing with it consumed such a huge amount of time, he admits that “if it came around again, I’d be keen to avoid stepping forward.” Grosset still smarts at the cork industry’s suggestion that only serious producers use cork. He maintains that, when screwcap was first introduced, “you could not select your way out of cork taint,” describing cork as “a flawed closure whose variability at my level was totally unacceptable.” For him, the argument is simple. He supports screwcap because “I love wine and want it to be as pure an expression of variety and place as possible. [...] I have picked up a lot of reliability with screwcap.”

In 2003, Grosset established the Australian Closure Fund to provide a research bursary in this field, the first of which was won by Southcorp (Penfolds). Their research dismissed the widely held belief that cork’s greater permeability to oxygen made it the better closure for red wines. It concluded that “oxygen was not a vital component for the ongoing

evolution and maturation of these [screwcap-trialed] red wines after bottling.” While the debate about screwcaps’ suitability for long-term cellaring of red wines nonetheless rumbles on, Grosset asserts, “The current screwcaps have proved themselves very well suited to the broadest range of wines.” He adds: “Whether they are perfect is somewhat academic when one compares the massive step forward in quality that their introduction has made, with the comparatively minor improvements that are likely due to a possible ‘refinement’ of the permeability.”

Half-amused, half-embarrassed that his children called the family cat Stelvin—“Because we hear so much about it anyway”—Grosset’s latest project, the Gaia Fund, is unrelated to wine and, he says, for his personal satisfaction. Conceived last year, it is named after Grosset’s Gaia vineyard, whose name was in turn inspired by the environmentalist

James Lovelock’s Gaia theory, which led Grosset to farm the vineyard sustainably, with minimal chemical input and intervention. Feeling that “applying the Gaia principle to a zha [5-acre] vineyard is insignificant in the grand scheme of things,” Grosset is contributing an amount equivalent to the Gaia Cabernet blend’s sale proceeds (net of wine taxes) to a capital fund that will benefit organizations supporting youth, the arts, and the environment. He explains that, “while Lovelock emphasizes environmental rather than human sustainability, both Lovelock and many ancient cultures imply that these are ultimately one and the same,” so the fund is his way of supporting sustainability in its broadest sense. The capital fund will be invested

in companies with credentials in “environmental sustainability” and based on a targeted accumulation of A\$1 million over three years, Grosset expects to make donations of not less than A\$100,000 a year.

In the meantime, when it come to the wines, neither Grosset nor Toole shows any signs of letting up the pace. Toole’s own Watervale vineyard came on-stream in 2006, giving her control over all her fruit and greater scope to experiment with organic and biodynamic practices. She reckons, “with the work still to be done in the vineyards, the best wines are still to come.” Grosset, who spent around A\$150,000 shoot- and fruit-thinning to avoid overstressed vines in the drought-afflicted 2007 vintage, is experimenting with the Italian varieties Fiano and Aglianico, with some Nero d’Avola on order. He hopes that these may help hedge against climate change, given that the extra cost of 2007 “is not sustainable every year.” But whatever the challenges, Grosset and Toole have a winning formula in a supportive and creative partnership. Acting as both spur and source of inspiration, their individual successes bring out the best in each other. Long may we enjoy the fruits of their labor. ■

GROSSET

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