

School of good drops

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Amateur winemaker Georgia Roberts gets her hands dirty learning the skills of pruning at the Heart Break Grape in Red Hill South.

Amateurs are learning how to make good pinot noir, writes Jeni Port.

Grime. There's plenty of that. And dust and spiders and snakes.

Snakes play hide-and-seek in the marshy lowland at the bottom of Buckle Vineyard, a curvaceous hill of pinot noir vines sitting pretty on millionaire's row, or Shoreham Road, in Red Hill South.

The snakes are hiding today. Too hot.

Lisa Beck stops for a water break.

The baking sun is turning her back and shoulders pomegranate pink, and while it seems she has only just begun her vineyard chores, it's actually been a good hour and there are at least two more to go. Funny to think she's happily paying for this experience.

Lisa and friend Georgia Roberts trawl rows of vines looking for bird-damaged grapes and green fruit that refuses to ripen and, above all, ensuring they have just two bunches of fruit left per shoot.

That's the way teacher Peter Mitchell wants it. He shouts his instructions down the rows.

"Don't tell me to take them off," comes the call from behind a mass of leaves. "I don't have that much fruit!"

Almost any other variety and these amateur winemakers might get away with a higher yield but this is pinot noir, a quixotic spirit

inside a lump of sugar and water. If you want concentrated flavour, if you want the kind of intensity that arrives in waves in the glass, you keep the yield low, about two tonnes to the acre. So good fruit along with the bad falls to the ground.

Welcome to The Heartbreak Grape, the wine course where amateurs try to unravel the mystery of pinot noir from the ground up.

The brainchild of Mr Mitchell, a former Melbourne wine retailer, the course is unique in Australia, covering the entire vineyard year, from pruning through to trellising, crop thinning, picking and, finally, wine production.

For just \$770 you can get a taste of the winemaking life over nine three-hour sessions. And at the end, you get to walk away from it, sanity intact.

There is guidance, but no hand-holding. If you make a mistake, be it on your head. In the five years the course has been running have there been some doozies. "In the second year, I allowed the group to take their fermentations home with them so they could plunge them regularly," Mr Mitchell explains.

"Some forgot to plunge, some left their wine in the sun, it was a disaster.

"Only one had anything half decent. The rest had faulty wines."

Now, the wines stay in the winery at Tuck's Ridge, where staff do the plunging during the times their makers are absent.

This is what wine production is like (mistakes and all) in the real world, except here it's in microcosm.

Five years ago, Mr Mitchell talked his way into taking a section of pinot noir vineyard off the hands of Peter Hollick, co-owner of Tuck's Ridge. The vineyard was cropping high and needed

retrellising. Mr Mitchell's first students did the job, and when the fruit was ready to pick, it went to Tuck's Ridge. The following year, he allowed his new students to make their own wine but that - as we know - didn't work too well.

"The third year we got it right," says the ever-smiling Mr Mitchell.

He was given part of a shed to make and store the group's pinot noir, and by then he was also getting return Heartbreakers keen to explore pinot noir beyond the basic level.

Mr Mitchell encouraged them to do a number of trials in the vineyard with the option of cane or spur pruning or leaf plucking from the cooler east side or alternatively the west side, where vines can be prone to sunburn. From 20 students, pairs would look after individual rows and the fruit from those rows would be fermented separately (with part going into a group wine).

"People end up getting very possessive about their fruit," he adds.

Last year, the students got stuck into making pinot noir with wild yeasts and experimented with pre-fermentation maceration. Some hand-me-down French barrels, courtesy of Tuck's Ridge, added a new dimension to the taste and the group also made its first rose.

This year, the ante was upped again with second-year students trading their fruit (from pinot clone, D5V12, from a younger section of the Buckle Vineyard) with fruit from the NV6 pinot clone grown by first-year students.

While some students such as Ms Beck, who is studying for a masters of wine and wine appreciation at La Trobe University and her friend Ms Roberts, a city hotelier, are fully involved in wine and hospitality, others aren't.

Mr Mitchell believes there is room for everyone.

"There is an influence from me, there is no doubt," he says of the overall course structure. "There's got to be some organisation otherwise it would be a disaster, but at the same time I am being much freer in what I allow them to do."

At the end of the year, the students get to take home about four dozen pinot noir.

The best wine made to date, according to the proud teacher, is the group's 2006 pinot noir. "I showed it to a winemaker on the Peninsula and his face went ashen," says Mitchell. "He said, 'It's better than mine!' "

There is some substance to the bragging. The unfiltered 2006 pinot, which saw nine months in one-year-old oak, has retained a lot of attractive raspberry fruit and spice and shows good, tight structure. In retail terms, it's worthy of a \$20 (or slightly higher) price sticker.

The 2005 group-blended pinot noir doesn't shine nearly as bright (sulphides, nasty!) but one individual wine from 2005 with wild yeasts - a lively floral, fruity style - shows what some Heartbreakers are clearly capable of achieving.

No heartbreak there.

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