



(AUSSIE FOR LEFT HANDER)

## The Sarah & Sparky story

Sparky Marquis was a successful professional photographer when his Dad lined up the 5 kids in the family, and told them that if any of them were prepared to learn winemaking or viticulture they would inherit his award winning vineyard and winery. Sparky's sister jumped at it, but the boys scattered. Then Sparky remembered how much he liked drinking wine and came rushing back.

But his dad's hopes and plans came to nothing, because in Sparky's second year Sarah Watts walked onto campus. She was beautiful, sporty, fun loving, artistic and clever. Next day Sparky was on the phone to his dad to say that he had just seen the girl that he was going to marry, and he would never be coming home!

It took him four years to persuade Sarah that marrying him was a good idea. Whilst waiting, he researched for his thesis on canopy management, won every prize and trophy each year of the course, was Dux of the course and won the overseas travel scholarship.

Meanwhile, Sarah, whose car numberplate is 'HAVNFUN' did just that. She partied, played sports, travelled, and still managed to breeze through her exams.

When they married in 1991 they had \$1000 between them, and big dreams of developing their own business, succeeding in a career they were both passionate about, helping other people, and having fun.



They started work as winemakers with Sarah's parents at Fox Creek. They built a winery, introduced their Vineyard Watering Programme in the vineyards so that they got exceptional fruit, and devoted long hours to perfecting their winemaking. The day after receiving the winery licence they won the McLaren Vale Bushing King and Queen Trophy for Best Wine in Show. Since then they have won the Bushing two more times,

and have been Australian Boutique Winemakers of the Year, and Australian White Winemakers of the Year.

They were successful and super busy, and happy working together, and when their son Luke was born, they would do their winemaking with him sleeping in bassinet close by. Then one day, they rejected a parcel of wine and gave it to an agent to sell. The agent made a small fortune in half an hour, and Sarah and Sparky decided that they would become bulk wine producers, and have more family time.

They created a virtual winery by helping their grower friends to grow exceptional quality grapes with the Marquis Vineyard Watering Programme™. Then they made wines from those grapes in the back of their winemaker friends' wineries. They made a lot of money.

After two years they found they needed help, and asked Sparky's Mom and Dad to sell up and join them. Sparky's inducement was "our aim will be to make the best bulk wine in Australia, so we can sell it easily. We'll start in the vineyards in January, harvest in March, make the wine to Racked Off Gross Lees, sell it in June, and then go skiing for six months". Tempted, they sold up.

Unfortunately the next vintage was the year of the huge grape surplus. Sarah and Sparky had red wines to sell, but the market wanted Chardonnay. Wine that had sold the previous year for \$7 a litre fetched 25 cents a litre. They promptly lost all the money they had made in the previous two years.

So they went back to making bottled wine for their friends Henry's Drive, Parson's Flat and Shirvington and for their joint venture Marquis Philips. Once again they were enormously successful. In 1999 they became Australian Winemakers of the Year. In 2002 they won the Bushing Award for a record breaking third time and in the USA Robert Parker commented '*The greatest red wine values in existence*' and '*Run, don't walk and secure as much as you can of these wines!*' and gave their Integrity 99 points.

The Marquis Philips brand was a runaway success, growing from 8,000 to 120,000 cases in four years. There was talk of growing bigger still. Then one day, Sarah and Sparky took stock and decided that it was not the life they wanted to lead. They love the vineyards, love making wine, and love sharing with friends. They didn't want to become corporate, and they didn't ever want to compromise on quality. They decided to go it alone and stay small and hands-on.

They reasoned that they had started with \$1000, so they could do it again, if they had to. Everyone rallied round to help. Staff offered to take a salary drop, growers offered to take late payments, suppliers offered extended terms. Both families mortgaged everything and chipped in.

In March 2006 they named their new brand Mollydooker – Aussie for left hander – because they are both left handed. Two weeks later they were down to \$17 in the bank. It was scary. They had always been a cash company. Their motto had been, if you can't pay on time, pay early. Now that was impossible. They couldn't even afford to label the wine.

And then a miracle happened. A local businessman walked in the door, said he had heard that they may be in trouble, and asked to know the story. Half an hour later he



walked out the door on his way to a month's holiday. Sparky stood, tears pouring down his cheeks, holding a cheque for enough money to enable them to survive.

Three months later, The Wine Advocate chose The Boxer as the Best Value Red Wine in the World, the Two Left Feet as the second, and the Maitre D' as the fourth. The Violinist was chosen the Best Value White Wine in the world. The wines sold out in nineteen days, and all the debts were paid off.

In August, when the Carnival of Love (WA:99) and Enchanted Path (WA:96) were released they sold out in five days, and Mollydooker was back to paying bills early, and was able to give bonuses to staff and growers.

Since then it has been a story of phenomenal success. Sarah and Sparky now have more wines of 94 Parker points and above than any other winemakers in the world, The Velvet Glove is the fifth wine of theirs to be awarded 99 points, the Carnival of Love has twice been in the Wine Spectator's Top Ten wines in the World, the Blue Eyed Boy is featured in the Qantas President's Lounge and in Morton's Steak Houses, and the demand for The Boxer is so huge, that this year (2011) it will have its own special release day.

A mere eighteen months after being down to their last \$17, Sarah and Sparky were able to buy a beautiful property with stunning views, a winery, and 114 acres of vineyards on the magic Seaview Ridge in McLaren Vale, home of most of the iconic McLaren Vale wines.



During the last three years they have modernised and upgraded the winery, pulled out unwanted grape varieties and replanted with Shiraz, installed a watering system, implemented the Vineyard Watering Programme, and moved the city office to the winery. They now have 50 permanent staff, joined by another twenty in vintage.

Their success has been built on following their passions, and by working from the heart. Sparky loves his vines, and for the three months before harvest you will find him sitting under the gum trees with the viticulture team, squashing the grapes and tasting the juices, to work out how much water should be put on the vines in the next half week, and when the grapes should be picked.

Sarah has been able to indulge her artistic flair. She designed the quirky Lefty labels, the Party labels featuring their kids Luke and Holly, the romantic Carnival of Love and Enchanted Path, and the elegant Velvet Glove (for which she received the Australian Packaging Award).

They are both passionate about their motto 'We make wines which make people go WOW, through commitment to excellence and attention to detail' and never take shortcuts or compromise on quality. They barrel ferment, using new or one year old barrels, and their used barrels fetch the highest prices in the industry.

They guarantee the quality of their wine by rating it on its Marquis Fruit Weight™ (the measure of how far back on your tongue the velvety sensation of fruit goes, before the prickly sensation of tannin is exposed). If they don't have parcels which qualify at the required Fruit Weight, they don't make those wines (in the 2008 vintage they only bottled Lefty wines).

Sarah and Sparky have never forgotten how they were helped when they were in need, and they have developed and fund two Mollydooker Houses in Cambodia which school and feed 200 children and their families, and have started on a third. They also support Chester County Futures in PA, providing education for underprivileged children; Mercy



Ministries in the US, helping abused girls; and Into The Blue in Australia, providing work opportunities for aboriginal traditional land owners.

Their business has grown entirely by word of mouth - they have never advertised, and don't even have a marketing budget. However, they do a lot of partying, so look out for Mollydooker events in your area! And if you ever make it to the winery be prepared to spend several hours doing the winery tour and sharing in the fun.

## Visiting Mollydooker

When you visit Mollydooker you will be welcomed as a personal friend. You will be taken through the vineyards to see the secret life of the vines and how the Marquis Vineyard Watering Programme™ works, then walked through the winery to experience the winemaking cycle, tasting the developing wines in barrel and in tank as you go. If you visit on a Monday you will be invited to join the family for a light lunch made from fresh garden produce, accompanied by some older wines.



Visits and Tours are by appointment only, and are very popular, so be sure to enquire early, by email [helpinghand@mollydookerwines.com.au](mailto:helpinghand@mollydookerwines.com.au)