

good living **wine**

# Shout from the Hilltops

The owners of Moppity Vineyards are making giant strides after a tough start.



**HUON HOOKE**

Amid the gloom and glut of the Australian wine scene, there are occasional good news stories. Jason and Alecia Brown, at Moppity Vineyards, Young, are one.

Moppity was planted in 1973, a year after the now-famous Barwang, Hilltops' first vineyard, was established.

Jason (whose family owned the Candamber liquor stores in Canberra) and Alecia were accountants looking for a new challenge when they bought Moppity in December 2004.

With 70 hectares of vines, it is a substantial vineyard. The Moppity brand was virtually non-existent, so the Browns were faced with building its profile – a herculean task in a flooded market and depressed industry.

They inherited contracts with Hardys but then along came Martin Cooper.

Cooper was being groomed as McWilliam's Wines' next chief winemaker when he departed abruptly and went to the former Hardys Kamberra winery to start a new venture, Cooper Coffman.

Cooper, as winemaker, made

extravagant promises to growers in the Tumbarumba and Hilltops regions to buy vast quantities of 2008 fruit at grand prices – including 95 per cent of Moppity's crop. This all fell in a heap and Cooper Coffman, with oceans of wine in its tanks, went into receivership and Cooper disappeared. The Browns received one-third of their grape payment before the firm went into receivership. The wine in tank was good and eventually, in mid-2009, the Browns made a do-or-die decision.

Jason takes up the story: "Cooper Coffman owed us a small fortune. The wines were all still in tank and the receivers were hopeful of selling them on the bulk market so we might eventually be paid. Enter the GFC and the bulk-wine market collapsed; 12 months on, still no money; wine still in tank and Moppity Vineyards now drifting closer to insolvency as a result."

By now, the Moppity brand had begun to attract good press and do well in the market. With the collaboration of their distributor, they decided to "take a punt" and bottle the remaining wine under a new brand: Lock & Key. "We sold our house in Canberra, put it all on 36 red and gave the wheel a spin," Jason says. "It's not a one-off; rather, we've taken a strategic view and are using this as a vehicle to exit the bulk wine/fruit market."

They made 15,000 cases of wine in 2009 and are on track to make 30,000 in the current vintage, with 45,000 cases to come in 2011.

"Yes, we have ambitious growth



Rising stars ... owners Jason and Alecia Brown, with Oliver and Lachlan, celebrate their success.

targets – hence the low price," Jason says.

The strategy, by necessity, is to provide exceptional value for money. "Uptake at retail level has been incredibly good," he says.

"The trade is embracing the opportunity to present a commercially priced wine that ticks all the boxes."

"It's an alternative to the mainstream big-maker brands; it's sub-\$10 (we say recommended price \$14.99 but the reality is that they're all doing \$9.99); it's single vineyard, cool (or moderately cool) climate; premium region (rather than labelled South Eastern Australia, like its competitors); and is from mature, low-yielding vines."

Critical to all this is that the Moppity Vineyards label had started to do very well, with three gold medals for the '06 Reserve Shiraz, crowned by a giant-killer gold at London's

International Wine & Spirit Competition. Then the '07 Reserve Shiraz won a trophy, and the '09 riesling and '08 Tumbarumba Chardonnay won gold medals – the latter at the prestigious '09 Sydney Royal Wine Show. The '08 shiraz made it into the NSW top 40 last year and '08 cabernet also did well in shows.

There's extra street cred in the winemaking: the wines are still being made at the old Hardys Kamberra winery in its newest incarnation, Coffman & Lawson, by Nick Spencer and his team.

Coffman & Lawson's own wine, Eden Road The Long Rd Hilltops Shiraz 2008, won the Jimmy Watson Trophy last year as a rank outsider. Between one-third and half its grapes came from Moppity.

The top-end wines are very good and the Lock & Key wines – shiraz, cabernet (pictured left), riesling and chardonnay –

are keen value at their price. I particularly like the '08 shiraz. Jason pays tribute to the vineyard's founders. "To their credit, they planted the right clones," he says.

"We have four shiraz clones, and this year we have 14 separate batches off the six blocks of shiraz vines. We're experimenting with whole-bunch fermentations, co-fermentation with macerated fruit and so on. We'll have many opportunities for blending."

Several independent retailers are supporting Moppity and Lock & Key. They include The Oak Barrel, Kemeny's, North Sydney Cellars and Coogee Bay Hotel. "We're not using the chains," he says.

As for the Hilltops region, Jason is enthusiastic. "In 2004 when we arrived, the region was down in the dumps," he says. "[We thought] 'No one knows us ... we're a small region with no profile.' I thought, 'Give us 10 years and I'm sure we can turn it around.'"

Six years down the track, it looks promising.

