

# LOCKDOWN STORIES: view from the vines

As our lives and horizons suddenly closed in around us, growing more limited in the year of Covid-19, it was perhaps difficult to appreciate what other people 'out there', elsewhere in the world, were experiencing and feeling. **Peter Richards MW** spoke to winemakers in six different nations to find out how they and their teams coped as events developed

**S**urreal. That's the word many winemakers use about lockdown, a stark new reality that defined 2020: the year that Covid-19 struck.

'It was like floating in a bubble – your world feels undone, uncoupled', is how California-based flying winemaker Paul Hobbs describes it. Given the unfolding pandemic and mounting death toll, some even started to question their profession. 'Working in a winery felt perverse, almost devoid of reason at times,' recalls winemaker and writer Oliver Styles in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand.

When things kicked off, harvest was underway in the southern hemisphere. Most governments deemed wine an 'essential business', thus exempt from shutting down. An historically early vintage in areas including South America proved a godsend logistically, as fruit was already largely in wineries come the start of lockdown.

South Africa proved to be an unenviable exception in many respects. Initially, harvesting and winemaking was banned, though this was soon reversed. But then a crippling export ban and longer-lasting restrictions on domestic sales ravaged the industry. Financial losses are estimated at billions of rand, and generic body Wines of South Africa thinks that anywhere up to 80 wineries and 350 growers may fail. Nonetheless, producers have reacted with typical brio – the likes of Bruce Jack (HeadStart Trust), Dirk Human of Black Oystercatcher winery and Rollo Gabb (Journey's End Foundation) have provided vital food and support for thousands.

Around the world, wine flowed into Zoom and Instagram Live as travel and events petered out. A flurry of re-bottled samples winged their way to becalmed tasters. Bordeaux managed – somehow – to make a decent fist of the 2019 en primeur campaign ('It pushed us to reinvent ourselves,' notes Véronique Sanders of Château Haut-Bailly. 'Its success was a breath of fresh air in this



**Peter Richards MW is a widely published wine writer, broadcaster and long-time *Decanter* contributor. With his wife and fellow MW Susie Barrie, he co-hosts the acclaimed *Wine Blast* podcast, a top-10 US and UK show featuring heart-warming lockdown tales from winemakers around the world**

difficult period.')

With bars and restaurants shuttered, consumption fell dramatically, despite the well-publicised sales bonanzas for some retailers (in the UK, overall alcohol consumption nearly halved during lockdown, falling from 2 billion litres to 1.3bn litres from April 2020-July 2020 versus the same period in 2019).

The following stories provide some insight into the realities of winemakers' lockdown experiences. Challenges? No shortage of those. But positivity, supportiveness, hope, creativity, humour, resilience – and, yes, joy? That too. As Styles says: 'You realised how significant a good meal or glass of wine actually was.'

## Chris & Ellen Wilson GUTTER & STARS, ENGLAND

Some Britons bulk-bought pasta. Chris and Ellen Wilson launched a micro-winery in a former windmill near Cambridge. 'We talked it through and thought, "What the hell" – from then, it's been full steam ahead,' relates Wilson, a former music journalist turned wine writer and qualified winemaker. 'Lockdown allowed us the time and headspace to set things up, but just as important was the lingering existential dread of coronavirus, which gave us the now-or-never attitude we needed.'

Wilson had been trying to set up a winery but had been held back by the lack of a suitable venue. During the first few weeks of lockdown, the owner of Chesterton Mill called, giving the project the OK for the 2020 harvest.

This 'kick up the backside' saw the couple source fruit and buy kit, including eight oak barrels from Burgundy. 'When they arrived in early July (and blocked the road to the mill), it finally hit home exactly what we were getting ourselves into,' he recalls. Lockdown has meant shortages of equipment, but this, together with other logistical challenges, 'may make for more interesting wines,' he says. 'For example, I can't get a tank wider than 76cm



Chris Wilson with the Pinot Noir grapes



Chesterton Mill



The winery at Chesterton Mill



**Above: Chris and Ellen Wilson with their daughters, Alice (left) and Grace**

into the winery, so I'm reliant on lots of small-batch fermentations.' Wilson plans to make 2,000 bottles of wine from 2020 under the Gutter & Stars label, including some barrel-fermented Bacchus, orange Pinot Blanc, barrel-aged Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

My final question to Wilson is: why the mill? 'Cellar door sales are an important part of my

business model, so it helps being in a characterful building that's 15 minutes' walk from the town centre.

'I hope people will enjoy visiting to see the windmill and taste the wines. It makes my commute very easy, too: just five minutes by bike. And who wouldn't want to set up a winery in a windmill!' >



Rafael Urrejola

## Rafael Urrejola

**UNDURRAGA, CHILE**

The first positive Covid case at Undurraga, an historic, multi-million-litre winery based in Santiago that employs 200 people on site, came in mid-June: one person from the maintenance department. 'What happened next was scary,' relates head winemaker Rafael Urrejola. 'Many people started feeling sick – in 10 days we had 12 positive cases; by late June it was 18.' Although anti-Covid protocols and 50% home-working had been implemented since April and the infected workers were from entirely separate departments, 'it seemed it would never stop'.

There were orders to fulfil, plus thousands of litres of new 2020 wines, but an emergency meeting saw CEO Andrés Izquierdo and Urrejola hit the nuclear button: a total shutdown 'health break' at the winery for 14 days. Despite losing 'a lot of sales and even some clients, who delisted our wines', the winery didn't lose any people – or any wine. ('Wine is loyal: it gives you second chances most of the time.')

After extensive investigation, the cause of the outbreak was finally identified as a particular corridor in the locker room – now closed. There have been no subsequent infections, protocols are improved and Urrejola says: 'Very positive things have come out of all of this: we proved we can be flexible,



**'We're all more motivated, our people feel the company cares for them, and the spirit has been incredible'**

Rafael Urrejola, Undurraga

**Above from left: Rafael Urrejola, Undurraga head winemaker; Miguel Meneses, cellar chief; Freddy Riveros, barrel chief**

we've shot down historic and social barriers like the negative perception of working at home, and we also understood the value of our people and culture. We're all more motivated, our people feel the company cares for them, and the spirit has been incredible.'

Though sales slumped 7% in volume, value by September was running at par, partly due to a higher peso/dollar exchange rate, but also 'a lot of effort'. And, as Urrejola explains, the 2020 wines are looking 'pretty good – they will be historic'.

## Miguel Torres Maczassek

**TORRES, SPAIN**

What struck the Familia Torres CEO about lockdown was how, in a day, Spanish terraces, shops, bars and restaurants went from 'noisy, vivid' places to 'empty, silent – like a very early Sunday morning that went on for 10 weeks'.

The Torres crisis team sprang into action, implementing 'home-office mode' for most and strict protection measures for the rest.

'At the same time, we tried to help our community with small contributions,' recounts Torres, including delivering 30,000 surgical masks to local hospitals and nursing homes, bought through daughter company Torres China. 'My sister Ana, a surgeon, worked as a back-up doctor in a Barcelona hospital.' The company also donated 2,000 litres of olive oil and 1,000kg of food to the Comer Contigo initiative in Barcelona. 'I will never forget the impressive solidarity of people

Photograph: Alexandre James

all over the world, their responsiveness and creativity,' continues Torres, mentioning the parents' WhatsApp group in Vilafranca that helped produce face shields for healthcare workers in hospitals, nursing homes and a centre for people with disabilities.

'One of our oenologists was part of the group and realised our 3D printers could contribute. In the end we printed the headband and helped in the assembly. All contributions help in situations like this.'

Torres is candid about the ongoing 'very negative' impact of the situation for the Spanish wine sector, given that 62% of sales are in bars and restaurants, but adds that authorities will provide financial assistance for growers with unsold grapes and wineries with excess stock. He remains upbeat.

'We must stay optimistic. The challenge is enormous for everyone, but we will overcome it. We've also learned from lockdown how much of our jobs we can do online.' Hence, 'flying less and reducing our carbon footprint'.



Miguel Torres Maczassek

## Brendan & Laura Carter

**UNICO ZELO, AUSTRALIA**

One of the worst droughts in history. Bushfires. Then Covid-19. Has 2020 proved challenging? 'Uh... hell, yeah,' quips Brendan Carter, who, together with his wife Laura, runs the Unico Zelo winery in the Adelaide Hills, specialising in dry-grown Italian varieties, particularly Fiano and Nero d'Avola.

The couple swiftly transitioned from being 80% reliant on broader distribution to

building a business in which 50% of sales are direct-to-customer. 'We always had online set up as a sales channel, but rarely focused on it. Now we're having rolling re-lockdowns across Australia, it's how we sell most of our wine – it's had an impact on our ability to survive.'

But the Carters' online rejig didn't stop at sales. They started a live-streamed wine show called *Wine For The People* 'to give those locked up an avenue to decompress at the end of the working day, and a sense of community'.

The show aired on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitch, and featured winemakers, chefs, waiters, bartenders and distillers, incorporating deliberately offbeat themes like 'Shit Wine Inventions' and 'Junk Food Wine Pairings', 'all the while chatting about the industry across myriad subjects, from Barolo to Burgundy to Barossa'.

Over eight weeks, Unico Zelo's Facebook following grew from 5,000 to 69,000 globally, and now the couple have signed a lease on a studio to expand into podcasting and broader cinematography. They also plan to embark on a journey across Australia to tell the stories of rural communities.

'There's an endless sea of amazing stories to tell in this industry, especially through the lens of a millennial. It's time we engaged with younger demographics in a relevant and entertaining manner. Lockdown has helped this happen – and about time, too.' >

Photograph: Tim Haris



**Below: Brendan Carter streaming his Wine For The People show**

## Pieter Walser

### BLANKBOTTLE, SOUTH AFRICA

One of South Africa's celebrated maverick winemakers, Pieter Walser has many wines to his name. Perhaps the best known is BlankBottle. The initial lockdown came after the end of his harvest, but there was initial uncertainty as to whether winemaking would be allowed. 'We didn't know what to expect, so we put all our stuff into barrels and tanks, closed them up and shrink-wrapped them in plastic. They looked like little spaceships.'

Although winemaking was subsequently deemed 'essential', Walser decided to go with the flow on the vinification front, which will have 'a significant effect on the styles of the wines – red ferments with no punch-downs, mostly the later-harvested stuff like Cabernet'. The subsequent South African export and sales ban 'gave us a knock, as we didn't earn anything for a whole month'.

Necessity being the mother of invention, Walser started selling to private clients – but without shipping. 'They started buying like you wouldn't believe. We had the whole team in, packing, with sales like never before. We

**Below: Pieter Walser bought new equipment including a press 'for a bargain' during lockdown**

sold huge amounts of wine.' This enabled him to retain his personnel – whom he then deployed to 'unpack all the winery, redesign all the systems to become more efficient'.

Walser bought a big new press 'for a bargain', a new bottling line and cork machine. 'If it wasn't for lockdown, people would not have sold those things.'

Importers also proved supportive once the export ban was lifted. Walser says: 'I still feel it now, people all over the world supporting us. It had a massive positive impact.'

The conclusion? 'It didn't turn out bad for us – Covid was only good for us. We spent time in the vineyard, in the winery. We were geared up for the worst, and that means you work harder than ever before. South African wine will get better because of lockdown.'

**'We were geared up for the worst, and that means you work harder than ever before. South African wine will get better because of lockdown'**

Pieter Walser, BlankBottle (below)



## Erni Loosen

### DR LOOSEN, GERMANY

'This has been one of, if not the most challenging year I can ever remember as a winemaker', is Ernst 'Erni' Loosen's opening gambit. 'For me, wine is about passion and people, and both of these are best handled in person. But to not adapt means to possibly lose everything I have worked for.'

A famously itinerant and driven people-person, Loosen intimates how challenging the world of online communication proved initially, adding: 'But we Germans love organisation, so we developed ways to streamline the process.' Samples were despatched for presentations, online events held, a long-deferred web-shop project was launched, and videos of vineyards were uploaded to social media.

**Above: Erni Loosen during lockdown**

But his urge to travel remains strong. 'I cannot sit in one place – there are still too many customers out there who need education. It's such a great time for high-end German wines. As soon as I can get back out there it will be like getting shot out of a cannon!' Also concerning Loosen are his projects in Washington State and Australia. 'It's hard to do blending via videoconference... But things have a way of working out. One message about this year is that you can always find a way to get things done, even if they aren't perfect. Giving up is not an option.'

Another point Loosen notes is the value of having trustworthy partners. 'As countries have come back online with ordering, we've had so many positive stories that give me hope that we will make it through this dumpster fire of a year.' He's also launching an alcohol-free wine, 'so that if there is a second lockdown, our customers can have that option as well'. **D**