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Mosman lawyer turned vineyard owner John Colvin on his vintage success

Picture: Quentin Jones

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UP CLOSE

Ali Lowe

Most people with a passion for wine might collate a large cellar in their home and stop at that. But not John Colvin. The lawyer and former CEO of the Institute of Company Directors, took his long term enthusiasm for fine wine a step further — he bought a vineyard.

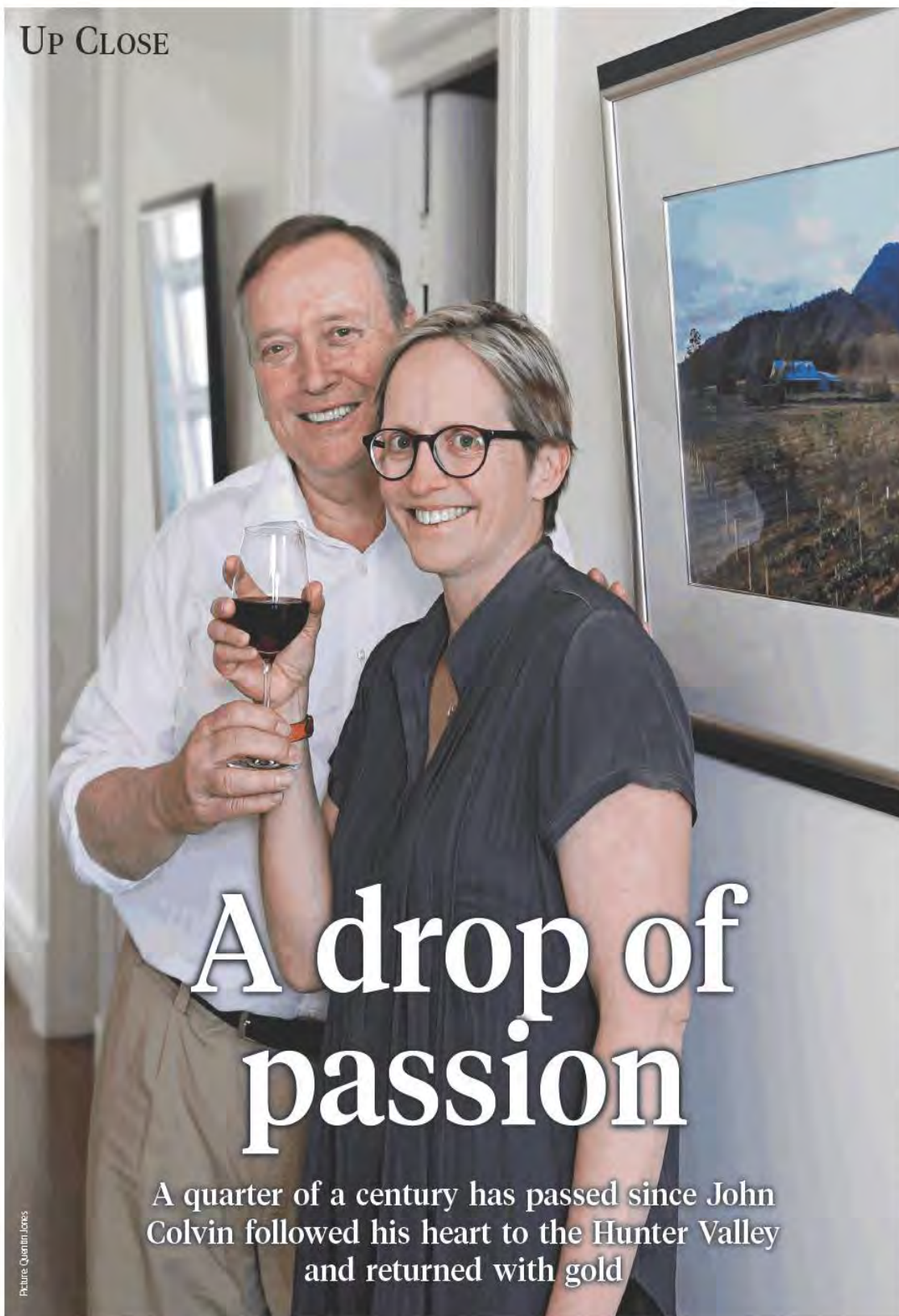
Colvin, from Mosman, acquired De Beyers Vineyard in Pokolbin, the heartbeat of the Hunter Valley wine region, back in 1992.

Wine has, says his wife Robyn, featured in most of their holidays together. "When I first met John, which was about 20 years ago, my father said he was worried that we'd all have to swim in the sangiovese for the rest of our lives, because John had so much of it," she said. "All our holidays have to involve vineyards and cellar doors, wherever we go in the world. You know how some people find gardens? Well John finds vineyards. Our first 'dating' trip together was to Bordeaux and our honeymoon was spent in Umbria and Tuscany. It is a major, major part of our lives."

Perhaps it was always written in the stars — Colvin grew up in Orange, a country boy through and through. "My mother died when I was very young and Dad was a country doctor, he worked around the clock. On school holidays I used to go to friends of the family, and I'd work on those farms. I'd play tennis, and work with the sheep and cattle and crops."

As an adult and by now a Sydneysider, Colvin, who studied at Sydney University, London School of Economics and Oxford University before embarking on a successful career as a lawyer, dreamt of combining his passion for the countryside with his love of fine wines.

He had hoped to acquire a vineyard back in Orange, but ultimately it proved to be too far away from his Sydney base. "In those days it was at least a four-hour drive, whereas you can get to the Hunter Valley in two and a half. Plus I fell in love with Pokolbin," he said. "I looked for two years. I went out to Broke, but nothing really grabbed me, and then



A drop of passion

A quarter of a century has passed since John Colvin followed his heart to the Hunter Valley and returned with gold

Picture: Quentin Jones

Up Close



“If I asked you which of your children you love the most, you’d say ‘I love them all equally’. And that is how I feel about the wines.”

De Beyers eventually came up for sale. At that time things weren’t going well (in finance) generally, and so I took a chance on it and the price came down.”

Today Colvin Wines, set on 6ha of land, produces small quantities of super fine wine — semillon, chardonnay, shiraz and sangiovese, sold in Mosman at Camperdown Cellars on Spofforth St. The wines are made by vintners from neighbouring winery on Ekerts Rd, Tyrell’s, Andrew Spinaze, Mark Richardson and Chris Tyrell, who Colvin describes as “superb winemakers”. Tyrell’s manages the vineyard and uses the grapes in its wines.

“The De Beyer family came from Alsace in France and were told that Roma in

Queensland was the place to go. When I was in school it was known as the hottest place in Australia, and so when the De Beyer family got there in the late 1800s, they realised they wouldn’t be able to grow wine grapes and walked all the way from Roma to Pokolbin, which in itself is amazing,” Colvin said.

“Billy De Beyer was the last owner of the vineyard and he sold it in the late 1960s to a group of people, one of which was journalist and restaurateur Frank Margan. The De Beyers had been famous for their white wine, mainly madeira — which is now known as verdhelo — but the new owners replanted the vineyard to semillon on the creek bed, and shiraz on the hills, and

they also planted a small amount of chardonnay. The semillon — and some of the shiraz — are the original vines that are still there today, which are 50-plus years old.”

In the early days, there was work to be done. Some vines “just weren’t quite up to scratch”, so Colvin took out some of the shiraz and replanted it.

“All the really good stuff I left,” he said.

A trip to Tuscany gave him a nudge to make another development within his new business. “I worked for a short time on a place through a friend of the family. They were some wonderful winemakers who were using, if you like, new world techniques with (native Tuscan grape) sangiovese,” he

said. “A couple of new wine makers around Tuscany started using oak barrels and new oak and all these sorts of things, and using sangiovese as a grape like cabernet or shiraz. The wines were sensational, and so I got very enthusiastic and came back and took out some of the shiraz and planted sangiovese.

“It was quite controversial at the time. People kept saying, ‘What do you think you’re doing, John?’ I told them I wanted to do something different — not entirely different because the shiraz and the semillon and the little bit of chardonnay would still be there.”

The late winemaker Trevor Drayton, who was sadly killed in the tragic explosion at Drayton’s Family Wines in 2008, stepped in to help. Drayton was a good friend to Colvin and godfather to his son Alistair, 14 (he also has a daughter, Emily, 16). “I said to Trevor, ‘So, how do you think we make this?’ And he said, ‘Let’s give it a go and see what happens,’” Colvin said. “In 1998 we bottled our

first one, with about six cases, so I didn’t either label them or sell them. The first real vintage of sangiovese was in 1999 — we tried the 2000 recently and were surprised to find it was a really good wine.”

The sangiovese proved itself at this month’s Hunter Valley Boutique Wine show, winning a gold medal. At the same awards Colvin Wines’ 2009 semillon was named best white of show and best open vintage semillon, while the 2017 semillon was named best 2017 semillon.

Colvin speaks with genuine affection for his wines, as one might a child. It is a comparison he makes himself when asked to name which of his own wines he favours.

“If I asked you which of your children you love the most, you’d say ‘I love them all equally,’” he said. “And that is how I feel about the wines. But if you were to ask me which I would be most likely to put in a competition, then I’d say the semillon does well.”

Accolades are all well and good, but it is clear Colvin

Winemaker John Colvin and his wife Robyn enjoying a glass of wine at their Mosman home (left) and in their cellar (above right). The Colvins own De Beyers Vineyard (above centre), in the Hunter Valley.

Picture: Quentin Jones

Wines is, for its owner, a labour of love. “If you do the maths, there are other ways to earn money that don’t depend on weather and so many other things,” said Colvin. “When I drive there, my shoulders go down six inches and my spirits rise by about two feet.”