



# Lisa McGuigan

## BLAZING HER OWN TRAIL

The best advice **Lisa McGuigan** says she has been given in business is to dare to be different and not worry about what other people say.

If you take a look at the career of the fourth-generation Hunter Valley winemaker, it is clear that's what she's been doing from the start.

→ **WORDS MICHELLE MEEHAN** - *Features Writer*

Whether it was initially eschewing her heritage to forge her own path in new industries, or turning winemaking conventions on their head by focussing as much on the packaging as she did on the product, Lisa has always done things her own way, with great success.

Growing up in the Hunter Valley as a member of one of the region's most iconic winemaking families, Lisa admits there was a certain assumption of where her life would take her.

But while her first experience with wine came as a nine-year-old girl tasting from the tanks with her father, industry icon Brian McGuigan, her thirst to make her mark on the industry did not come until much later than many would have expected.

"I never grew up thinking that we were renowned, just hard working. My family has always been passionate and committed to the region and the wine," Lisa said.

"My first memory was at the age of nine tasting wine from tank to tank with my father Brian at Wyndham Estate Winery. From recollection, my first taste was 1976 TR2 white.

"But I was always pressured to join the wine industry. In fact, when I left school and enrolled in visual arts, my father sent me to a Swiss hospitality finishing school to knock some sense into me.

"After 12 months I had nothing on my mind but the hotel industry - that was when I entered my Hotel Management Studies."

For Lisa, who also trained as a chef, hospitality felt like the perfect fit, and not completely outside the parameters of her family's own experiences.

"My mum Fay actually opened one of the first restaurants attached to a winery in the Hunter. My sister, Vanessa and I worked in the kitchen for pocket money every weekend," she said.

"Also, having spent 12 months in Switzerland and starting hotel management studies in a country where everything is about service, I felt like I had found myself."

Lisa spent the next ten years forging her path in hospitality, working in five-star hotels and restaurants across Australia.

But with such strong viticultural roots in her blood, it was not surprising that her career eventually became entwined in the wine industry.

"I'd worked in five-star for ten years. One of my roles at The Sydney Renaissance Hotel was curating the wine list," she said.

“The process of putting wines in a five-star hotel is fairly lengthy, though efficient. We masked the wines and tasted them, rating them as we went. Once we did that, we reviewed the label because this is also important to a wine list.

“Over several years seeing all the labels that came across my desk, I came to the view that something was missing.

“I saw an opportunity for a brand that had all the components that wine must have plus something new... a hot label design.

“I started to imagine the ultimate brand coming across my desk. I visualised it all, from the sales rep walking through the door to the price list and portfolio they leave behind. I foresaw everything that I wanted and wasn’t getting. That was how I modelled my first wine brand that I launched in 1996.”

That brand was originally called Hermitage Road, although it was later renamed Tempus Two following a ban on the use of the term ‘Hermitage’ outside of its French origins.

Lisa produced her first wine in 1997 after leasing a small space in one of the wineries owned by her father’s company McGuigan Wines (which later grew into the publically listed company known as Australian Vintage Limited).

“I produced four products under the brand name of Hermitage Road. I chose that name because I was using a corner of the AVL winery situated on Hermitage Road, so it made sense to me,” she said.

“The first batch was made with Peter Hall and comprised Merlot, Shiraz, Chardonnay and Verdelho. That brand took off really quickly because we had American partners who were successful in getting it into the American space.

“Looking back now, I realise that beginning my own winemaking journey I felt excited though anxious. But I started the brand with a friend from school, Veronica Lowry, who had been studying wine marketing and I convinced her to come and work on this.”

Tempus Two was always destined to be a bold venture, from the striking pewter and copper labels hand-applied to every bottle, to Lisa’s vision to create a bespoke \$12 million cellar door and winery for the brand, complete with its own amphitheatre that over the years has played host to some of the biggest entertainers in the world including Elton John.

“I wanted something that would make people say ‘wow, what is that?’ I took a risk in producing a wine with a dressed up pack that was exceptional wine too,” Lisa said.

“Good wines traditionally had conservative looking packaging; at the time people tended to attack wines that look good too.”

“I had to take my customers on a journey, making sure they had opportunities to taste the wine so they could realise for themselves

that our product didn’t just look great, but tasted great too.

“Tempus Two attracted females because of the packaging and given that at the time 70 percent of wine was purchased by females, that went our way. Fortunately, the packaging attracted men too. It was a successful brand from the outset.

“I was mindful of getting the labels right the first time around because good marketing demands consistency. I learnt this from Penfolds – once they had a good label design, they stuck to it. I love their packaging.

“Tempus Two launched in the UK in its fifth year. That’s when I thought it was time to open a winery and cellar door in the Hunter Valley to be the playground for the brand.

**“One night I was at a dinner party with my father and Bill Roche was there. I was telling Bill what I had in mind for the cellar door and winery, which we had planned to build in Pokolbin. He asked me how much money I needed to realise my vision, I told him \$12 million, and he wrote me a cheque for \$6 million on the spot. It’s amazing to have that vote of confidence.”**

The cellar door was sold to the Roche Group by AWL in 2009 and in 2015 was renamed Roche Estate.

By that time Lisa had moved on from Tempus Two following a change in management, with her next career move seeing her buy two retail wine stores in Sydney where she was living, which she renamed Lisa’s Wine Vaults.

But that was far from the end of Lisa’s winemaking ventures.

In 2011 she launched Lisa McGuigan Wines, once again fusing exceptional quality wine with eye-catching packaging. The venture got off to a flying start after airline Jetstar selected them as an option for domestic and international economy passengers. The wines are now also served in Business Class on both Jetstar and Qantas flights.

The wine is produced at a shared winery in the Hunter Valley. However, grapes are sourced from the most reliable and renowned terroir all over Australia, and internationally, in order to give the brand an iconic quality across its three different collections.

The Silver Collection is made up of everyday drinking wines sourced from regions where the varieties are best grown including a Victorian Pinot Grigio, Hunter Valley ‘Wilde Thing’ Semillon and Barossa Shiraz. (Continued next page) ►



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The Blaec Collection presents wines from across the globe, with a Sauvignon Blanc from the Waipara, New Zealand, Grüner Blanc from Hungary and Silver Moscato from South Australia. The Platinum Collection is the top of the portfolio, representing Lisa's favourite premium varietals from the regions where the varieties are best grown. It includes a Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, two Pinot Noirs and a Maximum Shiraz.

Aside from looking great with their distinctive labels and silver and black bottles (for wines in the Blaec Collection), the wine clearly tastes amazing as well, impressing judges across Australia and around the world and winning awards in London, Spain, France and Adelaide, among others.

Once again, it has been Lisa's willingness to do something a little different that has helped her succeed in her latest business venture. While she is passionate about doing things her own way, Lisa also understands the importance of seeking advice, having benefitted from a number of mentors throughout her career.

"It is really important to have a mentor. Being a mentor and having a mentor are really important roles," she said.

**"I know when I have been a mentor I have thought about things quite differently than I would if I wasn't trying to help someone else. It brings great ideas forward that I have been able to use."**

"I am always mentoring someone or looking for mentors for myself. They don't have to be someone you see once a week; you may just have lunch with them once."

"You don't just have a mentor when you have problems, but when things are going well as well. One of my most amazing experiences was to have the late David Clark as my mentor. David was one of the founders of the Macquarie Bank. He taught me so much about business, particularly how to act on boards."

Lisa has also passed on her own expertise to others and recently featured on an episode of reality television show *The Mentor*, starring Wizard Home Loans founder and entrepreneur Mark Bouris.

Lisa and her father Brian were called in to help mentor the Wilson family, who run Cobram Motorcycles & Mowers in regional Victoria.

The Wilsons were struggling to overcome the dynamics and tension that can come with working alongside family, as well as the pain of losing their eldest son Jay in a car accident some years earlier.

The McGuigans were called on to share not only their business acumen but their experience of working with family members and their knowledge of how a family tragedy – the death of Lisa's sister and Brian's daughter Vanessa – can have an impact on the business.

"The advice that I gave was based on my experiences in business, and I believe that you always have to look to business generally, not necessarily family," Lisa said.

"If you look around, my belief is you will always find someone who has a worse experience than you in life and that you don't have any option but to work through it."

"My mum was absolutely the main person that got my family and me through the loss of my sister."

"We've never really gotten over it, but we have learnt to live without Vanessa because we have no choice."

"I think when families work together it can become very

emotional and you can't just leave the office to get away from the stress."

While Lisa no longer works with her father, the pair still share a deep love for the Hunter Region's wine industry and the outstanding vintages it continues to produce.

Lisa will discuss her thoughts on the region's 2018 vintage this month as part of the *Hunter Valley Wine and Food Festival*, appearing at the **By the Fireside Winemaker's Dinner** at Hunter Resort on **Saturday, June 16**.

She will also use the event to launch two new wines made from the 2018 vintage.

"This year has to be one of my favourite vintages in the Hunter since I started Lisa McGuigan Wines," Lisa said.

"There are only two wines that I have finished from this vintage, but they are both pretty exciting. Firstly, my wild fermented Semillon, I'm reinvigorating my Semillon style. The second exciting wine is from my Dad's vineyard, he offered to sell me his Gruner veltliner fruit at a good price – he actually charges me more – this wine is in the bottle and already selling."

"These two wines will be launched at the Fireside Dinner for which there are still seats available."

"In regards to the region generally it was a good vintage all round, and the reds will be something to look forward to. The past years we have suffered too much rain, and the reds haven't been their best, but 2018 is a great year to look out for in both white and red."

Tickets for the **By the Fireside Winemaker's Dinner** are still available and can be purchased online via [www.hunterresort.com.au/fireside](http://www.hunterresort.com.au/fireside), or visit [www.lisamcguiganwines.com](http://www.lisamcguiganwines.com) for more information about Lisa McGuigan Wines. ■

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