

Black sheep of the wine industry does it her way



KELLY BARNES

'When you have been doing this business as long as we have, you need to have a few pet projects,' says Mary Hamilton

ELI GREENBLAT

From her bolthole in McLaren Vale, where the first buds of spring are dotting the landscape with vibrant colour, Mary Hamilton is throwing metaphoric hand grenades. It's something she has been doing most of her life. As a budding student politician at the University of South Australia, she shunned the embedded party structure to run as an independent and be elected student president.

Out of university she pushed, struggled and fought her way to the top of the male-dominated advertising industry, at one point "petulantly" agreeing to help out on a pitch to then winemaker Southcorp only if she got to run the account if they won the business. They won, she got her prize.

Now as chief executive of Hugh Hamilton Wines, one of only a few female bosses of a winery, she is at it again. This time the grenades are aimed at the major supermarkets to which she utterly refuses to sell her wine.

And there is the matter of ripping out proven grape varieties to plant an obscure grape from the former Soviet republic of Georgia called saperavi.

It seems a family trait, going back 180 years to her ancestor Richard Hamilton who decided in his late 40s — which at the time was close to the average life expectancy — to sail to Australia with his family.

Richard planted the first vineyards in South Australia, making the state's first wine. Since then, there has been 180 years of uninterrupted vintages through multiple depressions and recessions, wars and unpredictable weather.

It's ironic then that Hugh Hamilton Wines, so closely connected to the foundation of Australia's wine industry, has embraced the imagery of "the black sheep" on its labels and corporate branding.

Yet there is a sense that Mary Hamilton, the sixth generation to run the family business, does things differently to the pack.

"Because I have created our own turf here, 'the black sheep' is more than a moniker, it's a way of doing things and so we do things quite differently to other wine companies," she said.

"In my own little sandpit here I don't feel in anyway marginalised, but yes, it's a male-dominated industry but that is not unique to wine, I think it reflects human nature.

"That's why you see real pockets of male domination in business because they like to be together, it's tribal, and you do probably need to throw a hand grenade into those situations because otherwise what you end up with is a whole bunch of white sheep just following well-worn sheep tracks, which is a bit boring and predictable."

You could never accuse her of being predictable. First, there is the structure she helped put in place that saw Hugh Hamilton Wines

turn its back on the supermarkets and their massive wine retailers, led by Woolworths' Dan Murphy's and Coles' Vintage Cellars, to almost exclusively sell direct to consumers via the winery's Black Sheep Club.

"It's an extraordinarily competitive industry — to be honest, with our population of 24 million there is not enough people who want to buy wines over \$20 a bottle to sustain all of us.

"And so around the time the global financial crisis hit in 2009, we were quite invested in the US market and that just absolutely fell away in a single breath and we were all replaced — they just wiped us off the map.

"At that point, I made the strategic decision around did we want to be big and try and be everywhere, or be small and highly profitable?"

"I made the decision to go left rather than right, to be small and highly profitable and created a niche that we could work.

"We designed the business to be a price-making business rather than price-taking kind of business and so we are not reliant on that grocery duopoly at all. In fact, we won't sell to them."

Then there is the decision to plant saperavi, which literally means paint dye and produces an inky purple-coloured wine like nothing else seen in Australia before.

It began with a conversation between her father, Hugh, and Georgian winemaker Lado Uzunashvili, a national treasure in his homeland who moved to South Australia for a better life.

"When you have been doing this business as long as we have, you need to have a few pet projects that make your own life interesting," said Ms Hamilton.

(Lado and Dad) walked our vineyards together and started talking about this obscure variety called saperavi and Dad became really enchanted by the idea of it, so he impetuously ripped out some very good petit verdot (vines) and put in this saperavi as a test... it was so unlike anything else we were growing and making that it sucked us in.

"Just even picking these grapes was a different experience, and the pickers would come in and their hands would be black... there was so much colour in the skin."

Hugh Hamilton Wines now can't keep up with the demand, and there is currently a limit of one bottle per Black Sheep club member, with the winery to soon have three vineyards planted with saperavi.

Ms Hamilton, who as a young girl would sit on four cushions so she could see out the front window of a Kingswood ute as she drove it around the vineyard, is happy to carry on the traditions built up over 180 years but there also needs to be room for new ideas.

"It's about celebrating the past but never sitting on the laurels of it, constantly evolving the next part," she said.