

Our life in the country

INTERVIEW BY HEATHER MILLAR



EMMA AND JUSTIN LANE *Willunga, South Australia*

Winemaker Justin Lane, 32, is proudly showing me his slate paving in the courtyard of his Willunga home — “I had no idea if I was doing it correctly,” he says. “But it’s come up looking good.”

This roll-up-your sleeves, have-a-go attitude extends to more than home renovation. Justin is a renowned winemaker, albeit with no formal qualifications. He simply threw himself into learning every aspect of the business and then decided to try making some wine.

Recently Justin had another reason to roll up his sleeves. As he shows me around the house and we reach the kitchen, he says, with a cheeky grin, “This is where I helped Emma deliver the baby.” When the couple’s third son Fergus, arrived six weeks ago, he left his parents no time to get to the hospital.

Willunga is a leafy Fleurieu Peninsula township, population around 2500, on the edge of the winegrowing district of McLaren Vale and a 45-minute drive south of Adelaide. It’s known for historic buildings and an old slate quarry, which began business in 1840, shipping tiles and paving stones all over Australia.

Justin has been dubbed ‘South Australia’s rock’n’roll winemaker’ by the Adelaide press because of his irreverent attitude, the experimental ‘garage’ wines that he makes at Red Heads Studio (that is, small-batch high quality wines, traditionally made in sheds and garages) and the way he uses musical analogies to describe wine (“Classic, timeless, a little bit Rolling Stones”).

Justin is, however, more than just a maverick winemaker. He has garnered a formidable international reputation for his Viottolo Sentiero.

His wife Emma, 33, does some of the management for Viottolo from their home, while also looking after their sons — Oscar, 3, Noah, 2 and newcomer Fergus.

The couple, originally from the Hunter Valley, moved to McLaren Vale in the late 1990s when Justin took a job with the big winemaker Hardy’s.

“We were smitten by South Australia,” he says. “When we first visited, we did a tour around the Fleurieu, doing the cellar doors, and we just thought the coastline was amazing.”

“I love our life here in Willunga — the close-knit community, the wine, the fresh produce, the beauty of the area,” Emma says. “I’ve travelled a lot but Willunga is home — I can’t imagine living anywhere else now.”

Grape expectations...
Emma and Justin, with
Fergus, Noah and Oscar,
walk among the vines
that may one day make
Justin's wines.



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EMMA AND JUSTIN LANE

EMMA When I was 19, I trained as a chef. I don't know why — I wasn't that interested in food. Front-of-house suited me better, so I moved to Coffs Harbour to do a hospitality course. It was after I moved home at 24 that I met Justin.

When I was 28 we got married. Justin proposed down at Port Willunga beach early one morning. He was nervous but I said I'd marry him any day of the week. He said, "That's good, because I've got a ring." My brother had made it. Our family business for four generations has been jewellery making. I made my own costume jewellery for the wedding.

We bought the house in Willunga just before we got married. I began working from home then, doing contract programming and design. We've gradually been renovating since then — pulling up old carpet, polishing floor boards, landscaping the garden. We're about to start a big new extension.

Life is hectic, of course, with three small boys, but they truly make life an adventure. And they make you slow down and notice how wondrous things are. Their favourite thing at the moment is watering the herb garden. They each have a watering can and we can spend hours pottering around in the garden. Oscar's other favourite game is snail hunting — he collected an entire bucket of snails from the agapanthus the other day.

Because my family is so far away, the community here in Willunga has become my family. We have a great circle of friends you can really turn to in times of need. I love to go to the farmers' market on a Saturday and it can take me half an hour to get from the car park to the market itself, you run into so many friends. It's a good excuse for a social outing — I'll get the kids babycinos, have coffee with friends and do the shopping.

The fresh organic produce in this area is outstanding. I used to cook seven-course tasting menus for 12 before the kids came along. I love to cook and entertain friends. These days, we still love to see our friends, but each person brings a course and we start and finish a lot earlier.

I love helping out in the business, too. It keeps me stimulated and reminds me I have skills in addition to mothering.

Justin's as talented a winemaker as anyone I've met and yet he's never studied formally, though he's read every book on the subject you could imagine. He is a really passionate person with the creative spark, while I'm the grounded, organised one.

JUSTIN I grew up in Lochinvar in NSW's Hunter Valley. There were five boys and the family business was with a men's clothing store. On holidays, when I wasn't working in the store, I worked on properties cotton chipping. I thought I'd be a jackaroo for a while, but then I decided it would be too lonely — and I couldn't ride a horse! But I always had that pull to the country.

I started working at a cellar door at 19. I was good at customer relations — and at drinking! I loved the business, so I set about learning everything I could and worked ridiculously long hours.

I was working too hard and playing too hard and ended up



burning out. So I dropped out of the wine-growing course I had started at Charles Sturt University.

I worked at McGuigan Wines and lived in a cottage on the estate. An old hermit lived there, who made biodynamic wines. On weekends, I worked at a small winery owned by a Sydney doctor. That's when I was first exposed to 'shed' wine-making.

When Emma's mother invited me for dinner, I was in awe. Emma was spanking! Tall. Funny. Intelligent. And her family was great as well. So I went back the next day and became a bit of a stalker.

We got married in the Hunter, at the same church my parents got married in. We did the tango at our wedding. We practised while we were in France during the northern hemisphere vintage. We'd open the car doors and put on the Moulin Rouge version of *Roxanne* and dance around in the vineyards.

I'm so fortunate to have Emma in my life. She's a great sounding board and gives shape to some of my more out-there ideas. She's also level-headed and calm. It's a difficult balance, running your own business and the international travel I have to do — and having the kids. I'm getting better at separating work and home, since the kids came along.

I work an 80-hour week often, but I always try to make it home to put the kids to bed, then I'll work at home in the evening. Just as well I'm a bit of an insomniac. Weekends are sacred, though — I keep them for Emma and the kids. Except during the vintage, of course — that's seven days a week! **ACS**