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# The No. 1. Dandelion dynamo

**Dandelion Vineyards' chief winemaker and CEO left her Bulgarian homeland to chase winemaking dreams in South Australia. She went on to take the nation by storm.**

WORDS KATIE SPAIN PHOTOS MIKE SMITH







**W**hen Elena Brooks stepped on to the tarmac at Adelaide Airport in 1998 she looked up in awe. “The sky is impossibly tall here,” she says. “I remember thinking, ‘Wow, there’s no end to it.’”

Then came the heat. “The dry air just hit me. The day before I left Bulgaria it was minus 20 degrees and the day I arrived in Australia it was 37.”

Elena was just 19 when she left her rural hometown to study oenology at the University of Adelaide. “At that age you’re still developing as a person, but you are your own person as well. I knew what I wanted to do.”

For Elena, it was always wine.

Since boarding the plane to Oz, the petite, tenacious trailblazer has become one of the nation’s most respected winemakers. Her company, Dandelion Vineyards, exports to about 20 countries worldwide and has earned her a growing collection of gold medals. Along the way she helped make a 2005 Jimmy Watson Trophy winner (which also won The Great Australian Shiraz Challenge

that year), the trophy at the Decanter World Wine Awards for best Rhone-Style Red in 2007 (with LaCurio Wines), the Best Red Wine for the Gambero Rosso Guide in 2008, and won the Barossa Wine Show twice-over. Brag rights aside, she’s not one for the limelight and would rather talk about her veggie patch than an avalanche of awards.

Elena grew up in the mountain town of Lyaskovets which is located in the small wine region home to 50,000 tonne winery Vinprom Lyaskovets.

Her father, Encho Golakov, was a MIG fighter pilot who retired the year after she was born. Her mother, Dani Golakova, was a MIG mechanic, produced plays for soldiers, and eventually got a job in PR and communications at the winery. Elena practically lived there.

“It was a wonderful childhood,” she says. “Ever since I was two, I was surrounded by barrels, tourists and winemakers. Five hundred people worked there so it was like a city in itself. It had its own doctor, a dentist, a library and a live-in artist.”

During vintage, the entire winery (everyone from the bottling line all the way to administration) would pick grapes. “It was a real community.”

The fall of communism in the late 80s was pivotal to Elena’s path in life. In the aftermath, English studies were introduced in schools (in addition to Russian, German and French) and she worked hard to master the language. It paid off. Within a few years, UK supermarkets jumped on the new source of affordable Bulgarian wine. To keep up with demand, big companies including Tesco and Sainsbury’s sent Australian winemakers to Bulgaria to make wine to their specifications. “My mum was in charge of looking after those winemakers and my English really came in handy.”

By the age of 13 Elena was interpreting barrel tastings, gathering winemaking terminology and soaking up knowledge like a sponge. “When tourists passed through I heard a lot about taste, balance and stories. I learned a lot about how the consumer

approaches wine and how they think about it... what is exciting and what is not.”

She also developed a keen interest in marketing. “Post communism, marketing was a very new idea,” she says. “Until then it wasn’t needed because you literally had two kinds of chocolate. Everything was State run and there was no competition.”

So, she purchased books about marketing and devoured them. “It was so interesting to me because suddenly it was all about being creative, and thinking outside of the square... up until that stage it was all squares.”

She pauses. “Nowadays marketing is just so in your face. It was much more simple and real back then. You’d take your values and tell them to people.”

At 16, Elena made her first wine. “I stole a couple of buckets of Chardonnay and used my mum’s juicer to crush the grapes and her stockings to filter them. I emptied her fridge, put a couple of demijohns in it and fermented the grapes.”

The end result was tasty. Unsurprising, really. Visiting winemaker Steve Bennett (formerly of Southern Vales Winery/Tatachilla/Patritti) guided her through the process. “He is still my mentor to this day.”

The likes of winemaker David Norman (now Gatt Wines), Queensland’s Dylan Rhymer and Kym Milne MW were also sources of inspiration when they passed through as winemakers and consultants. “I’ve known Kym since I was 13.”

Elena also soaked up industry insight at trade shows. “Mum dragged me to them. That was her way of babysitting.” She laughs.

She imbibed cultural life lessons, too. “In Bulgaria we didn’t have a restriction on drinking age. At 12 you could go to the bar and order gin and tonic... but no one did. At 15 I could pour wine for people, I could taste it and I could talk about it. We never got tipsy. I think the first time I actually got really drunk was when I came to Australia and went to uni.”

Initially, Elena studied PR in Bulgaria, but with encouragement from Steve Bennett, completed a Bachelor of Science (Oenology)





in Oz. Fellow Adelaide Uni students included Kym Teusner, Nick Berg (Hugh Hamilton Wines), Angela Miranda (Lou Miranda Estate), Mike Brown (Gemtree), Rebecca Willson (Bremerton), dux Jo Marsh (Billy Button Wines), Colin McBryde (Adelina Wines) and his wife Jan who was studying a PhD. “She was like a tutor to us.”

Three decades later, Elena calls McLaren Vale home and continues to view the world with wide-eyed wonder and appreciation. It permeates her words and her winemaking. She honed the craft at wineries across the globe, starting things with vintages at Patritti

Wines and Hardy’s Tintara where she worked with Phil Reschke, Simon White, Peter Dawson and Steve Pannell. She enjoyed her time at Tintara but realised she never wanted to work for a big company again. “It just wasn’t my game.”

Five years as assistant winemaker at Geoff Merrill Wines followed. “I learnt so much there. It was an amazing crew (including Joe DiFabio who was the vintage winemaker), and a really dynamic team. Geoff Merrill taught me to never compromise on quality. There was no cost spared in order to make a great wine so I learned not to skimp on

things. No shortcuts. Of course, he was a character to work with. For a young girl that was very good. He taught me a lot in life.”

At 24 Elena and her ex-partner set up their own business (La Curio Wines). Three years later, Mark Maxwell handed her the winemaker role at McLaren Vale’s Maxwell Wines.

Then along came Zar Brooks, the larger than life wine marketing guru she now calls her husband. The pair met in 2000 (during a wine show at which she was a steward). “I told him off for using his phone during the judging process,” she says. They eventually started dating and when Elena jetted off to work vintage at Fratelli Urciuolo in Campania, Italy, they clocked up \$16,000 worth of sweet-nothing-packed international phone calls. “We soon worked out it was cheaper for Zar to join me overseas.”

Zar is no wallflower. In contrast, Elena is what she calls an outgoing introvert. “I enjoy company, but I love being by myself. Within the first week I said to him, ‘Honey, in order for this relationship to work, you must get up at least an hour after me. Two would be perfect.’”

It’s a rule she holds fast to 12 years later. For the mother of two young boys, the 5am ‘me time’, coffee in hand, is precious. “I like rising slowly.”

Elena became an Australian citizen in 2006 and married Zar in 2008. At the time (to their amusement) wine scribe Philip White likened the pairing to him marrying Carla Bruni (Mick Jagger’s ex who went on to wed former French President Nicolas Sarkozy).

Elena, however, is no trophy wife. Soon after returning from Europe, they formed Dandelion Vineyards with Peggy and Carl Lindner (Langmeil co-founder). Elena is CEO and chief winemaker and her focus has always been on making wine that exquisitely expresses terroir.

“When we started Dandelion, Carl had three conditions we needed to stick to,” Elena says. “The first was to take on an Eden Valley Riesling and Shiraz vineyard. That was easy, because the vineyard is magnificent.” Planted in 1912, the vines were tended to by Colin Kroehn throughout his lifetime. “It was the first vineyard that Carl had worked at in his youth,” Elena says. The fruit makes its way into the award-winning limited release Dandelion Vineyards Wonderland of the Eden Valley Riesling and Red Queen of the Eden Valley Shiraz. “The Wonderland and the Red Queen are definitely the heart of Dandelion.”





## GENDER BENDER

Elena isn't one for emphasising her gender. "I'm a good winemaker, I just happen to be female. That's the essence of it," she says. "I could sit on boards, not a problem, but I'd rather just get the work done. In general, I don't support the women in wine stuff. The reason is that I feel that if I ever agree with it, I would disrespect all the men in my life who helped get me to where I am today. They've all been amazing men who I listened to and have lots of respect for." Including her father, who since the day she could read, gifted her an inscribed book on International Women's Day.

"For me, it's not the suffering of the sexes, as such. It's about instilling enough confidence in girls that they can be anything they want. Once you have that, you can put up with anything. I wouldn't be where I am if my father didn't teach me that. Everything starts from the family... an industry won't change unless you infuse the right messages into your children. That is your responsibility."

Carl's second condition was always to be 50/50 partners. "The third one was never to divorce my husband," Elena grins. "As I grew older, I understood that wasn't due to any notion of love... it was because divorce is so very expensive and he didn't want the company to fall apart!" She laughs.

The couple bought out their business partners almost six years ago.

"For Zar and I, the vision has always been on par," Elena says. "It's a cliché but we want to make great wine. We always have."

They grow and source fruit from family vineyards across the Adelaide Hills, Eden Valley, Langhorne Creek, McLaren Vale, Barossa Valley and Fleurieu Peninsula.

"We know exactly where we want to take fruit from and what it has to be. We know the vineyards we're working with and we speak the same language."

Elena's brother Todor Golakov (a former Air Force engineer and recently retired Lieutenant General based in Europe) looks after their European market.

"He comes from such a regimented military background so he finds this exciting. His first job was to go to ProWine and represent us. He was excited because he's more like my mum and Zar - very social."

Elena takes international partners seriously. "It's like marriage; you can't just jump into it. Date a few times. All of our partners are our extension of us. They have to fit, they have to be protective, and they have to be proud."

Elena kicked Dandelion winemaking goals since day dot, winning Royal Brisbane Wine Show trophies in the winery's first year and Best Small Producer at the 2009 Barossa Wine Show. The Dandelion 2012 Menagerie of the Barossa GSM won gold at the 2014 Decanter Asia Wine Awards and more recently, the Dandelion Vineyards 2019 Wonderland of the Eden Valley took out the Pernod Ricard Winemakers' L Hugo Gramp Memorial Trophy for class 1 at the Barossa Wine Show. Meanwhile, at the McLaren Vale Wine Show, the Dandelion Vineyards 2018 Lion's Tooth of McLaren Vale Shiraz Riesling won the trophy for Best Shiraz Predominant Blend. They also won a bunch of gold medals at the 2019 London Women's Wine & Spirits Awards.

Elena is quick to deflect the glory.

"What I like about working with Zar, besides being husband and wife, is that he always challenges me. It's not about getting good show results... is it a great wine? Will it stand the test of time? Will it tell a story? The

greatest wines in the world tell you what they are and where they're from. You know what Dandelion wines are and where they're from the moment you taste them."

Elena also has a thing for Touriga. "We started making Touriga 10 years ago because I didn't like how it was made in Australia. I had amazing Touriga in Europe and decided to play around with a couple of tonnes here."

She picked it early. "It was just so pretty... it smelled like Earl Grey tea, very pretty and perfumed. I bottled it really quickly and Qantas bought everything for the first three years."

They now make almost 1,000 dozen. "It has slowly grown into an amazing wine and it



## MY ONLY PROPER ACHIEVEMENT

BY ZAR BROOKS

"Sometimes in the middle of an ordinary life love gives you a fairytale."

Lucidity and crystallisation of feeling and thought can, indeed, be found in the most interesting and practical of places - this wonderfully encapsulating quote was found on a public toilet wall by the Swan River in Perth.

Elena Entcheva Golakova Brooks has given myself and family a fairytale. Her comparatively short time in the wine trade has changed so many lives around the world. She is always helping or inspiring others to take off, or at the very least clear the bloody runway.

Observed close range one finds Elena's core: creativity, kindness and empathy, but all supercharged to a fearless and often all-consuming commitment to what she sets her sights on. From the mundane to gloriously quixotic, the manner of her quest is to always aspire to the mind - and mindsets.

Elena relishes but also respects the highs and lows of this strange life of the vine. She takes the best she can from terroirs and oenology, from hard work and from a rare moment of free time - and all with no over-egged ego getting in the way.

This resolution both in manner and mentality is a quality that typifies our extended Bulgarian family. This ever-present entourage of well-drilled and determined, loyal people (both here and in Bulgaria), who are never without at least five different salads at any given luncheon, act as starbright beacons in life's course. That my life, through Elena, has also become so wonderfully intertwined with such people as cousin Stefka, brother Todor, sister in law Geri, father Encho, and mother Baba Danni is another true blessing.

Elena has also ensured a great path. Just as one does with the great wines of the world, we seek to taste and talk and think and drink with rumination. Elena Entcheva Golakova Brooks is a true holotype - the one to which others are to be compared. Meeting her has been my life's only proper achievement.

started from a point of, 'this is not how Touriga should be made... this is how it should be made'."

Dandelion reds are made at McLaren Vintners and all the whites and Pinots at custom crush facility Lodestone in the Adelaide Hills and Langhorne Creek's Belvidere Winery. "We own all of our tanks, barrels, open fermenters and everything. I just don't have the four walls."

The recent purchase of McLaren Vale's Firehawk Farm may change all that. It was a homecoming of sorts. The 90-acre property on Chaffeys Road (next to Chapel Hill and Samuel's Gorge) belonged to a friend who passed away three years ago. It's a stunning spot and looks out over McLaren Vale's voluptuous curves. Below the surface there's limestone and ironstone and the 40 acres under vine includes Grenache and Shiraz. They had to have it. "We're very different people and we don't agree on many things but when we agree on something, you know that's the right thing. This vineyard, no matter how much it cost, was something that we both really wanted... we would have done anything to have it. The pedigree of this region up here is amazing, we absolutely adore it."

Elena says they paid a "pi" for their dream patch of land. Do the maths... you'll work it out. "It's definitely one of the most expensive real estates in McLaren Vale to date but we have a connection to it. We've known this place for a long time and I've worked with the fruit for a long time."

It wasn't as straightforward as signing on the dotted line. Days before their loan was approved, Zar went into a coma, struck down by Necrotising fasciitis (a potentially fatal infection) and stayed that way for three weeks. Luckily, he pulled through, and their new Firehawk Farm chapter began. It is full of potential. Elena has plans to open a cellar door on the property and dreams of one day building her own winery.

"We're really considering it because we literally only need those four walls and a crusher."

Elena believes in stages of growth both in business and life. "I arrived in Australia with \$802 in my pocket. That's all I had." When she took a tram to the beachside suburb of Glenelg and paid \$2.50 for an ice cream she realised the 800 bucks wasn't going to last long.

"Everything that we've achieved has been a stepping stone: start a brand, grow it, make sure that we're stable in the market, have amazing wines, have really good pedigree." She pauses. "Next step is the vineyard, then the winery. Hopefully we started the right way, not the other way around (buying the vineyard and wondering what to do with it)."

The property is home to an abode in which the Dandelion office is based. There, staff (all female) look after the portfolio of businesses (Elena also makes wine for Sister's Run Wine Company, her father in law's Heirloom Vineyards and for her Spanish Wine Company Cien y Pico in Manchuela).

Elena understands the challenges of







balancing motherhood with a busy career and makes sure employees (and their children) are welcome. “We have baby toys in the back room and there’s currently a seven-month-old baby in the office. It’s a village.”

Her mum and dad are now locals and help out on the property. “They love it. They spend all of their time in the garden. I’m looking forward to the time I retire and do the same thing.”

In the meantime, there’s lots of work to do. The vineyard is currently being converted to biodynamic. “We’re really, really taking that seriously.”

Elena has a lot of time to ponder future plans. She spends a lot of time in the vineyard. “The winemaker must be respectful of the vineyard and the grapes. That’s my key,” she says. “I like to call myself a lazy winemaker because if I spend a lot of the time there, getting to know the vineyard and the fruit, it makes it really, really easy in the winery.” It wasn’t always that way. In her early 20s Elena would look at vineyard-obsessed winemakers and shake her head. “I’d look at all these winemakers and think ‘They’re constantly in their vineyards... they know nothing. All the action is here in the winery’. Now it’s flipped. You only need a really bad year to learn a lesson really quickly.”

Cue the 2008 vintage. “If I had spent more time in the vineyard I wouldn’t have had such a difficult vintage. Luckily, Grenache didn’t get the message that it was a hot year. It was

just hanging out, doing its own thing while everything else suffered.”

In contrast, 2011 was a stellar year. “Everyone made fruit-forward and elegant wines. I think it’s probably one of our most awarded international vintages.”

Elena talks a lot about benchmark wines. “I think that my generation of winemakers have taken that on board... we actually make Riesling to be compared with the greatest Rieslings in the world. We make serious rosés, and amazing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.”

She is a fierce believer in the importance of teachers and role models. “I am the sum of the people who invested so much in me,” she says. “In Bulgaria the elderly and teachers are highly respected. Education is actually rated above medicine, doctors, lawyers... everything. Teachers are the building blocks of society.”

She gives respect where it is due and urges others to do the same, especially the new generation of winemakers. “We always say we love natural wines because they make our wines look much better.” She laughs. “The issue is that these kids are just trying to be different and are not putting the hard yards in to learn about the industry, learn about the fruit grades, and learn about the people who entered the industry long ago (and what they have been doing) before they start rebelling against it.”

Natty qualms aside, she believes it is an exciting time to be a winemaker in Australia.

“All of the generations beforehand have been working towards establishing the wine industry, whereas my generation of winemakers are the ones that are taking it to the world as a serious one. We are incredibly well educated. We are not just winemakers... we have to study business management, we have to study viticulture, and we have to study marketing. We are better winemakers than anyone else in the world because we are also the most travelled. As a group we probably drink more international wines than anyone else. We know how to make wines that stand up to the great wines of the world.”

An undercurrent of inner strength hovers behind Elena’s warm smile like a lioness ready to pounce. A little tattoo under her left arm is fleetingly visible when she gets animated. The Japanese Kanji symbol means strength of character and power. “I got it after I left Merrill’s,” she says. “I only see it when I need to. Like when I’m doubting myself.”

Elena looks out over her McLaren Vale farm and smiles. As fairytales go, the moral of this story is hard work, tenacity, gratitude and a nation of winemakers in shining armour.

“I’ve worked all over the world and the only country that accepted a 23-year-old female immigrant was Australia,” she says. “I was successful and achieved so much so young. No one cared that I was young. No one cared that I was an immigrant, and no one cared that I was a woman. I am so happy to be where I am today.” ♦

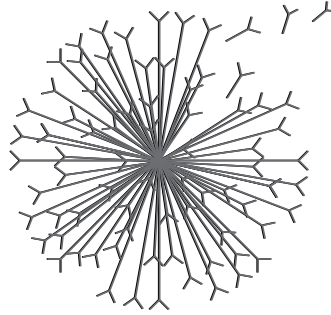




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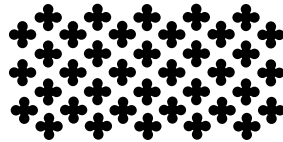


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dandelionvineyards.com.au  
winery@dandelionvineyards.com.au  
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