

## TRAILBLAZERS:

Esther Thorn meets David Paxton:

# A fertile mind

Photograph by Aise Dillon.

The collection of titles in David Paxton's office bookcase is an eclectic one. Wedged between bestsellers and crime novels are the 'The War Diaries of Weary Dunlop' and 'Cottage Gardens in Australia', and a hefty variety of others. They speak of someone with varied interests and pursuits, who can't easily be categorised.

David Paxton is such a man. He's one of Australia's most highly respected viticulturists and a clever entrepreneur. But he's also a passionate biodynamic farmer, who's spearheaded the organic wine movement in both the region and the nation.

It's 42 degrees in the shade on the day of our interview, but, despite the heat, David has spent the morning in the vineyards. He's nurtured his vines for over thirty years and won't let a heatwave keep him indoors.

We're sitting across a generous antique table in his McLaren Vale office, drinking water out of wine glasses. David flicks me a coaster, explaining he thinks the table belongs to his son and so we'd better look after it. It's a small gesture but it explains why David Paxton is so likeable; his offhand, relaxed manner belies a genuine thoughtfulness and deep attention to detail.

David grew up as an only child in a family who owned a small land holding in Willunga. 'My father was a soldier settler and (my parents) had a block at Monash in the Riverland. But when I was about six they decided Willunga would be a better place for their only son to grow up,' David tells me. 'My youth was spent shovelling chook poo out of sheds and picking apricots.'

Despite the unglamorous chores, David remembers his childhood as a very happy, albeit modest one. 'I was a boarder at Saint Peter's College (in Adelaide) and all the other boys would be picked up on weekends in Fairlanes and Mercedes and then Dad would rock up in an old, pale-blue van,' he says. 'It made me a better person though; more determined that one day I was going to have a Fairlane of my own.'

This spirit of determination and positive mindset have stood David in good stead throughout his career. When he finished school he started

an almond cracking business, which he ran successfully alongside the family farm and two other properties he leased.

Then when David's father died, he and his mother sold the farm and, with Willunga's almond growing business in decline, David was on the lookout for greener pastures and fresh challenges.

'I attempted to buy land in the Riverland but we just didn't have the capital,' says David, who was newly married with two young sons at the time. 'Then someone said to me: 'Why don't you have a look at the Thomas property on Sand Road at McLaren Vale?''

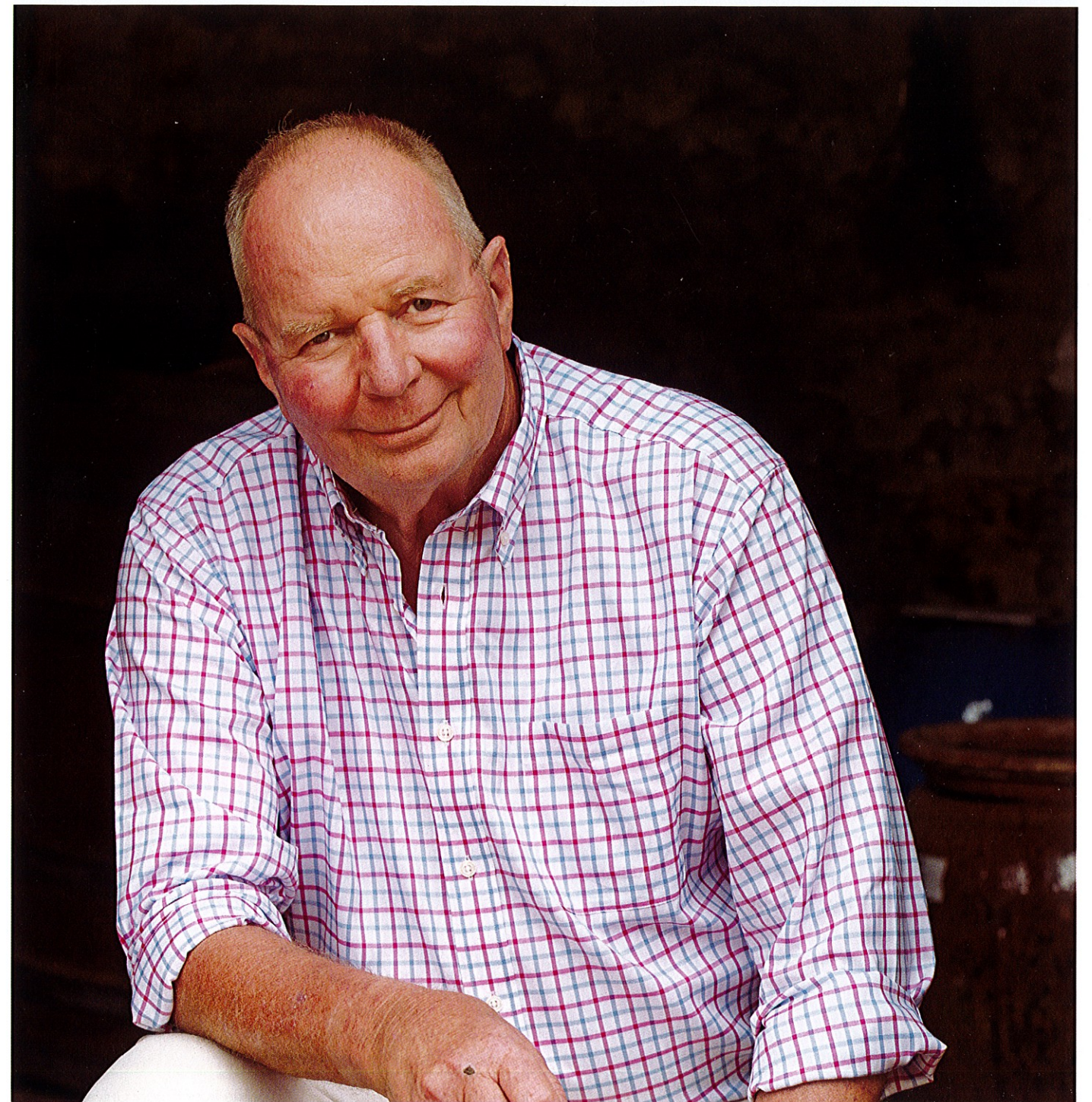
The property had a salubrious past as an inn and brothel before it became a homestead. But for over a decade it had sat empty, surrounded by eighty acres of vineyards. 'The wine industry was in a terrible state,' David explains.

But David sees opportunity where others see despair, and so he approached the owners and made an offer, which they accepted. 'I put everything I had into the back of a tractor, hooked it up and drove it down here,' smiles David. 'When I got here I had to ring a friend and say 'I've bought this place and I haven't got a clue what to do with grapes.' He came and showed me how to prune them.'

And so began Paxton Wines, an enterprise that would not only change the course of David's life, but would also greatly influence the shape of McLaren Vale as a wine region. David's first move was to rip the shiraz and grenache vines out and replant with chardonnay, which he hoped would be the next big wine trend. His punt paid off and from then on David went from success to success, working as a consultant to winegrowers across Australia and the world. 'I just had the confidence,' he tells me. 'If someone wanted a vineyard planted on a cliff, well I could do it.'

Then in the 90s, a downturn hit the industry and chardonnay was no longer in demand. David was forced to focus his energy back on his own vineyards at McLaren Vale. David's boys had grown up and his eldest son was a winemaker. Together they decided to make their own wine and launch the Paxton label. In 2005 they opened Paxton Wines cellar door and winery at McLaren Vale's historic Landcross Farm.

The next significant turning point came when David's younger son convinced him to go to a biodynamic conference with him in Victoria. 'We drove over and the first thing I realised when we got there was that they were holding the conference in an old lunatic asylum,' laughs David. 'They were talking about burying cow horns and moon



Above: David Paxton outside of Paxton's biodynamic hut.

cycles and to be honest I thought all the inmates had returned and were running the show, it just seemed so crazy.'

Then out came the food, which was all biodynamically grown and David was so impressed by its quality and flavour that he agreed to convert one vineyard. 'After six months we felt there was a tremendous change in the vines and in the soil,' he says. 'The soil just came alive and we decided to become a fully biodynamic, organic, winery.'

Biodynamic farming is an agricultural system that doesn't use synthetic fertilisers and pesticides. Instead, it focuses on promoting healthy, living soils through the use of natural compost preparation. 'It took us three years before we became certified in 2011 and we had to have a paper trail for everything, but it's been hugely beneficial for us,' says David. 'It's transformed the quality of the soil and the vines, and also our place in the industry.'

Today, Paxton Wines are sold in thirty countries. The label offers a comprehensive range, including pinot gris, graciano and tempranillo alongside more traditional varieties like shiraz and chardonnay, which has been reinvented as a preservative free wine. David firmly believes the future of McLaren Vale's, and indeed Australia's, wine industry lies in organic farming.

Our interview over, David and I leave the cool comfort of the office and are hit by a wall of heat. It's the hottest day in South Australia on record, but the gardens surrounding David Paxton's home and office are lush and green. We stand under an ancient mulberry tree and pick ripe berries, the juice staining our hands. I'm struck by David's humility, his entrepreneurial spirit and seeming ability to predict what lies ahead. 