

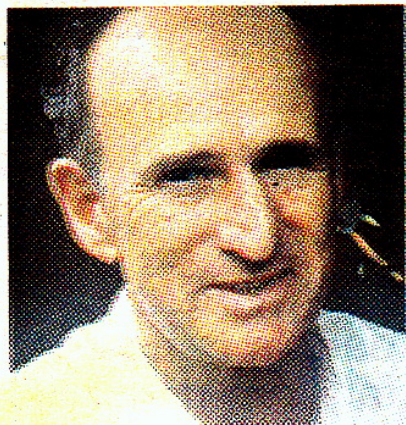
# Quality control at Milbrovale

**R**ICHARD Owens' new Milbrovale Wines Pty Ltd venture, which I wrote about last month, is the culmination of his 40-year fascination with wine and food.

And when he decided to become a vigneron, Richard went about it with characteristic thoroughness.

He plunged into a range of study, including the grape production course at the Kurri campus of the Hunter Institute of Technology. His vineyard has soil probes to monitor moisture and he has embarked on a stringent program to control grape yields and thus heighten wine flavour, colour and concentration.

He insists that all grapes be hand-picked and he believes he has created, if not the best, then one of the best young vineyards in the Hunter. He has been encouraged in this view by bronze medals for his Milbrovale 1998 Semillon and 1998 Seven Stones Chardonnay at the 1999 Sydney Wine Show.



**Richard Owens**

Rothbury Estate's Adam Eggins makes no bones about his admiration for the quality of the Milbrovale fruit, telling guests at Milbrovale's launch that it had encouraged his company to expand its grape plantings in the Hunter.

Richard Owens recognises the great contrast between his role as a vigneron and his former career as a food barn supremo.

As a vigneron he declares his total focus is on quality, not quantity. And premium-quality grapes are the only way to achieve this.

'I believe that too many people concentrate on the sizzle in this business and not enough on quality,' he says.

# Oakvale in new hands

**L**EADING Newcastle businessman Richard Owens has added to the lustre of his rapidly expanding Milbrovale Wines Pty Ltd operation by buying the historic Oakvale vineyard and winery in Broke Rd, Pokolbin.

Although the purchase price was not disclosed, it is believed to be in the region of \$2.5million.

Oakvale, famous for being the hub of the pioneering Elliott wine dynasty, has been owned since 1985 by Sydney lawyer-turned-vigneron Barry Shields and his wife, Jan.

The sale, to be finalised on September 30, includes the 54ha Oakvale property, 4.9ha of chardonnay, semillon and shiraz vineyard, the 200-tonne-plus-capacity winery, the popular Bacchus Bookshop business, the Shields home and a holiday rental cottage.

Richard Owens told me last Friday that in the light of the Oakvale purchase he would not go ahead with plans to develop a winery, cellar door sales centre and new vineyards on a 40½ha property he had bought near the Tyrrell's winery in Broke Rd, Pokolbin.

He said he would dispose of this property and make Oakvale the production and sales headquarters of Milbrovale Wines. He would maintain the Bacchus Books business and upgrade the Oakvale winery.

A new press and destemmer-crusher would be bought for use in the 2000 vintage and further improvements, designated by operational experience, would follow.

The Owens company would carry on production of wines under the Oakvale label and was conscious of the fine stewardship of Barry and Jan Shields.

'I cut my wine-drinking teeth on Elliott reds,' said Richard, 'and I'm very aware of the great heritage of the names Oakvale and Elliott.'

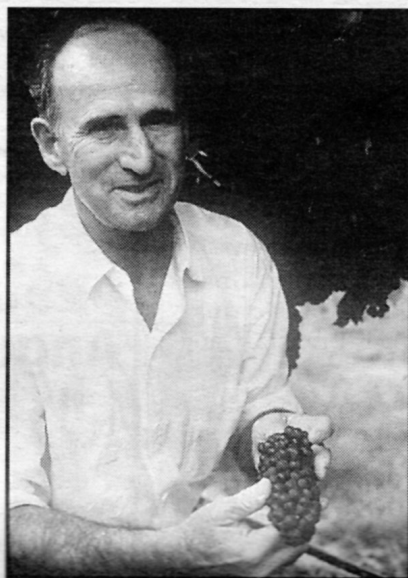
The Oakvale purchase meant Milbrovale winemaker Michael Glover would immediately have a winery in which to work, rather than waiting for a new one to be built on the other Broke Rd site.

Barry Shields told me last week that, although they would have to



**John Lewis**

Wine Writer



**Expanding:** Richard Owens.

find a new home, he and Jan planned to stay in the wine country and had hopes of establishing themselves as grape growers.

They were sad to be leaving Oakvale, but believed they had taken the business as far as they could.

'A business has to keep moving and Richard Owens has the ability to take Oakvale on to the next stage of its development,' said Barry.

The wine history of Oakvale dates back to 1893 when a Scottish coal-miner named William Elliott bought and planted wine grape vines on what had previously been a dairy farm in Broke Rd.

By adding the fine Belford and Tallawanta vineyards to their holdings, following generations of Elliotts established themselves alongside the Tyrrells, Draytons and

Tullochs in the top rank of Hunter wine-making families.

Doug Elliott sold the business in 1974 to Hermitage Estate Ltd, one of the tax-driven wine companies that sprang up in the 1970s. Hermitage plunged into receivership in 1977 and its assets were sold off, largely to Brian McGuigan's Wyndham Estate

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# Medal win for Oakvale

Herald 19/11/08



WINE

JOHN LEWIS

Historic Pokolbin vineyard proves its worth to owner Richard Owens.

EIGHTEEN months ago Richard Owens, the former Newcastle pharmacist-turned chief of the Shoey's supermarket chain, elected not to sell the historic Oakvale winery in Broke Road, Pokolbin.

And today he's delighted with the decision on the score of personal satisfaction and major wine show success.

At the 2008 Hunter Valley Wine Show in August, Oakvale won three gold medals – two of them in the 100 per cent Hunter Valley 2007 dry red class with the \$35 Oakvale 2007 Peppercorn Shiraz and the

“I'm really enjoying the hands-on role. I love Oakvale's place in Hunter wine history and I have some great staff to help me.”

\$25 Oakvale 2007 Gold Rock Shiraz.

The third went to the \$20 Oakvale 2008 Gold Rock Semillon, which scored the 56-point top gold in the 100 per cent Hunter Valley 2008 semillon dry white class.

The 2007 Gold Rock Shiraz and 2008 Gold Rock Semillon are reviewed today in *Uncorked*.

Richard and his wife Mary had a long-established love of wine when in 1994 they established an impressive new country home and a state-of-the-art 34.5-hectare Milbrovale vineyard on what had been a

57-hectare dairy farm in Milbrodale Road, Broke. In 1999 they and their family spent about \$2.5 million to add the historic former Elliott Oakvale vineyard and winery in Broke Road, Pokolbin, to their wine empire.

Founded in 1893, Oakvale was one of the most admired Hunter brands during three generations of Elliott family ownership.

Two years ago Richard became disillusioned with the Oakvale operation and put it up for sale.

Richard says that, when an acceptable offer had not come up 18 months ago, he pulled Oakvale off the market and decided to manage the business himself.

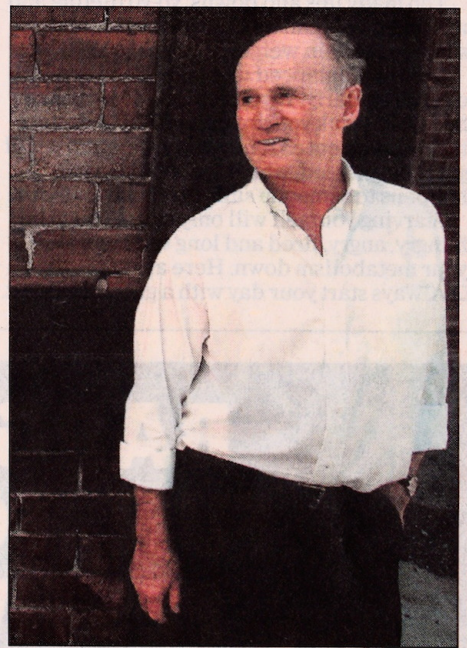
“I'm really enjoying the hands-on role. I love

Oakvale's place in Hunter wine history and I have some great staff to help me,” he says.

A key contributor is Oakvale's chief winemaker Steve Hagan, who has had wide experience in such diverse places as Marlborough, New Zealand, Oregon, the US, Chile, Argentina, Italy, Western Australia, Mitchelton, Victoria, and Yarraman Road in the Upper Hunter.

Oakvale is well worth a visit, with excellent food and cellar door facilities.

The Owenses have poured money into upgrading the winery and cellar door,



GOOD DECISION: Richard Owens from Oakvale vineyard.

opening a cheery coffee shop-delicatessen, creating gardens, farm-stay accommodation, children's playgrounds and picnic facilities. And, dipping into the past history of his family's Richard Owens and Sons grocery chain, Richard has recreated an old-time grocer's shop in an 1890s slab hut that was the original Elliott family home.

Oakvale wines can be bought in some wine stores and restaurants, at the Broke Road, Pokolbin, cellar door and on 1800 005 550 or [www.oakvalewines.com.au](http://www.oakvalewines.com.au).