

# The COVino diaries

A story by **Corrina Wright.**



Page left: Corrina Wright at Oliver's Taranga Vineyards. Photo courtesy of **Wine Australia**. Above: Socially distanced tractors between the shiraz and sangiovese blocks. Photo by **Jason Porter**. (Shot on **Nicky Connolly's** drone!)

Diary writing has a long history in my family. We have my great-grandmother's diaries beginning in 1917, my grandmother's from the 1930s, and my mum keeps one daily. Alas, I have not kept this tradition strong. Maybe it has something to do with my brother finding my diaries full of teenage angst and unrequited love in the eighties and teasing me mercilessly.

This changed when I had an inkling that vintage 2020 was going to be one imprinted on our collective memories forever. So, I picked up a pen (metaphorically only – I went digital) and started doing a weekly diary as things got weird.

#### 1-7 March 2020

Vermentino fermenting. Picking fiano, sagrantino, shiraz, tempranillo. Crops low due to bad set. Worried we won't have enough shiraz. Mild weather. Strange to be picking sagrantino so early, but tannins and flavour are right. Hearing stories out of China from our importer Anson. Sounds like this coronavirus thing will have an impact on our export to China. Send a note to friends on WeChat, hoping they are all safe. One of our customers asked how he could help those impacted by the fires in the hills and makes a direct cash donation. Bloody legend.

#### 8-14 March 2020

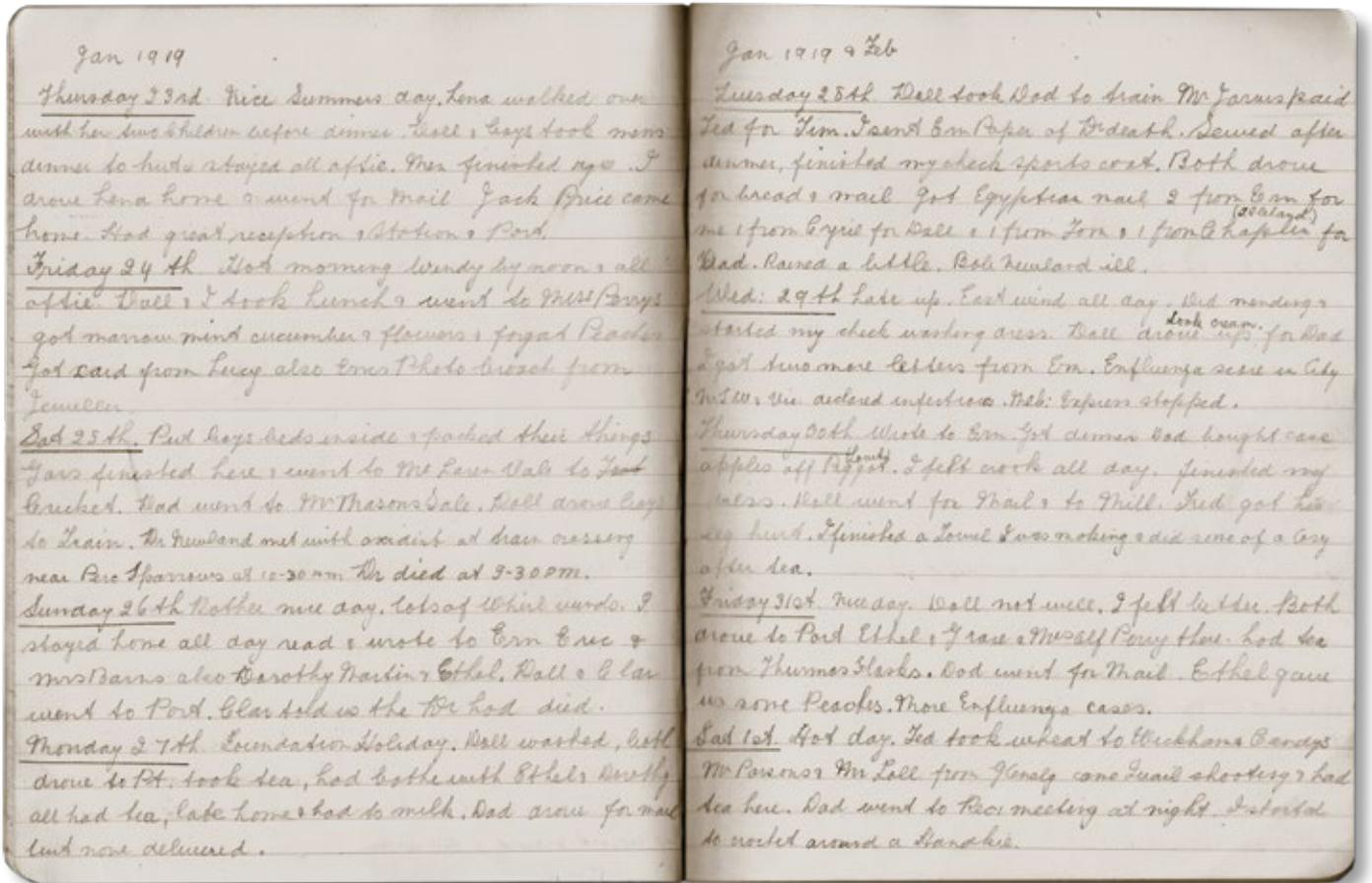
Shiraz picking ramps up. Plenty of ferments to look after. Brain working hard on pulling the vintage logistics puzzle together. Surf lifesaving carnival is cancelled due to coronavirus. Seems like an overreaction. Son is gutted, footy training provides welcome diversion. Celebrate International Women's Day at the Adelaide Central Markets guest speaking with Kris Lloyd from Woodside Cheeses and Barbara Knoll from Barossa Fine Foods. Why is there panic buying of toilet paper?

#### 15-21 March 2020

Homeless Grapes pick kicks off the week. Our community picks grapes for Hutt Street Centre, supporting Adelaide's homeless. Massive week of shiraz intake. Harvester breakdown drama but only offline for twelve hours. Pick grenache and mataro. Pressing of reds ramping up. Loads of barrel work. COVID updates become daily norm. Upcoming events I was hosting interstate cancelled. Footy training cancelled. 'Social distancing' is implemented at cellar door. Couple of our pregnant cellar door staff elect to be taken off roster. Cancel our upcoming Porchetta Parties. Buying toilet paper has got silly, but the memes make me laugh. Went grocery shopping for the first time in three weeks. See the empty shelves with my own eyes and worry that I should be panicking more. Realise that the s\*\*\*t has hit the COVID fan.

#### 22-28 March 2020

Government announces stage one restrictions. No guarantee vintage is going to be allowed to continue. Restaurants are shut down. Nightmare. Close cellar door and stand down all our weekend staff. They are very understanding. I feel sick. Emergency board meeting to determine impact of losing export, restaurant and cellar door sales. A lot of handpicking planned for this week. Handpicking gangs are reduced as workers return home while they still can. >



Above: An excerpt from great-grandmother Dulcie's diary.

All hands on deck to get the picks done. Winery team decides that we will isolate onsite to get the job done. Pack my swag. Eventually get confirmation of 'essential service' capacity. Relief. SA borders close and staff stuck in Victoria. Must 'self-isolate' for two weeks. Quickly get technology sorted so everyone can work from home. Busy out in the winery and vineyard in our biggest week of picking. Trying to concentrate on doing what I know while everything else is uncertain. Laugh when I read early diary entries and wish for the days I thought we were overreacting. Worried for my friends in Italy. Thankful that we can still harvest, our staff are understanding, and no one is ill.

**29 March-4 April 2020**

Picking grenache and cabernet. Winery packed after last week. Cellar doors banned from takeaway sales due to a cluster of cases in Barossa region. Hope we haven't put our staff at risk. Start to hear stories of people that I know having COVID-19. 'JobKeeper' announced by the government, trying to get my head around what that means. Easter holiday plans cancelled. Delve into Great Gran's diaries from 1918-1919 during the Spanish Flu epidemic to get some perspective. Turns out her brother was waiting to come home from WW1 when he succumbed to 'enfluenza'. He was 24. Grateful that we have been safe so far.

**5-11 April 2020**

Cellar door still closed. So quiet. Homeschooling of son begins. Thankful for one hundred hectares to roam on his motorbike. Extra thankful not to have neighbours while he does trumpet practice. Ferments and pressing continues. Grateful that favourite local restaurants have opened for takeaways. Last pick on Easter Thursday. No end of vintage party makes the troops a bit grumpy. My calendar has been wiped clean. Looks like international travel won't resume until 2021. Worried for USA and UK friends. Son turns ten on Good Friday. Family organise a drive-by birthday party featuring tractors, motorbikes, four-wheelers, trucks and cars decorated with streamers,

lots of beeping and yelling. He tells me it is his best birthday ever. Older daughter cooking, cleaning and babysitting instead of travelling overseas on a gap year. Full COVID measures for the vineyard team. Each have their own tractor and have gone to the extreme of having their own toilets. Vineyard manager drew the short straw and now shares the old long drop with the spiders. Marketing now about ramping up online promotion, creating lots of video content. Daily COVID curves, Zoom meetings, cash flow and staffing schedule updates. Is this the new normal?

**12-18 April 2020**

Very very quiet Easter. Usually our busiest weekend in cellar door. Cooked, cleaned, gardened, visited ferments. Hair not at best. Worked out we qualify for JobKeeper. Happy for our staff but sad our turnover is reduced. Tried working from home. Failed. Energy levels suffering from lack of adrenalin now that picking is finished. Leaning on fellow family business owners and friends to make sense of the weird. Great Gran's diary tells of the Spanish Flu locking down NSW, Victoria and notes the first death in the region in February 1919.

**19-25 April 2020**

Prepping whites for bottling. Reds all in barrel. Big tasting of all the 2020 batches. Very happy in the end that the wines haven't suffered while focus was demanded in so many other areas of life. Small pat on back. Cellar door still closed. Staff on reduced hours. Kids still at home. South Australia looks to be 'flattening the curve'.

In her diary Great Gran discusses the terrible losses, but quickly goes back to recording the daily comings and goings of the family. The new normal establishes itself, and I go back to my prior non-diary keeping ways. We always say that each vintage wine in bottle is a physical representation of a particular time and place. 2020 will perhaps trigger a diary of emotions in each of us, and we will remember the roller coaster ride and reminisce while we enjoy the fruits of the wine producers' labour. 