



# NEWSLETTER

November 2002

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## ***To hell and back on a fiery day***

Conditions were not fair on Thursday, October 17. My vineyard manager, Angelo Cutuli, remarked that it was a bad day for a fire. The buffeting wind threw young shoots around and tender vine leaves wilted in bone-dry air. We trickled water into the vineyard.

At about one o'clock an ominous column of smoke arose down the valley, from around Ballandean, I judged. We later learnt that a power pole on Neil Mungall's property had blown down sparking the fire, which immediately leapt eastwards in tinderbox conditions.

In minutes the fire raced through treetops to the New England Highway and leapt over it into thick bush on the other side. A septuagenarian friend at Glen Aplin, Harry Ireland, who is a double for Walter Matthau, saw the possibilities of making the next firemen's calendar and raced to help a female friend in Horan's Gorge Road. He would emerge that evening sooty and dishevelled with wild tales of fighting flames and attempts to release horses, chickens and ducks from a threatened home. Nearby, Wild Soul's vineyard was in ruins; the organic mulch heaped under the vines proved their undoing. The house and winery were saved but there were tears.

## ***The pain was immediate and acute***

With dusk the hot wind did not, as usual, abate. Instead, it continued to howl and we learnt from friends that in Limberlost Road, three houses had earlier been lost to fire and a 41 year old woman and mother of four, Sharon Paton, lost her life.

Having helped others during the day and finally evacuated her children, she made a last, desperate attempt to retrieve family photos as the flames reached her house. She did not get out. Sharon's daughter Jodie works casually in our restaurant. The pain was immediate and acute and we grieve for Sharon and her family. She was good and brave and too young to die.

The fire raced north and east along the mountainous eastern slopes of the valley. It travelled as much as 40 kilometres in a matter of hours. I realised that Harry, now back home, and Otto and Ann Haag of Felsberg,

on the edge of the escarpment, had no electricity and may need assistance.

It was dark now and a powerful red glow silhouetted all ridges to the east and south as high again as the mountains themselves. I heaved a petrol-fuelled fire-fighter pump into the back of the utility and headed south.

## ***Flames were huge and close***

Coming down the highway near Townsend Road the flames – incredibly big– were just behind the ridge and about to leap it. An Ergon Electricity crew was isolating power circuits on a pole at the end of the road. The flames, possibly two kilometres away, looked very close. They were in the canopy of the trees and reached about the same height above them – sixty or seventy feet, I judged - the kind of wildfire rarely seen in Queensland, exploding from tree to tree ahead of the wind sometimes causing vegetation thirty or forty feet away to spontaneously combust.

Turning into Townsend Road, by this time hesitant about what I might encounter, a vehicle hailed me. They were St John's Ambulance volunteers. Also there was Glen Ireland, Harry's wife, and Sophie, their dog.

"You must turn back," the volunteers told me. "The police are evacuating residents and closing the road now." Glen was hysterical. Harry had apparently headed off again to the top of the road where danger was greatest, to help another friend (is this what he dreamt of at his partner's desk for all those years?)

## ***The fight for Felsberg***

Knowing that Otto Haag and, possibly, Tony Comino, were at Felsberg, now just 100 metres or so from the advancing flames, I was reluctant to turn back without at least delivering the pump but eventually I saw the sense in doing so. With the others I retreated to a local service station.

Otto, Tony and one other were at Felsberg, I later learnt, back-burning and using puny vineyard knapsacks and a tractor sprayer to try to save the vineyards and the magnificent winery on its mountainous eyrie. Unbelievably, they succeeded but what they went through for a couple of hours up there on the mountain is unimaginable.





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"How big were the flames?" I later asked Otto. His eyes were hollow and he simply shook his head. It must have been terrifying. They lost their Merlot patch.

By next day the wind had abated and turned the fire on to itself. The danger was by no means over, indeed the ridge at Back Creek, just a valley away from Beverley, was blazing but by now a hundred fire tenders from as far away as Chinchilla and Dalby had ascended our smoky plateau so there was skilled help. The State Government declared a state of emergency.

**Harry's brilliant career**

Townsend Road was evacuated again as the fire turned around. When police knocked on Harry's door he protested that he had to stay. This produced a withering look: "We've heard about you, Mr Ireland. Leave now or we will arrest you." Thus ended a brilliant second career.

We put out spot fires that day. There was excitement but little danger in the evening when three fire tenders, hoses magnificently drenching the slope under Felsberg, back-burned the last of the forest to finally protect Otto's and Ann's smoke-shrouded Bavarian schloss.

**No business like show business**

The last thing any of us needed by then was a wine festival. However, that was what was scheduled for the next day, Saturday and, as they say, the show must go on.

With cancellations depleting our Saturday lunchtime "Guitar-pickers BBQ", a young bloke with a Glaswegian accent rocked up with three friends who confided that Keith Urquhart, as he was named, had a guitar in his car. We persuaded him to fetch it at roughly the same time that Denice took a call from the classical guitarist we had booked that night for our "La Guitarra Banquet", saying his car was playing up and he would not be able to make it.

Keith, an engineer by trade, turned out to be sensational. With his own arrangements and others he tripped easily through numbers that would make Tommy Emmanuel hesitate.

"How would you like a gig tonight?"

Recall the wonderful film "Shakespeare in Love": Geoffrey Rush's Henslow character constantly assures people that "It'll be alright." "But how will it?" others ask. "I don't know," he replies. "It's a mystery."

So it is and was. Keith was brilliant, much applauded by a packed house and if he and his friends will come again we'll do it over.

There we have it. Slightly singed, somewhat wiser and barely fitter we emerge from budburst 2002 to officially begin what will eventually be the 2003 vintage, unless the French purloin the word "vintage" in the meantime.

The vines are green, bountiful in fact. Life, as always, is interesting.

<b>2002 Spring releases</b>				
<b>Wine</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Bottle price</b>	<b>Carton price</b>	
2002 Whiskey Gully Wines Leaping Lizard Colombar	Medium dry white. Big, refreshing and fruity	\$13.50	\$150	
2001 Whiskey Gully Wines Upper House Cabernet Sauvignon	Full-bodied red. Soft with mocha and berry flavours	\$22	\$250	
2002 Whiskey Gully Wines Opera House Unwooded Chardonnay	Dry white. Firm with fig aromas and peachy palate	\$14.50	\$165	
2002 Beverley Vineyard Homestead Colombar Chardonnay	Medium dry white. Intense marmalade flavours, very refreshing	\$11.00	\$125	
<b>20% discount for Pleasant Pluckers' Wine Club members on all carton purchases</b>				

*John Arlidge*

