



Bushfire update

To all of our valued mailing list members and friends, we just want to advise that the recent devastating bushfires in the Steels Creek area will have significant impact on our operations for the near future. For those of you that have already contacted us we would like to say thank-you for the words of support you have given and for the offers of assistance - this is very much appreciated.

The wall of fire that tore through our community on the afternoon (around 6pm) of Saturday February 7 did not spare many buildings, however our small community building which was not defended still stands defiant in a burnt landscape. The hit and miss nature of the devastation is bewildering, some due to the will and fight of those that stayed and some to good fortune of a change in wind. It is now almost 7 weeks since the fire and while we have managed to send a couple of notes to our email customers this has been our first opportunity to update everyone with the events of the day and what has been happening since.

The Fire

Our written fire plan was always to stay and defend and given the direction (from the South) and speed of the fire our most viable escape route of Steels Creek Road was cut off. So stay and defend we did. We quickly changed into protective clothing and sturdy boots, cleared the deck of barbeque, gas bottles etc, contacted neighbours, wet down the house, set a ladder to the man hole, filled bath, sinks tubs and jugs with water, turned off electrical appliances, wet the house and gardens more. By now you could hear the fire roaring and the tree tops glowing orange, we quickly disconnected the fire hoses and threw them into the winery, grabbed the hose fittings and raced into the house. Joanne pulled open the linen press and pulled out armfuls of towels, wet them and placed them under doors and windows, Simon checked the progress of the fire as it raced across the top of the dam and leapt towards the vineyard, the pump shed caught alight and the fire had reached the house. Small sparks of burning ash floated about the curtains, the room filled with smoke and the beep of the smoke alarm made it impossible to think. Simon felt the fire front had passed and went outside to put out spot fires only to be greeted by ember attack and the advance of another fire front from the north which forced him back into the house.

Eventually we were able to make our way out of the house and man the fire hoses to control spot fires close to the house. We switched to garden hoses, mop, bucket and rake and expanded our control area around the house, then joined the garden hoses together so that we had a 60 metre reach from each tap and controlled fires in the house fence, gardens, and trees and around the winery and machinery shed. By 3.30am we had blacked out all areas around the buildings and rested for 2 hours. We dragged ourselves back out at 5.30am as the sky started to lighten and checked all areas and blacked out until 9.30am.

We are so glad we made it. On the highest point of our property we have a 5,000 gallon concrete tank that

gravity feeds the vineyard irrigation system and also flows into 2 fire hydrants and 4 taps. This provided us with plenty of water under pressure to fight the fire. Even though the large electric pump was the first thing to burn it had already done its job to keep the tank full while we damped down prior to the fire. Fortunately, the fire stopped a metre short of the petrol fire pump so we were able to keep the tank full throughout the fire. We were also fortunate when the vegetable garden irrigation melted in the initial fire front and sent a geyser of water into the air showering the south side of the house. We must add sprinklers to this wonderful gravity feed water system and are already reviewing the fire plan for any other improvement opportunities.

Unfortunately, we did incur extensive damage to the vineyard and property fencing and are concerned that some vines may not fully recover - time will tell. It all looks pretty bad at the moment with dying leaves and shrivelling crop, melted netting, charred and burnt out posts and toppling trellis.

At the Cellar door

Our Cellar Door is now open for business on weekends and public holidays or by appointment. In fact, it was new and some existing customers that roused us into re-opening when we left our front gate open and they wandered in on March 7, 4 weeks after the fire. The first weekend's tastings were amongst the ash and dirt at cellar door, with everyone assuring us that the mess did not matter and only added to the atmosphere. Fortunately now the professional cleaners have been in this week and removed the thick layer of soot, I am very happy to be rid of the sooty atmosphere.

Fortunately, the majority of our wine is stored off site in a cool store so no finished wines were lost - there will definitely not be a 2009 vintage, which follows on from significant losses of the 2007 vintage due to frost. Our expectation is that yields for the 2010 vintage will also be down as the vines recover from the fire.

In the vineyard

Due to fire there will not be a 2009 vintage at Steels Creek Estate. The fruit on the Eastern (back) block was desiccated by fire and radiant heat, the Western block near the front gate fared a little better with only the fruit at the northern end being desiccated, however the radiant heat still defoliated the vines leaving no leaves to ripen the remaining fruit. In our five acres of vineyard we have lost 120 pine posts, most of these being the end strainer assemblies at the northern end of the vineyard. About 50% of our netting was on at the time of the fire and even though there are some patches intact at the southern end of rows it is of no use as it is no longer in continuous lengths. All the irrigation drip lines and trellising from the eastern block is destroyed plus a small amount from the western block. Some vines in the eastern block are totally destroyed however we hope the majority of the vines will survive. Many are already sprouting new shoots and leaves, some vines that lost

their fruit are also flowering. Our intention is to leave the vines until winter and prune them at the normal time. We will however drop any remaining fruit to the ground and untangle and remove the melted netting. Most of the work on trellis wires will have to wait until we prune the vines and untangle them from the wires. Our wonderful new 6' fence around the vineyard to exclude the kangaroos was working very effectively before the fire enabling the kangaroos to happily graze on half the property and keep us, the vines and garden fenced in on the other half. However, with about 70% of it now destroyed it is pretty much a write-off, together with all the boundary fencing on the property.

The wildlife

Many of you love our property for the amount of wildlife you see when visiting. The fire has dealt a huge blow to the number of birds and animals we see, but most species are still represented. As an indication here are some numbers from before and after the fire of our daily visitors:

Kangaroos – 40-50 now 3-5, Wombats - 2-3 now 1

Echidnas – 1 or 2 occasionally now we see 1 every day – maybe because there is nowhere to hide?

Swallows 8 now 2, Finches – lots now only a few

Crows – 2-3 now 50-100, Magpies – 8-12 now 3-4

Kookaburras – 8-10 now 1, Cockatoos – still lots.

Unfortunately, there has been a significant drop in all bird numbers and the peace of the bush is no longer interrupted by birdsong but the sounds of demolition and hopefully soon rebuilding.

The gardens

The white rhododendrons, azaleas and hydrangeas at the front gate are no more and the dry stone wall is blackened, the fire through there was so hot that some of the rocks in the wall have split. The silver pittosporums and lavender on the drive are burnt. The 9 flowering pear trees lining the top of the drive that we have nurtured for the last 2 years took the brunt of the fire. Four were snapped off at the base from the force of the wall of flame that hit them. The 5 that remained standing were consumed by cattle in the days following the fire. With all fencing in the neighbourhood burnt and no available food the hungry livestock thought our vineyard was a great place to visit. They munched their way through the grapes and vines, chewed 8' pear trees down to 3', moved on to the apple tree to feast on baked apples, tried out the succulents and spat them out, cleaned up anything in the vegetable garden that was not burnt and ate all the remaining flower heads off the agapanthus. Fortunately they did leave payment in the form of the largest moo poo's we've ever seen. I guess you could say they had the @#*& scared out of them by the fire. The gardens around the house and winery were fortunately quite green and mostly suffered radiated heat burns with very few actually catching alight. The red gum garden edges did catch fire and a number are quite burned so please take care not to walk on these until they are replaced. Most of the non-deciduous plants have been cut back now and are already reshooting. The apple and apricot trees are already covered in new spring growth even though it is autumn and the apple tree even has a few flowers, they are very confused. The rose bushes mostly have new shoots and one or two flower buds are appearing.

Water

Our rainfall at Steels Creek for January and February was only 1.5mls each month. The dam was dropping with the hot weather leading up to the fire, but we certainly had enough to see us through this season. Since the fire 46ml of rain has fallen on 4 days between March 4 and 14. It has been great to have some rain to settle the dust and ash and it is best when it is light and steady so it can

soak into the ground. However, the 15 ml that fell in 40 minutes on the 14th blocked the drains and flooded black ash across Steels Creek road. The water in our dam which turned a weird blue-grey colour immediately after the fire from the falling ash has now turned black since the run-off from the rain. With the vineyard drip irrigation out of action due to extreme melt down the dam water is now available to rejuvenate the gardens. All the pollutants have made the dam water a little smelly but the plants are not complaining. Like all Victoria we look forward to more rainfall, hopefully of the gentle kind with the fragile state of our soils.

Return to the Valley

We look forward to seeing you return to the Yarra Valley and share the wonder as our bushland recovers from the fires. Our Steels Creek valley is starting to take on a new kind of beauty, be it one of stark sculptural black lines against a grey and brown background. The recent rains have added green. Burnt paddocks that were black last week are now tinged with emerald green and stand out sharply from the brown grass that was not burnt. If you look closely you can see the fuzzy green of new growth on many of the gum trees as they re-awaken from their cloak of dead leaves.

Diary Note

Mark your diary now for the Yarra Valley Smaller Wineries Shortest Lunch on Saturday and Sunday, 20 and 21 June. Once again Steels Creek Estate will be participating in this wonderful winter wine and food event. Join us and our chef for deliciously warming winter fare complemented by our wines in the warmth of our winery. We are looking forward to a bit of fun after all we have been through and look forward to seeing you there.

Go Green

Please help us save paper and resources by receiving our newsletters online. Currently we have one third of our customers receiving updates online and two thirds on paper. With so much happening as a result of the fires the internet certainly provides the fastest means of keeping many people informed. It would be great to see those numbers swapped around before we do our next mail out for the shortest lunch. Registering for email is easy, just go to www.steelsckestate.com.au/cellar_door.html, click to subscribe under Newsletters and fill in your details, alternatively you can email us at scemail@steelsckestate.com.au and we will fill in the registration for you.

We hope to see you soon at our cellar door so that we can have a chat about the fire and the renaissance! Our cellar door is now open again for weekends and public holidays or by appointment. We can also arrange tastings in the winery for groups of up to 25, if you would like to arrange a group tasting contact us on (03) 5965 2448 or email. If you cannot make it to the Yarra Valley our wine is also available online www.steelsckestate.com.au.

Best wishes and Regards,

Simon and Joanne

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