

Sea of vines

Seachangers are covering the Mornington Peninsula in grapes.

WHEN PHILIP MURPHY'S name was last in the papers it was to do with an ill-fated plan to launch a national chain of wine shops. That was a couple of years ago. Now here he is, shouldering his way through a heavy barn door with what looks like a high-school science text in one hand. He's smiling. He looks relaxed.

The expensive business suit permanently attached to his body when he was head of Philip Murphy Wines and Spirits has been replaced by shirt and jeans. Can't say whether the red Ferrari has also been traded in.

How's life, Philip?

"No complaints. Just returning this," he says, indicating the dog-eared book, and he's off.

Where most neighbours follow the usual path of borrowing cups of sugar, ladders and what-not, here on the Mornington Peninsula it's wine and viticulture textbooks. Murphy, in semi-retirement at Main Ridge, is studying winemaking at Charles Sturt University.

His mentor is Kevin Bell at Hurley Vineyard over at Balnarring, in his fifth year of a wine science degree at Charles Sturt.

Bell, a barrister and expert in native title, is as passionate about pinot noir as Murphy (who is renowned for his excellent cellar of Burgundies), which should make their study sessions most enjoyable.

Both men have been lured to the sea by the siren's song of wine. For Murphy, a former career in retailing is over and another quietly beckons. As for Bell, he's easing himself into a second, after-hours career that might just turn full-time when he hits 60. And it's not just men. Heidi Mitchell at Montalto Vineyards, Red Hill South, was a city-based lawyer until her father, John, decided to set up a vineyard in 1986 on one of the Peninsula's more spectacular sites. Two years ago, she joined him. "I know my friends sometimes say, will I ever go back to law?" she says. "I hope not!"

It's a common story on the Peninsula, so common that a wine marketing campaign called "Embracing Seachange", starting next month, will celebrate past and present seachangers who came, and stayed for the bucolic idyll that most of us imagine a vigneron's life to be.

Sounds like a Hallmark moment. Is that how it really worked out?

"I will say, I thought I was going to have something more like a retirement lifestyle," says seachanger Tony Lee, a former Melbourne restaurateur who manned the kitchens at the Argo, Les Halles and Garcon.

Lee and his family had a beach house at Sorrento, which they sold to buy 4.6 hectares of land at Red Hill, where they planted a vineyard. Now there's no time for sailing or taking the kids to the beach. A winery-cellar door-restaurant for Foxeys Hangout, the wine company run by Lee and his brother Michael, is slotted for a Christmas opening next year. "Now I work seven days a week, but I do see the kids more," he says. "And I am living in the country."

Paul Scorpo in his Merricks North vineyard.



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PAUL SCORPO

Living in the country with a vineyard of one's own comes close to nirvana when you throw in beaches, surfing and sailing, or, in Philip Murphy's case, a golf course. But it is clearly not enough to sustain a business. While Peninsula vineyards were sometimes viewed as hobbies of the well-to-do, they have to be treated seriously today simply because of the heightened competition.

In 2000 there were 174 vineyards on the Peninsula. Most were under four hectares and 80 per cent produced only two varieties: chardonnay and pinot noir. This picture will be updated when the 2003 survey is complete but will undoubtedly show an explosion in vineyard numbers if nothing else. That much is obvious to any half-interested day tripper.

A trek down country lanes leads past anonymous stretches of vines such as Paul Scorpo's property at Merricks North. A cellar door (by appointment) will open early next year, but for now, after two vintage releases, the five-hectare vineyard founded in 1997 is working towards the break-even point.

"For the first four years we did all the work ourselves," says Scorpo, a landscape architect who tends the vineyard with his wife, Caroline, and three daughters. Although devoting more time to the vineyard, he's not giving up his day job yet.

"We are the new kids on the block and our attitude is based on quality. It's not a hobby." Nor is it about making big money, he hastens to add. "If it's money you want to make, forget vineyards of this scale."

Scorpo is fortunate because his wines (made with rising Peninsula maker Sandro Mosele at Kooyong) have already caught the attention of drinkers, notably a stunning shiraz and concentrated pinot noir.

Others, including Mark and Belinda Rodman at Marinda Park, Balnarring, are just starting. The British-born couple, refugees from the corporate rat-race, have converted old stables into a fabulous-looking cellar-door restaurant serving French-style food, next to their equally fabulous, petite,