

SE FARM MAGAZINE
HD **A star among thorns**

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With a background in broadacre cropping, Judy Barrett has turned her farming skills to save Morning Star **Estate**, with an orchard, vineyard, olive grove, Angus cattle and one of the country's biggest collection of roses. Tony Fawcett reports

"I'm absolutely a blood and guts farmer ... I'm out at 6am and I don't come in until I drop," says Judy Barrett, fresh from a morning's toil in the paddocks.

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Yet don't confuse this country-loving and highly affable workaholic with your normal farmer. No way.

For starters, Judy's farm is not conventional. It's the 38-hectare Morning Star **Estate**, a former delinquent boys' home run by Franciscan friars, nestled in rolling hills overlooking Port Phillip Bay at Mt Eliza.

And rather than sowing crops or crutching sheep, Judy spends much of her time caring for a rainbow of more than 75,000 roses (up to 900 different varieties) stretching between the historic 1867 mansion and the bay.

When not tending roses, this dynamo of a woman, who admits with a little coaxing that she has just turned 70, might be found out tending vines - the **property** has 12 hectares of pinot, chardonnay and cabernet grapes as well as the more than 80-year-old and "rather beautiful" one-hectare vineyard planted by the Franciscans in 1932.

Or cleaning out the four old pig pens for some new incumbents.

Or readying the 800 olive trees in preparation for pickling the fruit and also making olive oil.

Or generally looking after the hectares of lemon trees, kaffir limes, tamarillos, boysenberries, blueberries, cumquats, figs, quinces, persimmons, apricots, plums and peaches and goodness knows what else.

With so much produce, you would assume Judy had plenty of markets. Not so.

Apart from the buckets of rose blooms she sells in season to visitors (\$50 for as many roses as you can get in a bucket), nearly all produce ends up in the restaurant she runs in the mansion, or for the nourishment of guests staying in the **B&B** accommodation with its stunning views over the roses and the bay.

You see, Judy is a self-sufficient type - and is in love with this intriguing **property** and its rambling mansion, built by Londoner Francis Gillet after he arrived in 1853 (back then it was called Sunnyside). And she will do all it takes to keep it going.

On the day I visit, a three-month location shoot around the mansion for the movie *Partisan*, starring French actor Vincent Cassell (he was a lead with Natalie Portman in *Black Swan* and recently

separated from his Italian-born actress wife Monica Bellucci), is about to wrap. Upstairs, a fashion parade for local women is under way.

Last year the mansion was the location for the Kath and Kim movie spin-off Kath & Kimderella. And currently Judy is preparing for a country and western music concert (she holds about six entertainment events here a year).

For this daughter of "a great farmer and a good produce merchant", who gained her love of the land while helping her father sow oats and barley in the Riverina, such diversity is just par for the course, what's required these days to make a go of things on the land. And besides, she loves every second of it.

"I've always loved the land, always," she assures.

Judy bought Morning Star 20 years ago, soon after her husband, Charles, died of a heart attack. It was at the height of an economic downturn, and the **property**, which had been a horse stud, was in the hands of receivers and had gone to auction seven times in five years but had not **sold**.

Judy admits she got it at a good price, yet the Victorian-era mansion was in a dilapidated condition through lack of occupation.

For Judy though, anxious to get back to her rural roots, it was a dream in the making. "It was derelict and unkempt yet I knew what I would do with it the moment I saw it," she says.

While waiting to get approvals from various authorities to renovate the double-storey 930sq **m** mansion with its soaring chapel, slate roofs, gymnasium (now a ballroom) and courtyards, she filled in time planting roses in the old cow paddock. And she just planted and planted.

The actual mansion renovation was one massive, torturous journey for she and her family (today son David and daughter Christine both work at Morning Star), with the former dormitory wing becoming a boutique **B&B hotel** and the woodwork room becoming a restaurant.

Lure of the grape

Morning Star has about 12 hectares under vines, including pinot, chardonnay and cabernet.

Recently Judy has been leasing out much of this area, apart from the one-hectare original vineyard, but is considering taking it back under her own Morning Star label again.

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Currently she buys Mornington Peninsula wines for the restaurant and accommodation but feels guests would appreciate the **wine** more if they knew it was grown on the **estate**.

Besides, being a perfectionist, she likes to be in charge of how the grapes are being grown and cared for. "I'm **fussy**, I want my grapes, not anyone else's grapes."

For a time Judy also leased out the restaurant but that came back under her control early last year and has been winning rave reviews since for its seasonal dishes and breathtaking views over the roses.

Most of what she produces from her enormous orchard and vegie garden is used in the restaurant, with the 800-plus olive trees meaning Judy never has to **buy** olive oil.

She maintains a small herd of Angus cattle and has enough chooks to keep the kitchen in supply of meat and eggs. And five or six pigs are soon to arrive, both for recycling kitchen scraps and, after fattening up, for the table.

Coming up roses

When Judy first started ploughing her cow paddock for roses, she had no idea where her passion would end.

Now with 75,000 roses, she has possibly the biggest rose garden in Victoria (as a comparison, the Victoria State Rose Garden at Werribee Mansion has about 5500), including romantic old heritage blooms, original species roses and newer varieties.

"People like to come and sit and smell the roses," she says in explanation of why the rose garden exists, adding, "I suppose I've made a rod for my own back, haven't I?" Certainly the many brides who like to be married among the blooms aren't complaining.

Maintaining it requires a giant effort. Judy would like to mulch her row upon row of roses with lucerne hay but, because it is expensive on such an enormous scale, opts for the cheaper rice straw. She also grows roses at the ends of the rows of grapes (red blooms for pinot and white and yellow for chardonnay), both for aesthetics and as an early indicator of fungal disease. Apart from the rose garden, she has what she calls "The Wilderness", a romping and wonderfully wild area filled with her favourite plants.

"I've put everything I love in here, and they're all doing exceptionally well prunus trees, crepe myrtles, rugosa roses and many more."

In here is a particular favourite, a Morning Star rose, a white rugosa bloom, which Judy had patented. With her own hothouse and large nursery area, she has an ongoing propagation production line and grows most of her own plants from cuttings.

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Diversify or else

Diversity is the key to succeeding in a rural venture, insists, Judy.

"You can't make money today without doing it. It is such a hard **business**, especially down here on the Peninsula. The doctors and accountants thought they were going to be Collins St farmers with their grapes but it doesn't work like that, it's too labour-intensive. A lot of them have **sold** up or **sold** to the bigger wineries.

"Plus, chemicals today are just so expensive. You've got to keep spraying and using them, especially down here, or you get downy and powdery mildew because we're so close to the bay." In her case, Judy sprays both roses and vines at the same time.

And in order to remain diversified, she says, you also need to be aware of just what opportunities are out there.

"You have got to have an open mind, because if you can't make money one way, you have got to turn to another."

Yet as Judy has found, diversity also makes extreme demands on your time and energy. You can't be afraid of hard work. "If you suspect you might not have the energy for such a job, find something else," she advises. "People think I'm mad with all I do. In the country you work from daylight to dusk. But I love it. I'm passionate about it. And there are just so many more things I would like to do, because this **property** lends itself to so much. You can do anything with it."

On with the show

Part of Judy's diversification program has seen her move into hosting concerts and other events at Morning Star, despite no prior experience in the field.

"I had been to Spray Farm (the Bellarine Peninsula **property** that previously hosted concerts) and I loved the way they did things. I thought 'well if they can do, it so can I'. I love music, I go to the opera, ballet and symphony concerts and the people down here love culture and they love to be outdoors."

To date, Morning Star has hosted performances with everyone from Jimmy Barnes, an Abba revival **group** and INXS to the Three **Chinese** Tenors, Marina Prior and opera.

She would like to do more but currently is restricted to six shows a year by the local council.

One of her most successful and enlightening shows to date was a blues concert. "It was fantastic. I had thousands here, interesting people, some tattooed all over. But when it was over, there was not one cigarette butt on

the grass.

"We went through pallets and pallets of Jim Beam cans but there was not one can left on the ground.

"When they left you would not have known we had had a concert. They were tough, rough knockabout fellas - and the girls were too - but they respected everything here. They enjoyed the music, loved the day, and kept everything so clean and pristine. It was wonderful. I would do that again tomorrow. They were superb."

The future

With so much on the go, it seems almost inconceivable that Judy would want to take on more of a load. Yet she does.

She would love to add some sheep to her stock if she can sort out the shearing (shearers are notoriously scarce on the Mornington Peninsula), she hopes to improve the **property's** pasture areas, and if the opportunity ever arose she would consider buying some land for broadacre farming enterprises.

Three years ago, she **sold** her late father's stud, **Park** North sheep station, at Jerilderie, and yearns to get back to owning something similar. "I love the broad acres and miss them terribly," she says.

Then there is the spot set aside as a home **site** at the bay end of Morning Star. With magnificent views across the water back to Melbourne, it has been a dream of Judy's to one day build a house here. Until now, she has just always been so busy with other projects.

"But who knows, one day soon I might build that house."

Farm facts

MORNING STAR **ESTATE**, MT ELIZA

Judy Barrett runs the 38-hectare Morning Star **Estate**, with the help of her daughter Christine and son David, as a boutique accommodation centre, restaurant and events venue.

The **property** has 12 hectares of pinot, chardonnay and cabernet grapes and Judy grows about 75,000 rose bushes (tours available), along with hundreds of fruit trees.

The 20-room **B&B** accommodation, Morning Star **Estate's** Country House Rooms, is located in the transformed dormitory wing of the Morning Star boys' home.

Judy employs managers and staff in the restaurant and accommodation, along with two workers who help her outside and another who works with David.

The restaurant and accommodation are open Wednesday to Sunday.

morningstarestate.com.au

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