

Organic wine comes of age

Chardonnay goes gold, writes John Lewis.

ORGANIC winegrowing in the Hunter Valley is not the activity in which one would expect to find two people from Canada with careers as a health and social economy academic and an engineering consultant on NASA, US Air Force and Woomera Rocket Range projects.

Yet this huge transition has been made by Geoff and Barbara Brown, proprietors of the Ascella Pure Wine vineyard in Thompson's Road, Milbrodale.

Geoff, 65, and Barbara, 64, this month took the spotlight at the 2012 Hunter Valley Boutique Winemakers' Show when their \$20 Ascella 2011 Chardonnay won a gold medal and the trophy for the best regulation 2, 2011 chardonnay.

Although they have collected a haul of medals and awards at organic wine shows, the Maitland show gave them their first gold medal and trophy.

The Browns say their 32-hectare planting of

chardonnay, semillon, shiraz, merlot and chambourcin is the largest certified organic vineyard in the Hunter.

Geoff and Barbara came to Hunter winegrowing in 2007 when they bought the River Pines vineyard, which had been established in 1999 and 2000 and was already managed on organic principles.

It was a perfect match for the couple, who had a long-term commitment to organics arising from Geoff's allergy problems.

Geoff was born and schooled in Wagga and gained an aeronautical engineering degree in Sydney before moving to Canada to further his studies at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver.

At the university he met Barbara, then beginning a community development and health career that would culminate in a post on the UBC faculty.

Geoff earned a PhD in mechanical engineering and



GOOD BALANCE: Barbara Brown (left), winemaker Liz Jackson and Geoff Brown celebrate winning gold with their chardonnay

design, then worked in acoustical engineering in Vancouver and later established his own metal manufacturing business.

He sold the business 20 years ago and then branched out as an engineering and design consultant, working on projects for NASA, the US Air Force, the Canadian Defence Force and on a power generation back-up system at

Australia's Woomera rocket range.

In 2000, with a sea change in mind, he and Barbara bought an Australian cattle and sheep grazing property in the New England Region.

In late 2004 they quit Canada, leaving their son there to continue his studies, and moved to their New England property.

There they embraced

organic farming practices and increased their dedication when they sold in New England and bought into Hunter winegrowing.

Initially they sold their grapes to the Pokolbin-based Tamburlaine winery and in the 2009 vintage they launched their own Ascella brand wines made at the First Creek winery by Liz Jackson.

Geoff and Barbara believe

that for the sake of future generations, the use of chemicals in agriculture has to be reduced.

In the Ascella vineyard they encourage a natural ecosystem so the vines are stronger and the plant and animal life live in balance.

This allows them to steer clear of harmful chemicals, a claim they back up with rigorous testing.