Wine Australia

AUSTRALIAN Grape & Wine

Australian Wine Industry Gender Equity Toolkit

CASE STUDY

Setting yourself up for success during vintage – managing teams and managing time

Pia Merrick, Head Winemaker, Australian Vintage, SA



Good preparation for vintage includes clear communication and understanding your people.

For wineries of all sizes, the most important thing is to go back to the very start, which is recruitment.

Recruitment in the wine industry, particularly during vintage, needs a thoughtful balance between operational demands and employee well-being. By setting clear expectations during the interview — such as 38-hour work weeks outside of vintage and the requirement for vintage hours during peak periods — you create an environment where staff can manage their professional responsibilities alongside personal commitments.

This vintage we openly discussed individuals' preferences and accommodating varying start times to foster a supportive work environment that balances operational needs with personal commitments. Our teams understand that being adaptable is key to maintaining productivity.

While managing staggered shifts requires effort, the benefits of a content and committed workforce during the demanding vintage period are invaluable.

Preparation and leadership support

We trialled various scenarios to prepare for peak times, ensuring everyone knew their roles and responsibilities.

A month before vintage, we implemented a personality strength training session for our team — a decision that proved invaluable during the peak of harvest. The training, which focused on understanding and leveraging individual strengths, significantly enhanced cohesion and communication. When the intensity of vintage set in, this shared understanding allowed us to work more effectively, ensuring a smoother and more successful harvest season.

Ahead of vintage, we trialled a range of scenarios — we simulated machinery breakdowns and delayed truck arrivals, allowing us to anticipate and address potential challenges and develop effective contingency plans. We then presented our findings to senior management and the sustainability team. This collaborative effort not only showcased our commitment to sustainable practices but also highlighted the tangible value of teamwork in driving meaningful business results.

Positive outcomes

Outside of vintage, our team works 4.5 days a week from July through December. This flexible schedule isn't just about work-life balance — it's about creating opportunities for deeper community engagement and fostering a strong sense of belonging. We want our staff to feel truly at home in the region, not just at work but as part of the wider community.

If you get it right during vintage, by the middle of the year you're in a strong position in terms of wine quality. Gathering meaningful data throughout vintage on how this approach impacts quality over time will be invaluable for sharing with leaders and managers — and will support smarter, lower-intervention winemaking.

We're talking about something that's constantly living and reacting with the environment. Whether it's in a barrel or tank, wine is constantly changing. So is our team!