



# Meet the Yarra's High Flyer

---

## **WORDS**

Brendan Black

## **PHOTOGRAPHY**

By James Morgan and courtesy of Bird  
On A Wire.

For Bird On A Wire's Caroline Mooney, wine has  
always been an integral part of life – and doesn't it  
show.

**LIKE MANY BEFORE HER**, winemaker Caroline Mooney, of **Bird on a Wire** in the Yarra Valley, discovered wine was intricately linked to many aspects of her life. As she says, “My greatest wine experiences have actually been about experiencing life.” Her eventual embrace of the grape, via an unconventional pathway, has led to a richly satisfying career and a full appreciation of the natural world around her.

Born and raised on a farm in the small town of Yering, Victoria, Mooney loved the country lifestyle. From a young age, she accompanied her dad on his trips to South Australia to visit wineries – and for birthdays, the family would open wines from the birth year, or at least from close as possible to the year.

Despite her love of maths and chemistry in high school, Mooney was dissuaded somewhat from pursuing a science-oriented career when her maths teacher told her she would never be any good at the subject. While her sister heard about this and reprimanded the teacher, it nevertheless influenced her later decision to study arts and design at university. However, even with a keen interest in painting and drawing, she couldn't quite see where it was taking her.





Caroline Mooney created the winery with husband Paul Bridgeman in 2008.

Needing to “shake my life up”, Mooney turned her back on the degree, worked for a while to save up for travel, and then headed overseas to go backpacking. Her trip included visits to regions such as Bordeaux, yet it was her experience of life there, rather than wine, that motivated her. On her return, she started working at **Yarra Ridge** in Yarra Glen, when Paul Bridgeman (later to become a winemaker at **Yarra Yering** and **Levantine Hill**, as well as Mooney’s husband) joined the team.

Progressing to the role of cellar door manager, Mooney wanted to gain more hands-on experience with wine, especially the making of it. After moving to **Tintara** in McLaren Vale in 2000, she knew wine would officially become her career.

Mooney fondly remembers sitting on a milk crate in the lounge room to study when she enrolled in Charles Sturt University’s Bachelor of Wine Science degree. Despite the views of her former teacher, she actually felt she was “not bad” at maths and chemistry, and as she approached her new course like a job, this helped her stay focused and to succeed.



She says one of the benefits of studying at Charles Sturt remotely was she could work and study off-campus, but then travel up there three or four times a year, to steep herself in the industry.

“[I could mix with] like-minded people who are ... jumping into an industry that is ... full of dynamic positivity and possibility,” she remembers. There was a great sense of achievement, as well as shared struggle (and partying), particularly when the residential period fell during vintage.

In 2006, a few momentous events occurred. Mooney and Bridgeman married and headed over to France, completing a vintage at the famed **Domaine Jean-Louis Chave** in Hermitage. It was here that Mooney learnt more about the process of winemaking and also the philosophy behind it; that there are elements you can control and those that you can't, and it's best to work with your circumstances in the vineyard and winery rather than trying too hard to manipulate the process. Another important lesson was the intrinsic link between food and wine: that some wines can't be fully understood and appreciated until they are paired with the right kinds of food. Her approach to wine is similar to that of being in the kitchen, given the joy she derives from taking a raw product and creating something that brings enjoyment to herself and to others.



These factors were firmly in Mooney's mind when she and Bridgeman created Bird on a Wire in 2008 – the name derived from a song by Leonard Cohen – where she took over

the reins fully in 2010. Having worked as a contract winemaker for several years, Mooney based her operations at **Warramate**, before eventually moving to **Long Gully**.

It was here that she also started **Yarra Valley Artisan Winemakers**, a small group offering contract winemaking services.

During this time, she was approached by Rod Micallef, the director of **Zonzo Estate**, to make wines for his label. Their business relationship has since flourished, and in 2019 Mooney helped Micallef design a new winery in Lilydale, a purpose-built space with production facilities, barrel room and cold storage. This hangar-like warehouse is massive, shiny and a wonder to behold, allowing Mooney to conduct all aspects of the winemaking process in one place for both labels, thus keeping her firmly planted in the Yarra Valley.

While she has travelled far and wide, Mooney always loves coming home. The farm in Yering where she grew up, **Hubertswood** (named after the settler and vigneron Hubert de Castella), has been the site of the **Yarra Valley Dairy** since 1994. The cheese factory was established due to a desire to diversify away from beef and sheep farming, with Mooney's mum Mary being the original cheesemaker. The dairy focuses on the farmhouse style of cheese common in France and Italy, which, unsurprisingly, also happens to pair marvellously with Mooney's wines.



**Bird on a Wire** has three main offerings – chardonnay, marsanne and syrah – with others produced on a limited-release basis, such as pinot noir, nebbiolo, and rosé. Fruit for the chardonnay is sourced from the **Willowlake Vineyard** in Gladysdale, a plot with a stellar reputation for producing cool-climate chardonnay and pinot noir. The marsanne and syrah come from sites in Yarra Glen, which were selected by Mooney due to the vineyards being “awesome”.

Wines are usually released with several years of bottle age, which helps them to develop before they reach the consumer, something easier to do with the increased space. There will only be a few more vintages left of the marsanne from the current vineyard, however, as the new owners recently decided to pull it all out. Mooney is mulling either looking for another grower to replace the marsanne, or instead adding a different grape variety to the core range, such as nebbiolo.

Even given the recent development with the marsanne, Mooney has resisted the urge to establish her own vineyard, as she feels she wouldn't have the time to dedicate to it, and her growers already produce amazing fruit. The wine industry has changed a great deal and it is increasingly common to find winemakers who source their grapes from vineyards they don't own. This has allowed younger winemakers to get a start in the field, which also helps bring new ideas to an old profession.

A recent initiative keeping Mooney busy is her partnership with Bird Life Australia, who are responsible for the annual Backyard Bird Count. Mooney offers wine packs with a percentage of the proceeds going to Bird Life Australia and their efforts to protect native birds and their habitats. Flora and fauna have always interested her as much as wine has, but they are now a much greater focus in her life.

An exciting new chapter has now begun for Mooney, as she has signed with Imbibo to distribute her wines across all of Australia, whereas before they were only available in Melbourne and Sydney.

Given that the country is opening up again, and on-premise sales are returning to previous levels, Mooney is confident Bird on a Wire will fly once again.





## Wines to try

### **2017 Bird on a Wire Marsanne, A\$39**

Described by Mooney as a “polarising” wine due to not conforming to the usual idea of Australian marsanne, this wine is textural, flavourful, and at its best when consumed with food. There’s wax, lemon, pear, blossom, honey, and nuttiness. Delicious with cheese or chicken.

### **2017 Bird on a Wire Syrah, A\$45**

This is possibly one of the most dark and brooding syrahs you’ll find in the Yarra Valley. Black cherry, spice and violets lead the way, with some prune, mushroom, cola and gamey notes from bottle age. On the second night, it’s even more of a knockout.

### **2021 Bird on a Wire Pinot Noir, A\$45**

Tasted in Dec 2021 before bottling, the pinot noir was showing beautifully: perfumed, full of dark cherries, cinnamon, raspberry, violets, forest floor, cedar and pepper, all developing in the glass as it breathed. It’ll go smashingly with duck or even some spicy Indian dishes. Drink or cellar.

