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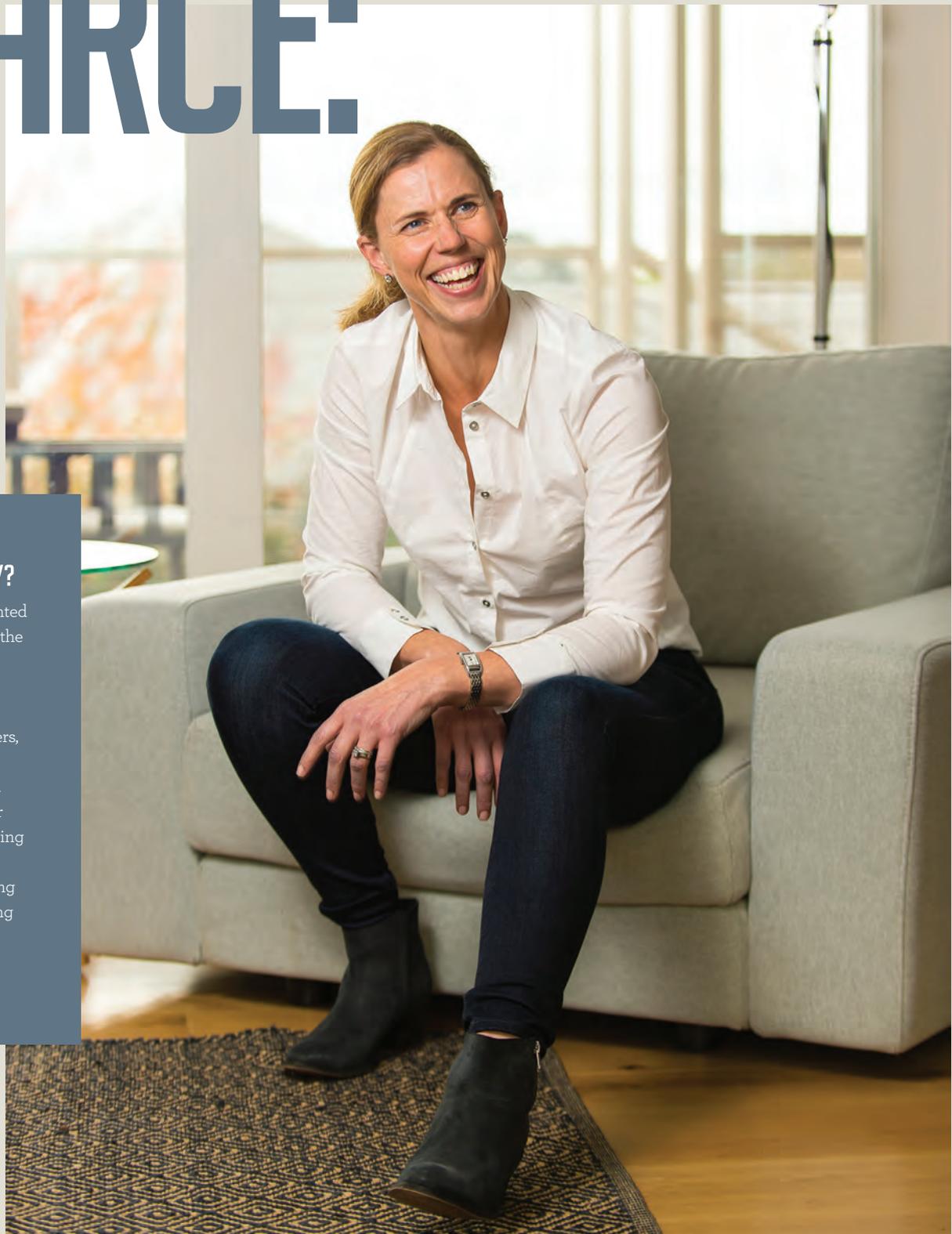
MENCIA MAGIC

INCA PEARCE:

PHOTOS JOHN KRÜGER

WHAT DRIVES INCA CRAZY?

“We’re very good at unwarranted and unnecessary criticism in the Australian wine industry. We tend to be a bit inward and critical – whether that’s corporates versus small players, bulk versus premium, region versus region, and on and on. We should be celebrating our diverse industry, and harnessing that positive energy into collaborative projects. Working collaboratively is what is going to get us success in export markets, and that’s where the growth is.”



THE PHYLLOXERA BOARD HAS UNDERGONE MORE THAN A REBRAND IN THE PAST TWO YEARS. VINEHEALTH AUSTRALIA'S NEW CEO INCA PEARCE IS A GAME CHANGER FOR THE ORGANISATION AND THE BIOSECURITY LANDSCAPE IN GENERAL. BUT WHO IS INCA PEARCE? WBM CAUGHT UP WITH INCA AND HER DAD, TERRY LEE, FOR A CHAT.

She was raised by the man who transformed the AWRI. She's done vintages around the world. She has a masters of viticulture. She managed R&D at Pernod Ricard. Meet Inca Pearce – CEO of Vinehealth Australia.

Inca is the opposite of everything you think you know about people from industry bodies. In the space of one year as CEO, she's transformed Vinehealth Australia (formally the Phylloxera Board of SA) into a solutions provider, shifting the dynamic from biosecurity being an insurance against risk to an enabler for industry success.

Inca has wine in her blood. She had ambitions to be a doctor – she was studying human physiology and pharmacology when her dad, Terry Lee, encouraged her to consider viticulture.

“Dad was the managing director of the Australian Wine Research Institute at the time and he said, ‘Why don't you try the wine industry? We're in a boom period, it's very exciting.’ I organised an interview with Peter Dry who was the senior viticulture lecturer at The University of Adelaide,” Inca says.

But that didn't go so well. “It was late on a Friday afternoon and I was all dressed up for a night out with my girlfriends. Peter said, ‘You do know you'll need to get your hands dirty in viticulture’, raising an eyebrow. I still

don't think I've lived that down.”

It was 1994 and the Australian wine industry was indeed booming. “There were so many acres being planted, I knew we were going to need viticulturists. We were going to need people with good scientific knowledge of the grapevine,” Terry says.

“That focus on science has done very well for the Australian wine industry, which has had an enormous impact on the world of wine over the past 30 years, both in winemaking and viticultural terms.”

Inca completed her masters of viticulture in 1996 and quickly found a job with Orlando Wines, working as a technical officer in the vineyards at Padthaway and Coonawarra and then at Rowland Flat, under Russell Johnstone, while also completing her thesis. “It was hectic! But it was an interesting role because it was all about understanding the science behind grape quality and payments.”

Inca's rise through the ranks of Orlando was rapid – senior viticulturist (2005), manager of research and development (by 2007) and communications manager (by 2010), with four US vintages under her belt. Orlando was owned by Pernod Ricard, which opened opportunities for career development for Inca. “Orlando and then Pernod Ricard Winemakers were an extraordinary company to work for. Over the course of my employment, I got to know the whole

business and it gave me incredible insight across the entire supply chain.”

She counts Don Lester, Leon Deans and Philip Laffer among her key mentors at Orlando, luminaries of the Australian wine scene.

When Pernod underwent a global restructure in 2014, Inca decided it was time to leave the organisation she'd been with in various roles for 17 years.

“It was tough because there were a lot of people who were being made redundant at the time. My office was really the ‘couch’ where people would come and sit and chat about it all. I really relished that role, it made it hard to take a package and leave it behind. But I'd been there for a long time. For me it was an opportunity to reconsider my career. I didn't want my way of thinking becoming institutionalised.”

Inca took six months off to recalibrate and was approached by the then head of the Phylloxera Board Alan Nankivell to do some project work in early 2015. By February 2016, Inca was acting CEO. And in April 2016, she was awarded the top job at the newly rebranded Vinehealth Australia.

“I'm loving it – I thrive on pressure,” Inca says. “It's the first CEO role I've done, but it's similar to previous work I've done in lots of ways. At Orlando, it was all about creating a premium product, according to prescribed quality and cost specs, to excite consumers, and prompt them to buy again or trade up.

GAME CHANGER



Vinehealth Australia CEO Inca Pearce with her dad and industry legend, Terry Lee.

“Now I’m just selling a different product – I’m getting people enthused about biosecurity. But it’s totally different to the corporate world in terms of decision making – I report to a board, which is a great new challenge for me. And working with government is a new challenge, too.”

In the year since taking the reins, Inca has ramped up projects that will deliver practical solutions to growers, and is producing a raft of tools to help growers understand and

implement biosecurity. Late last year, she employed Suzanne McLoughlin, another experienced and successful viticulturist, as Vinehealth’s technical manager.

“We need to be accountable to growers and we need to do everything we can to support them in their quest to protect their vineyards. As an organisation, we need to do a better job in this area,” Inca says. “I really hope Suzanne and I bring a practical industry focus to an industry body. I think that

develops a sense of empathy for growers – we’ve worked with growers our whole lives.”

What’s the biggest challenge? “Getting buy-in from growers for setting up biosecurity practices on their properties. The pendulum hasn’t even started to swing in the direction we need to go with biosecurity yet,” she says.

“That’s our number one challenge: how do we get growers to invest in very small biosecurity practices that can make a huge difference.” ♦



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