



# An Evolving Plan

**B**ack in March 1998, Jennifer and Rhys Withers fell in love with a property comprising sixty-seven vacant acres and well positioned in the Sweetwater Estate at Pokolbin, actually situated on part of the original stock route to Singleton.

They purchased the property as an answer to their long-term goals and love of the Hunter Valley, an alternative to their ongoing strong interest in sailing and a place to escape to from the city at weekends and for holidays.

But with an eye on retirement, Rhys, an astute corporate businessman, also had a commercial vision and mindset behind the purchase.

Rhys and Jennifer named the estate “Littledale”, after the name of the couple’s

farm when first married and living in New Zealand. The first stage was to establish a vineyard and then to build a home that would complement the estate in all ways. Initially, weekends were spent clearing the land, landscaping and building infrastructure such as sheds and irrigation.

Three grape varieties, Sangiovese, Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon, were planted and established over twenty acres, not without some initial trial and error. A further five acres of Verdelho and Chardonnay are currently being established.

With a defined business and lifestyle plan in mind, the couple contacted Singleton-based builders Stibbard Homes to design a home.

“At the initial design meetings with Jennifer and Rhys, we established that any proposed design required sufficient flexibility to enable it to meet both their immediate and perceived future requirements,” said Neil Alberts, Stibbard’s home designer.

“Initially, the building was to provide accommodation while working to establish the vineyard, as well as a family holiday destination.

“It was envisaged that in years to come, the now-holiday home would serve a dual role as both a cellar door from which the family wine company can trade, and manager or tourist accommodation. >









"We decided that a pavilion design, linked by screened breezeways, provided this flexibility. Other factors which had an impact on the overall layout were the need to feature a large pond which was part of the landscaping to the north of the building site and also the desire to retain two established and mature eucalypts for shade."

The Withers wanted an Australian country cottage-style home that blended with the surrounding landscape, and which would complement the sandstone, timber and iron materials they preferred to use. >

## We wanted to create a real country home, not a city-styled home in the country.

- Jennifer Withers

*Above L to R: The Withers Family - Karen, Rhys, Jennifer and Andrew, sampling their Littledale wine.*

*Below: The front dam, which is the perfect swimming hole in the hot summer months.*











The final design relied on traditional roof shapes, pitch and proportions to create the contemporary country feel. Although the budget ruled out sandstone as an external wall cladding, a mixture of natural-coloured masonry blocks and Colorbond Custom Orb achieved the desired ambience.

Jennifer had some definite ideas when it came to the internal fit out of the home.

"I wanted to create a real country home, not a city-styled home in the country. For one, I decided to use Mini-Orb decorative sheeting on the en suite and bathroom walls instead of glass and tiling. In hindsight, it has been most practical and very easy to keep clean, at the same time keeping the country feel."

The first pavilion of Colorbond Custom Orb accommodates two spacious double-sized bedrooms, and a bathroom with a screened verandah off the side.

The central linked pavilion of natural-coloured masonry block is designated as the main living area, featuring blue gum timber flooring, natural coloured masonry block walls and clear-finished, raking Fijian cedar ceilings.

The massive open-plan design easily encompasses a lounge/sitting room with a welcoming fireplace and a superb craftsman kitchen equipped with stainless chef's stove, timber cupboards and ample bench space.

A two-way walk through a shelved pantry room behind the kitchen wall creates a perfect space to store china and household appliances and the refrigerator, keeping the kitchen area uncluttered.

The third pavilion, again of Colorbond Custom Orb, is accessed through another screened verandah linking the main living area with office/guest rooms, utility laundry, mud room and another bathroom. The double garage is at the end of this pavilion. Wide, covered verandahs around the perimeter of the







home give shade and protection from the elements, and at the same time enhance rainwater-collection capacity.

Eighteen months on from completion, the farm cottage has an already established informal, rambling cottage garden, a rose garden and a prolific vegetable garden that Jennifer has created, surrounded by acres of vineyards.

One thing Rhys was adamant about was that the house pond had to be aerated so the family could safely take a cooling summer dip. The aeration system, which is a floating immersed pump, also provides an excellent cooling effect for the house during the hot summer months.

The Withers' Littledale plan initially was to grow grapes to on sell to wine producers, but with the fruit they produced proving to be of top quality, the idea developed to create their own boutique wine, under the label of Littledale Estates.

Jennifer's dream to cultivate lavender proved to be a colourful if somewhat economically challenging project; a first-grade fragrant lavender oil and other related products are produced and also marketed under the Littledale name.

Littledale Estates now produces an excellent Italian-style Rosé from the Sangiovese, named "Blushing Duck", after a family joke, and a species which frequents the house pond. The first vintage (2003) of their Shiraz is named "The Little Red" and their new-release Verdelho is named "Prelude". New releases of Shiraz Cabernet Sauvignon are planned for this year.

Littledale Estates began marketing their first wines ten months ago. Andrew Withers has successfully been selling, taking over the role of Littledale's marketing executive. The sales are centred around selected Sydney-based restaurants and committed orders from acquaintances and word-of-mouth. >





The day-to-day running of the property is now under the watchful eye of Newcastle-based viticulturist Jenny Bright and a full-time manager, Barney Barnett. At weekends and prime times, family and friends rally to lend a hand, working at various tasks such as picking and suckering.

The Withers family are now beginning to enjoy the fruits of their labours, literally speaking, by sipping their own fine wines. But not prepared to rest on their laurels, there are more plans afoot.

The “family council”, with daughter Karen acting as chief innovator, has decided to allow Rhys to realise his yearning to breed and graze miniature

Hereford cattle on a 14-acre portion of the property not under vine.

Having been the topic of great discussion around the family council table for some time now, it's almost certain that the decision has been minuted as a goer! Fine red wine and tender beef seem to be a perfect combination!

There are also future plans to build a second permanent home, designed to take full advantage of the high part of the property overlooking the entire vineyard and with views to the Brokenback Ranges in the south and the Barrington Tops in the far north.

From the actual spot, Rhys Withers described how the proposed driveway

would wind its way from the road through an avenue of grapevines purposely planted. In his mind's eye, he can see the dream.

The current purpose-built “Farm Cottage” could then be easily adapted from a home away from home into a cellar door outlet when the time is right, especially as Littledale Wines is now a dream realised and a going concern.

With retirement scheduled for the end of the year, Jennifer and Rhys Withers are well set for an active, productive and interesting retirement in the years ahead, working together with Karen and Andrew to build a real family business. 🍷

