

## **JULIAN CASTAGNA: FILM PRODUCER, WINEMAKER**



Julian Castagna is a former pupil of St. Albans High School who always had an interest in drama and theatre. He was introduced to film production when he started working for the ABC as a mail boy. He was quick to take the opportunities that presented themselves and was soon Directing a popular ABC television music show, 'The Hit Parade', as well as running his own discotheque - one of the first in Melbourne. But it was in England that his interest in film-making blossomed into a career that kept him occupied for sixteen years. His overseas experiences began in Sweden and Spain where he worked, at first, for a pittance, which enabled him to extend his experience as a Director and Producer. And, from there, Castagna went on to establish himself in London and form his own production company where he started making mainly advertising films that took him to places like Paris,

Rome, New York, and Los Angeles.

He is now back in Australia, and though still involved with film-making to some extent, has taken a major career change to produce wines which are amongst the top-quality in Australian boutique wineries. The Castagna vineyard is run biodynamically as is Cullen from Margaret River and Jasper Hill in Heathcote. Ron Loughton of Jasper Hill in Heathcote and Julian Castagna of Castagna in Beechworth are almost neighbours, historically speaking, because Ron grew up in Sydenham while Julian was just down the road in St Albans.

Castagna's small vineyard produces Shiraz, Viognier, and Sangiovese wines that are receiving critical acclaim on the Australian wine scene. He has also established a reputation for being a guru in the relatively new biodynamic philosophy of viticulture, and has exhibited his wines in Bordeaux (2003) and New York (2004) San Francisco, Tokyo, London, Brussels (2005) as part of a 'best of the best exhibition' featuring biodynamic wines from a dozen countries. It is by invitation only and only the top-drawer are invited. Also Castagna took the opportunity to expand this international tasting concept into an educational and promotional event by hosting via Biodynamic Agriculture Australia, the first International Biodynamic Wine Forum at La Trobe University, in Beechworth (2004) which attracted viticulturists from as far afield as Chile and France.

Running a small winery is not a get rich quick venture, in fact, many small wine producers operate on margins as low as 1%-4%. Castagna's output is about 1,000 cases a year, which he admits is 'right on the edge' financially speaking, but the lifestyle is priceless.

### **Coming to Australia**

I was born Guliano Castagna on top of a hilled village named Montona in the province of Trieste, in Italy. In Australia I became known as Julian. My mother and father arrived in Australia in 1951 under refugee status with no money. They brought with them the clothes on their backs and a copper pot for cooking polenta - which I still have. My parents came from a tiny village where making a living in Italy's post-war conditions was difficult; migration was a solution accepted by many.

I think I remember (or it may simply be family folk-lore) lining up to board a ship with my family, and my mother's sister's family - who was in front of us in the queue - to board whichever boat came along. My mother's sister boarded the ship for America and then a barrier came down. The ship was full. The next boat was bound for Australia. So, that's how we came to Australia. It sounds implausible in this day and age but it's very much how my father told the story. My mother remembers me crying because I wanted us to go with Zia.

My mother never forgot that there were only two countries in the world who would take people without 'papers': America and Australia - and with the polenta pot in her hand and me and my father flanking her, she thanked God for both of them.

(Bringing to mind my parents' relocation to Australia I'm struck by how courageous they were: they didn't speak the language; they didn't have any money, nor did they understand the currency; they didn't have jobs; they didn't know where they were going to live; they didn't even have a friend.)

### **Family**

My father Pietro (Peter) Castagna was a stonemason in Italy, and when he came to Australia he worked in a factory at first and eventually as a brick layer and a sort-of builder - not a big-time one. We settled at 20 Main Road West, St Albans, at first in a one-roomed bungalow which my father built and which ended up housing the now six of us till my youngest sister was born five or six years later. Being a stonemason my father had the skill to build a brick house for us whereas many other places were being built of weatherboard. He worked in a factory on night shift so he could build the house in daylight hours.

My father really was a worker rather than a thinker. He thought that hard labour was what you did to get on, whereas I always said success is in the head - anyone can do physical work, but very few people can think. My father didn't really want me to go on at school as he saw that I had abilities to help his business grow. If it wasn't for my mother I probably would have left school at fourteen. My mother is very bright and understood that education was very important.

I have four sisters, all younger than me. I'm quite different to them. They've happily settled in the western suburbs of Melbourne, whereas I couldn't wait to get out. I've never been able to accept that an accident of birth should control or dictate your life. It never occurred to me that anyone could be restricted in their aspirations by where they came from - I've never had any fear in that regard.

### **Primary School**

I first went to St Albans State School in May 1951. I have no memory of it other than my mother coming to the school at lunchtime to bring me freshly squeezed plum juice and something freshly made each day because I didn't want to eat what was on offer at the school tuck shop.

In 1953 I transferred to Sunshine Catholic School, Our Lady's, a school which I hated. I was there from Grade 3 to Grade 6. There was only one good teacher in that whole school - such an indictment of that system. I remember one particular nun, the only one there with any humanity - I wish I could remember her name as she used to tell us such wonderful stories. She would take us into the room where all the sports and gym equipment was stored; it was just a little junk room really with a vaulting horse and quite crowded too. She'd seat the kids around the room and tell stories. I remember it as very important - I suspect it is from her that I first understood about theatre through story telling and her dramatisation of the story. I can still see her dressed up in her nun's habit and wimple putting dramatic emphasis into her stories, which really impressed me.

I have also many awful memories of that school. I can remember at one general assembly a boy not more than 6 or 7 who had not turned up for a sports carnival, because his parents wouldn't permit it, being beaten by the headmistress on the stage the next morning in front of the whole school with strips of rubber linoleum and hitting him until his legs bled. Those are powerful memories of injustice for a young boy and the attitude formed from them very much effects how I am today.

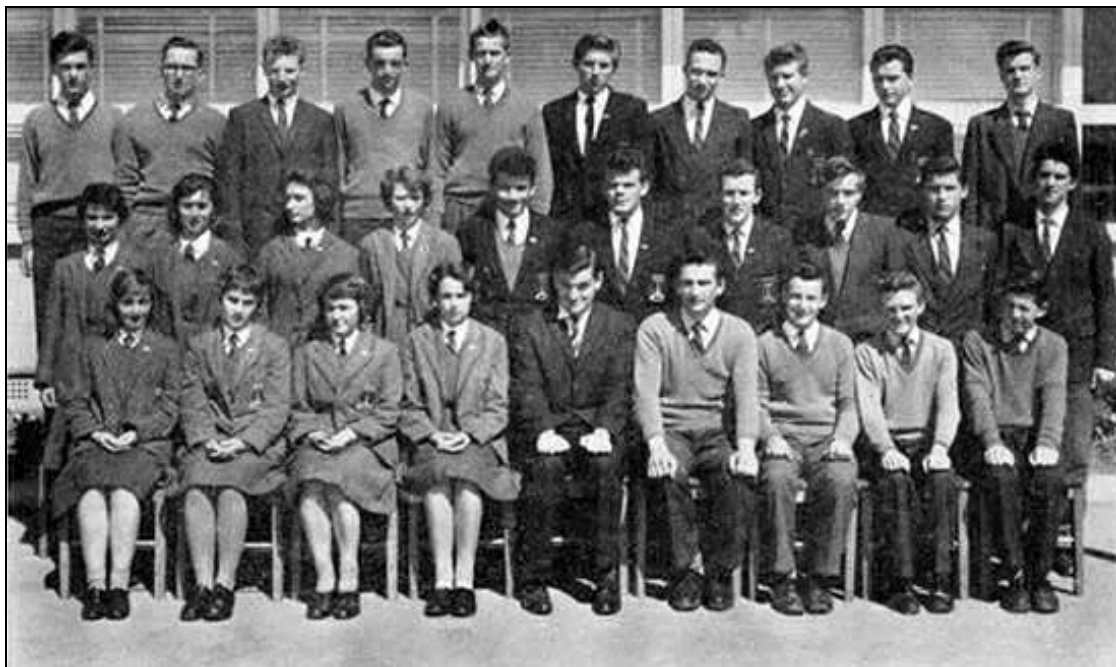
### **Competence in English**

When my parents came to Australia in the early fifties I guess I didn't speak any English, though I never remember not being able to speak English. Neither of my parents ever spoke English well. My father died three years ago and he still only spoke broken English. My mother speaks some English but is in no way fluent. That didn't seem to be a problem for us kids - communication was never a problem. St Albans in those early days was very multi-cultural. I remember a newspaper coming to take a photo of the school and a panoramic photograph of the school kids and there were 46 nationalities represented. It's amazing. Looking back at it now I guess it would be considered as an underprivileged school. I never saw that at all.

### **High School**

I started high school in 1957, the second year of the school, the first year in its present location. Barker was the Principal then, and though I think he never got the credit he deserved he was a fantastic headmaster. I don't think he was a great educator but he was a great inspirer and a courageous man. I think life is about courage and he inspired and encouraged both staff and pupils. There were never restrictions in those early years, whereas as the school got bigger everything became restricted. I stayed there right through to Matric. Some of the teachers that I remember with some fondness are Reid, Strauss, Gliddon, and Alcorn It's not that I disliked the other teachers, but some of them were very wishy-washy, and because I didn't engage in the system we didn't understand each other very well. The only

teacher I engaged with was Tom 'Doc' Walsh who undoubtedly had a powerful influence on my life and future career.



Form 5, 1961. (Rear L-R): B Vadjnal, D Richards, F Honey, E Hylan, R Szczudlinski, B Listopad, A Kratsis, M Neskov, T Ciesniewski, H Koch (Middle): J Cox, E Seseke, V Kepalas, R Andrews, E Bajraszewski, J Darul, J McMillen, G Lambert, L Labko, J Castagna (Front): R Freeland, A Kasser, N Carrick, J Cocks (Form Captain), Mr G Reid, W Muc (Form Captain), J Waring, R Priest, J Rodgers.

I became part of Doc Walsh's dramatic group which was not part of the school but a group drawn from children from several schools. That group was called Electra Dramatic - I have my blazer pocket badge framed on my study wall. That's how I got to travel Australia, by performing plays in various towns and cities round Australia. It was probably in 1958 when all this started. I remember my parents couldn't afford the uniform that was required to go on tour and Doc helped with the cost. That's why I worked at various shops after school from an early age, to earn money for that sort of stuff.



Julian Castagna, third from right, with Doc Walsh and the drama group, 1960s.

### **Impressions of School**

I was fortunate as I think I had one or two very good teachers - although we had some awful ones too. The most important teacher for me was Doc Walsh; he showed me that I had something different to offer.

People like Strauss and Gliddon were really bright people: It was the first time I saw brightness and cleverness.



M Bowkun, V Mahorin, G Castagna, R Kiss, Mr Conroy, Mrs Gliddon, S Gunew, R Keegan.

School, for me, was never just about learning, school was an experience: I knew where I was going; I knew where I wanted to go when I was very young; I knew that I wanted to be in something to do with theatre-drama. I knew almost instinctively, but you couldn't talk about it, being an migrant Italian boy from St Albans. But I knew then what I wanted to do. My father of course thought it was all nonsense - he thought I should learn to do something practical - like building. He strongly disapproved of my acting and didn't come to see any play I was in until I was about 18.

I have no idea why I was so interested in drama. I think it may have been because of radio, because I listened to the radio a lot and the spoken word has always been of interest to me. I've always been able to see images.

School was a process, nothing else. It's the good teachers that made a difference. Having raised two children I've seen first-hand how lucky one is to have good teachers. One son didn't have one in this whole school life the other had one - it makes a big difference. I can think of four good teachers during my time at school, so I think we were pretty lucky.

### **Part-time Work**

I worked every night after school, every Saturday and most Sundays, at two places. One was Joe's Fruit Shop, which was later called St Albans Fruit Supply. I worked there for a long time, working after school and on Saturdays.

The rest of the time I worked at the local delicatessen. That was in Main Road, right down towards the end, run by a couple of guys who didn't live in St. Albans. There was a huge Polish-Russian population there and that's why I call it a delicatessen rather than a milk bar. The customers would only speak to you in Russian, Polish, Yiddish, whatever their mother-tongue was so you had to learn. You didn't learn it fluently, but you learnt enough. I needed the job because I needed the money. They paid me little enough, but that didn't matter. If you wanted the job that's what you did. I was always good with mental arithmetic and the owners were impressed by that. They'd say, "No, no, you've got it wrong" and then they'd write it down, add it up, and say, "You're right." I would have been about 14.

Svetlana Bohudski was another student from the high school who was working at the same delicatessen. I first met Svetlana at school. She was going out with Tom Ciesniewski, who was a friend of mine. Svetlana was part of the school drama group, and was in the play called Lilac Time. Even though I wouldn't act in the school plays I would help with makeup and the like. We used to do performances at Sunshine Town Hall.

I worked all through secondary school until I joined the ABC. I worked either at the delicatessen or the fruit shop. The fruit shop was every Saturday morning, because along with my pay I would get some of the fruit that couldn't be sold and that would give our family fruit for the week.

### **Study Habits**

I didn't study and never did any concentrated work for school. I recognised early that one of the skills I had was a very good auditory memory so I worked to buy a tape recorder so that I could dictate on to it what I had learnt in my lessons at the end of each day and then replay it. I was eleven. I passed exams by reading the set text into a tape recorder and then listening to it, and during exams it would just all come back, I could 'hear' it. It was a process for me, rather than something to learn.

### **Character Traits**

Both my parents were conservative and not prone to risk-taking, my mother still is very conservative. There is no doubt that there was great love and great hope for me from them. I know that when I went on those trips with Doc Walsh they sometimes didn't eat to allow me to do it - quite powerful - and that wouldn't have happened without my mother. My father wouldn't have allowed it.

In truth, I think we're born with what we are. We are what we are. Some of us use that given talent and some don't, but it's always based on who we are and what makes us tick. I guess we're taught a bit, but I think it's mostly innate. I know that I behave in a repetitive manner, differently, but the things that make me react are always the same. If I see someone being treated unfairly, I react. If I see someone not accepting responsibility, I react. Even with my boys. I suspect I'm not an easy father to have because I can be pretty tough. I think the boys are only now starting to understand me. We have a wonderful relationship, but I'm not an easy parent to live with.

### **Attitudes to School**

My children don't feel warmly about their school life and they had a much more salubrious education than I did, whereas I do feel warmly about the school in the first part of my life. I felt it was an important 'basic' to my start in life. I feel warmly towards the school even though I didn't like some of the teachers. Torpey, the third headmaster was the first person that I recognised that I didn't like - I don't mean dislike - I just felt that his energy was negative he was a bureaucrat first and an educator second. We ended up having bureaucrats at St Albans. Barker, our first headmaster, was always a teacher first and therefore attracted staff who had energy.

I think that St. Albans, in its early years, was a unique school. It schooled sons of migrants who were hungry for knowledge and success. The school that my sisters went to - same school - was a totally different school to the one I went to. They started in the mid-sixties or a bit earlier. Leadership became bureaucratic rather than inspirational.

I can't think of a major negative experience with any of my teachers, though I think there were teachers who were not very good, but that's a retrospective perception. At the time I thought it was me not being clever enough to understand what they were talking about. Despite that, it's been an extremely important part of my life because it created who I am, and sometimes it's a bit of a monster, in the sense that I think fairness is absolute, and therefore if I see unfairness I react in a way that is very powerful, and sometimes that is inappropriate. Fairness, both giving and receiving has become an important part of my life. I don't know whether that's also to do with my upbringing, that is, coming from immigrant parents where you saw people having a tough time.

As a young child, I remember door-to-door salesmen coming to the house and giving my mother their chat. She would buy something from them with a precious shilling believing what they told her was true only to find it broke or disintegrated very quickly. It bothered me greatly that someone had been dishonest with her.

### **Working for the ABC**

I feel my time at St Albans was very positive because of the spirit and the energy of the school. I did Matriculation and then went to the ABC. I was going to go to university when the ABC offered me a job as a mail boy; I said no. I went home and thought that was stupid of me, because working for the ABC was exactly what I wanted to do. So I went back and said yes. I worked at the ABC for about two to three years before going to London.

Once I was at the ABC I had access to equipment - I did things. I was one of the few really young people there and I was prepared to work for nothing just to have the opportunity to improve myself. I'd work at night using the machinery that was available to me. I started a discotheque when no one else was doing it. In fact, I had one of the first discotheques in Melbourne, a place called The Mad Hatter in Little

Lonsdale Street. I was working on a pop program for the ABC, so I would audition the people at the discotheque, and that's how I came across all these great bands. We had people like Mick Hadley and Lobby Loyde from the Purple Hearts, The Loved Ones with Gerry Humphrys were regular performers, and others included Running, Jumping, Standing Still. The Mad Hatter didn't last for very long but it was popular because it featured live bands as well as the latest pop records. My three teen-age colleagues in this business were Sue Johns, Boris Damast and Jim Byrnes - I was the senior partner because I was aged 21. Sue was the one responsible for the decor and decorations inspired by the characters from Alice in Wonderland.

Working with the presentation staff at the ABC I very soon realised I had skills as a director. At that stage the ABC had a policy of promoting people from the inside. As people were promoted others would be given a try-out in their position by being put in that job temporarily. If you could do it well you got the job permanently. It was a great time to be at the ABC. Again, it was a process. My ambition was to become a TV producer and I was planning to go to America and study at the Los Angeles University. I tried very hard and was accepted into the UCLA Film course, but the big disappointment for me at the time was I just couldn't raise all the money. Had I got in I would have been there at the same time as Coppola, Lucas and the like.

### **Working in Europe**

Then I went to Europe. I left Australia because I hated Melbourne and I hated St Albans. I was also called up for national service which was another good reason to leave. At that stage you still had the right to go overseas as long as you signed a piece of paper to say you'd go into the army when you got back. I didn't want to go into the army so I just went away and didn't come back until Whitlam got in and abolished the call-up.

First we went to Sweden, and that was fairly disastrous. We had been doing a programme at the ABC called The Hit Parade, which a Producer from Sweden had seen and invited us to do something similar in Sweden. Boris Damast (who was a partner in the discotheque venture) and I were really responsible for it. At that stage I was a Gramophone Operator but I was also directing The Hit Parade. It was cute. We had a Presenter and we would do things that lots of people do now, such as quote lines out of comedy and the Presenter would have to give off-the-cuff answers. It was quick, smart, and funny. No one else was doing anything like that at the time. When I tried to reproduce that in Sweden it was a disaster. I didn't recognise that much of the success of what I was doing at the ABC was because I had help from all the other crew members. We did a bit of thinking but the crew did all the work getting the cameras in the right place at the right time, being ready for the jokes. In Sweden no one was helping me. They'd say, "You're the expert. Show us. Tell us where you want the cameras to be, tell us what you want us to do." It was terrible. I had lots of ideas but I didn't know how to do it, whereas at the ABC all these guys knew what to do and did it. I'd point and say, "That one there, that one there ..." It's a wonder they didn't kill me.

After Sweden we went to Spain for a while, and then the UK.

### **Working in England**



I was in the UK for sixteen years, and from there I was making film and working all over the place: Rome, Los Angeles, New York. It was tough financially at the start. Carolann wasn't working at that stage. She was trying to be a writer, we had kids, and buying houses in London was expensive. When I first got to England I didn't have any contacts, so I knocked on doors. It took a while. I got caught working without a union ticket - at that time England was very unionised, so you couldn't work unless you had a union ticket, and couldn't get a union ticket unless you had a job! I worked for nothing at first and didn't care, because I wanted to gain an understanding of the industry. I eventually got a job that I suspect no one else wanted, but it got me a union ticket and that got me back into the film industry. They'd say "Can you do this?" and I'd say yes to whatever they were asking about. I remember working in

Spain as an assistant director and the producer fired the director and turned to me, "You can do that job can't you?" I said yes.

## **Filmmaking in Australia**

We got to a point in the UK where we had to make a decision whether our children were going to be educated in London or in Australia. The oldest one had just started school; we decided on Australia.

I've had wonderful experiences and been lucky, really. When I came back in 1981 I went straight into film. I came back to make a film about Cyclone Tracy but in the end the script was not one I wanted to make, so I started a production company that made advertising films - which became quite successful. People gave me lots of work - the work was very inventive. There's a camera attached to a Lear jet called Astrovision. I brought that to Australia in 1982, just after I came back. TAA gave me an airbus for a fortnight to film their major corporate commercial. We were flying around Sydney Harbour quite low and people were phoning the police to report a little aeroplane attacking this big passenger jet. Spy stuff they thought it was, and it was just us getting in very close to film it. The publicity did us no harm at all though.

## **Making Wine**

We'd been looking for a new challenge but had nothing definite in mind. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable because I was just working for money and that made me uneasy; advertising was going nowhere. We decided to look for something in the country, take it easy, and keep doing a bit of work. Then I suggested to my wife that we could make a little wine. Everything we've ever earned is in these 50 acres of land. If it hadn't worked ...

I have no understanding of failure; none whatsoever. I don't accept failure as a possibility in life. I've never had an experience that in the end hasn't been in some way or other positive. Never.

When I started my winery my mother said, "You know, your grandfather (Barbarossa) made wine."

I said, "Yes, I know he made his own wine."

"No," she said, "you don't listen do you? He made wine."

I said, "You've always told us he made his own wine."

She said, "No, no. He had a vineyard and was a winemaker. That was his business and that's how we lived. And he brought the first hand plough from Egypt."

I actually went back and stood in my grandfather's vineyard a couple of years ago. That was interesting. I seem to have a natural ability to make wine but I've no idea where that came from. I know where my palate's come from, but I have no science background. It was interesting to stand on a bit of land that belonged to my grandfather and feel the energy. That was on my mother's side. I never met him and have no memory of him. He is a photograph.

I have had no formal training as a wine maker, but I have a good palate and therefore I knew I could make good wine; it isn't brain surgery. French and Italian farmers have been making very good wine for centuries. I was lucky in that I have had the opportunity to experience great wines throughout my life. While I was working as a film Producer, I enjoyed many of the top French and Italian reds. I was living in London when there was a huge amount of wonderful wine available at fair prices and I had the opportunity to experience it. I'd say to people, "Let's go to lunch." I'd pick people up at half past ten, take a car to the airport, get on the aeroplane and take them to lunch in Paris. All of that was available to me, and it was available to me because I was working for a successful company.

When I was looking for land to buy in Victoria I came across Rick Kinzbrunner, who had established his Giaconda winery just outside Beechworth. I ended up buying 50 acres of land not far from Kinzbrunner on a hilltop overlooking a scenic rural landscape. I was interested in making Shiraz which was less dominated by oak and more suited to a variety of foods, though I do use French oak for maturing my wines. I add a very small proportion of Viognier to the Shiraz as they do on the Northern Rhone. I had been impressed by some of the Italian wines made from the Sangiovese grape particularly the classic wines from Tuscany. I thought the soil and climate of Beechworth was also suitable for this Italian grape, so I planted some of that as well.

We established the vineyard and winery in 1996. We did a lot of the work ourselves, with help. Whenever a job was too big or hard for us we brought in help, and when they'd done the hard bits we finished it off ourselves. We built out of straw bales.



The initial plantings were 70% Shiraz, 20% Sangiovese (all Brunello), and 10% Viognier. For many years, people assumed that the Beechworth terroir was like Burgundy because of Kinzbrunner's success with Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Then in 1999, research into Italian grape varieties in Australia identified Beechworth as a great spot for Sangiovese, but by then I had already established my vineyard, so I was already ahead of the research. I simply looked at the soil and saw there was so much similarity to areas of Tuscany that it is quite amazing.

When I planted the vines there was some infestation by the African black beetle. I bought the recommended pesticide and was going to spray the vineyard. I read that you had to

wear protective clothing as well as a respirator and had to see a doctor immediately if you spilt any of the chemical on your hands or body. I decided that was not something I wanted to use on my land. I did some research about the beetle and found that it usually fed on grass roots, but if you remove all the grass - and I had ploughed all the mid-rows - the beetle will transfer to the vine roots, being the next best thing to their normal preference. So I let the grass grow back and the beetles went back to that and left the vines alone. That's one of the reasons we decided to adopt biodynamic practices for the vineyard, to learn to live with nature rather than try to defeat it. It is more labour intensive and requires more vigilance to ensure healthy vines, but there are no chemical costs and the quality of the wine and the environment are much the better for it.

The biodynamic approach is not the same as organic farming, as biodynamics uses more of a homeopathic approach in using small amounts of additives as catalysts to free up nutrients in the soil.

The harvesting season means seven weeks of 18-hour days packed with anxiety and fatigue for the grape-picking team of family, friends and willing neighbours, just for the right to turn up next year and do it all again. (I think it takes a year to forget it's hard yakka and remember it romantically, just in time for them to enroll all over again.) My son Adam also puts in long hours of help to make sure the vintage is in on time.

### **Current Activities**

I travel a lot, more than I care to at times. I'm Chair of the Biodynamic Association of Australia and on a couple of boards, so that requires travel. I've just come back from Shanghai, where we were invited to be part of a trade mission. I'm still playing with film a bit. Carolann is a writer and we're trying to pull something together at the moment. That's taking up a bit of time. She's written a film I'd like to make, but I'm no longer as good at getting money as I was. Suddenly, having to find four million bucks is a bit complicated.



Julian Castagna, 2005.



2014 Update:



Castagna winery at Beechworth.

Castagna family at Beechworth.



Castagna family: Carolann (gardener, viticulturer, researcher and writer), sons Alexi (film-maker), Adam (winemaker), and Julian Castagna (padrone).  
Photo by Philip White <http://drinkster.blogspot.com/2011/11/castagna-opens-to-falcons-thunder.html>



Julian Castagna, 2015.

Link: Castagna Biodynamic Vineyard at [www.castagna.com.au](http://www.castagna.com.au)