

Vintage performer

Alec Epis won two VFL premierships with Essendon but now it's wine that excites him, writes IAN GILBERT

THERE aren't many people who can make wine as well as Alec Epis. And there certainly aren't many who can tell an anecdote as well as the Essendon dual premiership player.

Spend half an hour in his company and the former football champion and now winemaker's zest for life cannot fail to rub off on you.

While his football career provided enough accomplishments and anecdotes to fill a book, it's the winemaking that is his new passion, and his conviction that the Woodend area has the perfect soil and environment — or terroir, as the French would call it — to make pinot noir to rival anywhere in Australia.

"This area is becoming known for good pinots," he says. "I can't understand why people haven't planted more."

He'll be looking to convert a few more wine drinkers to his philosophy when Daylesford hosts the Everything In Its Right Place

festival on June 10. Alec's Domaine Epis label is among those taking part in the show, which is all about smaller-scale, individual wineries that allow a true regional identity to emerge from their wines.

For Alec, the progression into wine made perfect sense. His parents hailed from northern Italy and were lured Down Under by gold prospecting in Western Australia, making their life at Boulder, near Kalgoorlie.

"Wine was always part of my life," he remembers, recounting how his father would get a couple of barrels from the Swan Valley — "I wouldn't put that in my tractor today".

But making wine came later in Alec's life, after a stellar career for Essendon in what was then the VFL — winning the flag in 1962 and 1965.

His progress through the junior ranks had been meteoric with Goldfields League club Mines Rovers, in Western Australia, and he made the seniors aged only 17.

But his father couldn't understand the fixation with football.

"He offered to buy me a new car if I didn't play Aussie rules — he was a soccer man," Alec says.

Alec had

plenty of offers from Western Australia Football League clubs — "my ambition was to play for WA in a state game because I hated the Victorians," he chuckles — but higher honours were looming.

Footscray were in the hunt but Essendon told him to take a train — second-class, he points out — across the country to try out for the Dons.

However, events would test his resolve to play in the big league. He was denied a clearance to play from the WAFL and had to stand down from football for two years before he could turn out for the Dons.

IN THOSE days players, of course, also had regular jobs, and Alec worked as a butcher in Moonee Ponds from 5am-6pm through the week and 6-11.30am on a Saturday before he was free to play football.

Hardly the ideal preparation for physical endeavour but he prospered nevertheless.

"It was mind over matter in the end," he says.

Post-football, Alec bought his property at Woodend and in due course planted vines — "the best thing I've ever done", he says.

His estate produces pinot noir, chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon, but it's the pinot that he really enthuses about, believing the climatic conditions of Woodend are perfect for the notoriously fickle variety.

"Our pinot's a ripper because it's the site — pinot doesn't like hot weather, it likes a slower ripening," he says.

Alec typifies the attitude of the exhibitors at the show, who are in the game for contentment, not cash.

"I just want to make wine for customers who appreciate it," he says.

While festival organiser Jen Latta is loath to label all the wines on display "natural wines" — the minimal-intervention approach gaining popularity — many of those taking part boast no additives, no "tinkering" in the winemaking process.

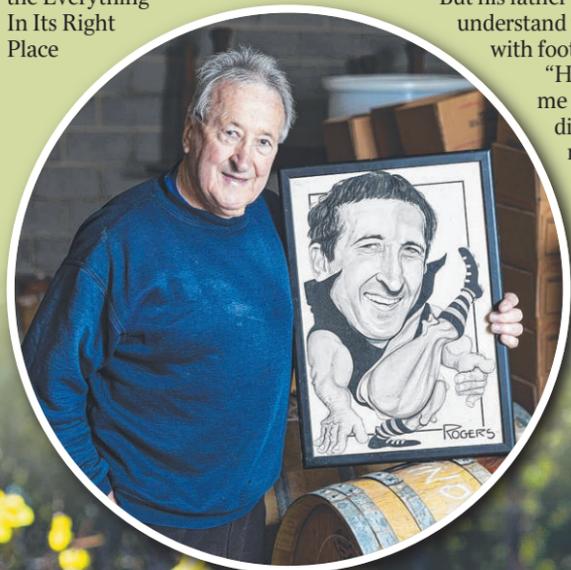
Jen's husband, Owen, is the winemaker at the natural wine Eastern Peake — started by his father, Norman. Others, such as Domaine Epis, are not "minimal intervention" but share the same regionality and care for their product.

Jen says: "At the moment the natural wine movement is really big in Melbourne and Sydney but hasn't reached regional Victoria so we thought we'd bring them (the winemakers) down to the town hall to show their wares."

Everything In Its Right Place is on Sunday June 10 at Daylesford Town Hall from 11am-4pm, featuring wine tasting, a DJ, cocktail bar and cheese.

• wineandthecountry.com.au

Star turn: Alex Epis has plenty of memories of his football career but these days life is more pinot than punts. Pictures: DANNIKA BONSER



Biteline

Bays offer good squiz at squid

PLENTY of fish are being caught all around the state. Squid and salmon dominate the bay fishing, while it's a top time to be on our lakes chasing trout.

Yellowbelly to 48cm, cod to 71cm and silver perch to 56.5cm are the main catch in the Murray River, Jim Credlin reports. Top spots are Wentworth, Mildura, Swan Hill, Pentall Island and Tooleybuc.

The Goulburn River is fishing well with brown and rainbow trout to about 2kg. Gary Constantine says. Anglers are hooking the trout on hard-bodied lures, scrubworms and salmon egg Powerbait.

Eildon Pondage is slow for rainbow trout to 1.4kg on Tassie Devil lures, with smaller trout to 200g taken on Powerbait. Brown trout to 2kg are striking pink Tassie Devil lures surface trolled in Lake Eildon. A few Murray cod to 70cm are taking spinnerbaits and deep-diving lures in Gough Bay and near the dam wall.

Southern bluefin tuna is the main target species off Portland. John Johnstone says fish to 124kg were being caught. The best results were coming from 50m of water south-south-east of Lawrence Rock. On the North Shore gummy and school sharks to 15kg were caught while salmon to about 2kg are being caught in Portland Bay and local beaches. The Glenelg River has mulloway to about 80cm, bream and estuary perch. Mullet and bream are the main captures in the Surry and Fitzroy Rivers.

In the Western District, Rocklands Reservoir is consistent for redfin to about 1kg. At Lake Purrumbete, John Clements reports brown trout from 2kg to 6.2kg are being caught trolling or on lures. Rainbow trout to 1kg and Chinook salmon to 1.5kg are also being caught.

Bank anglers are doing best at Lake Bullen Merri where they are catching Chinook salmon to 2kg and rainbow trout to about 1kg, with pilchard and Powerbait attracting the bites.

Alex Greer reports Devilbend Reservoir near Mt Martha is fishing well for brown trout to 2.2kg taken on mudeyes and Tassie Devil lures. Estuary perch are also being caught on surface lures.

In Port Phillip, Alex says pinkies to 1.4kg are being caught at Black Rock, King George whiting are biting on mussel and squid along the Bellarine Peninsula, and salmon and squid are well spread around the bay. In Western Port, whiting to 35cm are being caught along Middle Spit.

In the Gippsland Lakes, bream are being caught in the Mitchell, Tambo and Nicholson Rivers, Metung, Paynesville and Hollands Landing. Baits include shrimp, crab, prawn and soft shell. The Highway Bridge at Lakes Entrance is producing bream, the town jetties have trevally and mullet biting on sandworm and pilchard strips, while salmon are running in the surf.

In East Gippsland, bream, estuary perch and mullet are being caught in the estuary system at Marlo. The surf is producing salmon on pilchard. Bemm River has bream in the lake and tailor in the surf. At Mallacoota, salmon are taking pilchard in the surf while the Top Lake is consistent for bream on yabbies and prawns.

— Steve Cooper