

## THE SWITCH

# From winemaker to teacher's aide

**N**ick Armstrong's first career happened more through accident than design.

"When I left school I didn't know what to do. I liked farming so I went to an agricultural college," he says.

After an enjoyable stint on a mate's family farm, Armstrong did an agricultural apprenticeship, which landed him in the wine industry. "I worked on a small winery; we were making our own red and contracting out the white," he says. "I was doing quite different things every day and was outdoors, which I also liked."

Eventually, Armstrong was drawn back to city life but he decided to stay in the wine world.

"With my knowledge of how wine was getting produced, I instantly understood the sales side of wine," he says.

After jumping between retail and wholesale roles, Armstrong ended up at a small wine company servicing restaurants with top-notch wines.

The job was fantastic but the role played havoc with Armstrong's work-life balance.

"I'd just turned 40 and was driving 12 hours a day," he says. "Our kids were in long day care every day, so I started to think about how I could do something where I could be a good family person while earning a buck."

Armstrong realised what he loved about the wine industry was educating people about wine. Asking around, he learnt male educators with life experience were sought-after in primary schools.

While his lack of a university degree meant he couldn't simply top up an earlier tertiary qualification with a diploma of education and become a teacher,

Armstrong decided to quit the wine industry and take on a job as an integration aide at his daughters' primary school.

"Integration aides work in the classroom with intellectually challenged kids. Some have funding from the government for that extra help," he says.

"I work with two kids with autism issues. You have different levels of autism; these kids are pretty good, they've just got a few things where I can help them with their learning. They come to me and I'll work with them one on one, guided by the teachers."

Less than a year in, Armstrong is already loving his new role.

"Our school [Bentleigh West Primary School, in Victoria] uses team teaching, so there are five teachers and 130 kids together in grade 5-6," he says.

Rather than driving off to make sales calls, Armstrong's days now start by heading off to school with his twin girls.

"They go to their class; I go to mine," he says. "We work all day and go home together, then I come home and prepare the evening meal. It means [my wife and I] can relax a bit when she gets home, rather than be in a frenzy to get good food on the table after we've both had long days at work."

Armstrong has been so inspired by his switch into the classroom that he's already planning his next move – from an integration aide to a teacher.

"I'm going to talk to university to see how I can get a degree without grinding away for four years," he says. "I've done 20 years in wine. If I can do 20 years in education, it'll be quite a nice career, I think."

SUE WHITE



THEN

NOW

**SALARY** \$50,000, plus a car.

**WORK-LIFE BALANCE** "I enjoyed running wine tastings but they were usually after-hours. Most Friday nights I'd work till 8pm and once a month you'd need to hold a half-day tasting on a Saturday. You don't get paid extra for that."

**HOURS** 50 hours a week (or more). "I serviced the country, so there was a lot of driving home from Bendigo or the Yarra Valley and maybe not getting home till 7.30pm."



Taste for teaching ... Nick Armstrong (above, right) left the wine industry to head back to the classroom (top).

**SALARY** \$27,000. "It'd be \$32,000 but I opt to get paid during holidays, which are near 12 weeks a year. But if I get qualified [as a teacher] I might get back to \$50,000-60,000."

**WORK-LIFE BALANCE** "Magnificent. Suddenly I have the whole weekend back. As a sales rep I ate a lot of rubbish; that's now out of my life. I was also sitting in the car 10 hours a day; now I'm moving. It's a huge lifestyle change for me."

**MISS** "The wine! Not drinking but tasting and assessing real good wines. They're expensive and I can't afford them now."

When you're working with the you get a chance to try them."

**HOURS** 9am to 3pm weekday  
**CHALLENGES** "To try to get teaching qualification. If I had degree I'd only need to do one additional year and I could be teacher. As lovely as this job is can't survive on \$27,000 for the rest of my life."

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