

WINE Technology

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Essential reading for winemakers and viticulturists

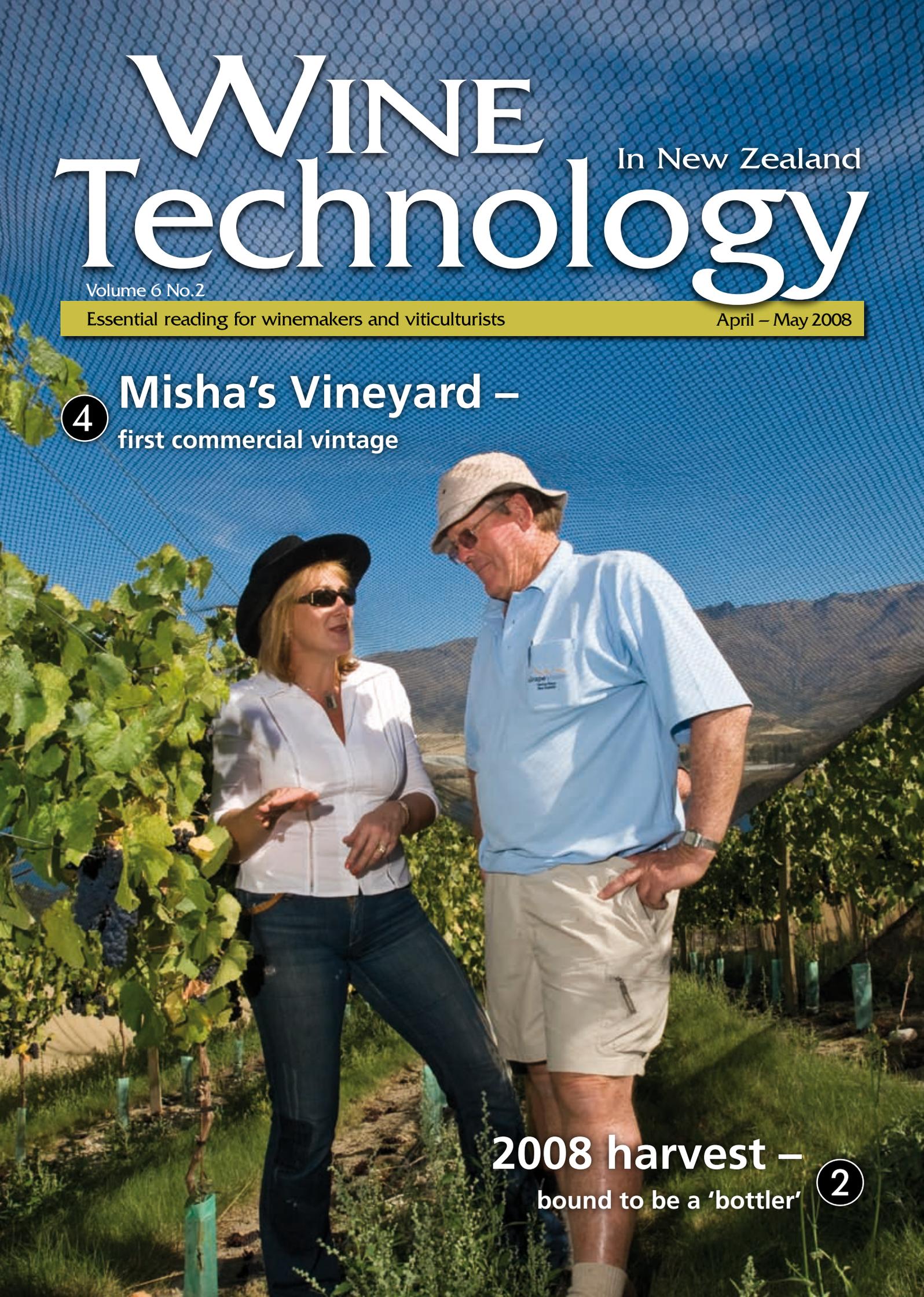
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Misha's Vineyard – first commercial vintage

2008 harvest –
bound to be a 'bottler'

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Last year was a practice run –

in 2008 it's the real deal

Misha and Andy Wilkinson have worked and planned for seven years to bring their first commercial harvest to market. And in one of the best seasons Central Otago grape growers have had – it's all about to happen.

Sometime in April, workers at picturesque Misha's Vineyard on the shore of Lake Dunstan, Central Otago, will start to bring in the site's first commercial grape harvest.

Last year, the vineyard cropped 1.5 tonnes of pinot noir as a trial run for 2008.

This year, Misha Wilkinson, along with her husband and fellow-director Andy Wilkinson, are expecting to harvest 50-60 tonnes from just their 2004 plantings - having thinned about 50 per cent of their fruit during Central Otago's stunning summer of 2008. They will bottle 4000 cases of wine under the Misha's Vineyard label.

The wines will be pinot noir predominantly, but also bottled will be the aromatic white varieties of pinot gris, riesling, and gewürztraminer.



Checking the crop...from left: Viticulturist Robin Dicey, vineyard manager Steve May, and Misha Wilkinson

Consulting winemaker Olly Masters is at the helm to produce wine from each varietal that best exemplifies the character of the Central Otago fruit and specifically from the Misha's Vineyard site.

With altitudes on the vineyard ranging from 210-340 metres above sea level, the harvesting will occur in several stages so that all the fruit will be picked at the optimum time.

Targeted export markets for the wine will be primarily in Asia – especially Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong, although Misha's Vineyard will have a small percentage of product going onto the New Zealand market and into Australia.

Misha Wilkinson says Japan in particular is developing as a sophisticated wine market.

"Japan is the largest wine market in Asia and the world's fourth-largest importer of wine. More than 70 per cent of that wine comes from the Old World wine countries, with France dominating," she says.

"So there is a strong market for fine wine with established channels. That's quite different from markets like China. And now the market (in Japan) is growing, with a younger generation of Japanese looking to New World wines – with New Zealand wines having a small presence but a strong perception.

"Then if you look at Asia excluding Japan, the forecasts are for growth of between 10-20 per cent in the next five years with mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Korea leading the growth."

Misha Wilkinson says with Hong Kong abolishing duties on wine from February this year to establish itself as a fine wine trading hub for the region, this will serve as an excellent gateway into North Asia.

"Singapore is already positioned as a trading hub for South-East

Asia with half the wine imported into Singapore being re-exported across the region. It is also set for solid domestic growth aided by the development of two 'Vegas' style casinos (officially called Integrated Resorts) currently under construction and a change in how duties are calculated according to the alcohol content rather than their volume."

"So we're excited about the opportunities in Asia and being based in Singapore, where we've lived for the past fifteen years, we have a good understanding of how business works in this region and have already started building relationships with our potential distribution partners."

It has taken Misha and Andy seven years of planning, preparation and planting to bring their vineyard to a commercial reality.

The vineyard now has 17 hectares in pinot noir, and nine hectares of pinot gris, riesling, gewürztraminer and sauvignon blanc grapes. Further development planned over the next few years includes a winery and underground cellar.

Situated on 57 hectares of Bendigo Station's most visually spectacular land, the vineyard was developed in line with the Wilkinsons objective of creating a 'no compromise' vineyard. "Just finding the ideal location that met all of our criteria took nearly two years," says Misha.

Dr Richard Smart, who worked with the Wilkinsons on the site evaluation, praised the high altitude location as one of the best he had seen in Otago, due to its excellent cool air drainage - given that frost is an issue for most vineyards in the area.

Andy and Misha began the first stage of vineyard development with 10 hectares of vines in 2004 under the guidance of their viticulturist Robin Dicey. The planting programme continued in 2005 with another 12 hectares and a further four hectares in 2007, taking the total vineyard to 26 hectares.

Further plantings are planned for the future.

The Wilkinsons made a decision from the outset that they would wait until their pinot noir vines were four years old before cropping – a year longer than normal.

"Quality is our most important driver and we wanted our vines to have an additional year to put down their roots and really establish themselves in our stony terrain," says Andy Wilkinson.

However the Wilkinsons also wanted to do everything they could to ensure this first commercial vintage would be successful. That meant testing the entire process from harvest through to bottling. A decision was made to 'trial' a harvest last April from a very small corner of the vineyard which had excellent growth on three-year old pinot noir vines.

"As the old adage goes, practice makes perfect, so we took just 1.5 tonnes of pinot noir grapes as our trial vintage. That's currently luxuriating in French oak hogsheads and due for bottling mid year," says Misha.

"This will enable us to test a new bottling facility in the area, and will also help us to understand the entire winemaking and packaging process.

"The trial vintage has also given consulting winemaker Olly Masters the opportunity to taste and understand the flavours the vineyard is producing so he can align his winemaking process and oak barrel choices to complement our fruit."

One hundred cases of pinot noir wine from the trial vintage will be used for marketing purposes and library stock, and will not go on sale.

These bottles will carry a special label created by Tucker Creative, a wine packaging design agency in Adelaide, under the name Misha's Vineyard 'The Audition'.

Over the next eighteen months the Wilkinsons plan to take 'The Audition' to their potential export markets in Asia, Australia, the US, and to distributors in New Zealand



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Pinot noir grapes awaiting harvest

Auspicious signs in the numbers surrounding 'Misha's Vineyard'

All cultures around the world have 'signs of good fortune' that seem to indicate whether a particular project will do well.

"It's in the stars" is a phrase often used to explain why some ventures are particularly successful. But for wine producers Misha and Andy Wilkinson – it seems a special number is indicating the future for their new vineyard on the shore of Lake Dunstan in Central Otago.

The couple, who have lived in Asia for the past 15 years, say the vineyard also has a special connection with Asia, based on its history as a place where many Cantonese settled during the

gold rush of the late 1800s. Remnants of the alluvial mining sites are still visible in the gullies on the vineyard.

"We also have an uncanny recurrence of the number 8 – a very lucky number for Chinese people," says Andy.

"Misha's Vineyard is situated on State Highway 8, just 8kms from the nearest town of Cromwell, and on land that was originally known as sheep run 238. There are also 88kms of vineyard rows which are aligned, by chance, in a direction of 288° with a total of 8 clones of pinot noir planted".

It all bodes well.