

ACROSS THE DITCH WITH MISHA WILKINSON

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING GREEN



Being green worked for Kermit in wooing Miss Piggy, but will it work for New Zealand in winning markets globally? MISHA WILKINSON reports.

So what is it about being 'green' that's all the rage? Is it social conscience, an agenda set by the media, the latest fashion trend where green is the new 'black' or perhaps just a need to find a differentiating factor in markets flooded

with wine? Is a green card now a requirement for the US market?

And what does being green actually mean? From a wine perspective does it include those wines made organically, biodynamically or just sustainably? And does it include 'natural' and 'pure' wines, and those made at wineries with reduced carbon emissions, and those packaged with recycled materials and perhaps in cartons instead of glass? And does it also include those wines that haven't been shipped

outside their immediate neighbourhood because of the food miles consideration?

Reality is there are many shades of green and consideration of one aspect of green doesn't necessarily paint the whole picture. A winery who may boast biodynamic practices on one hand, may cause serious air pollution when using helicopters to hover above their vineyard to minimise frost impact, fail to minimise their wine packaging, and also burn huge amounts of fuel travelling the world in order to have their wine distributed globally. So how green are they in reality? To judge the depth of one's 'greenness' you can't just look at a single factor that says 'organic' or even 'biodynamic'—but it's certainly an easy indicator of at least some good intention.

New Zealand has a natural advantage in this area with its unspoilt landscape and a clean green image and justifiably so. For example 74% of New Zealand's electricity is derived from renewable sources and in the South Island that statistic goes to 100%. To ensure the New Zealand wine industry was producing quality wines with true environmental integrity (and to ensure the realities of grapegrowing in New Zealand coincided with external perceptions), an industry initiative was established by a group of grapegrowers in 1995. This led to a set of industry standards that were commercially introduced in 1997 known as Sustainable Winegrowing New Zealand (SWNZ). This was a framework for companies to work towards, in order to improve all aspects of their performance in terms of environmental, social and economic sustainability in both the vineyard and the winery (although the winery program was not added until 2002).

In June 2007, the New Zealand wine industry agreed on a goal of 100% sustainability by 2012, which means all vineyards and wineries should be fully accredited by an independently audited sustainable program such as SWNZ, certified organic and biodynamic programs and ISO 14001.

The incentive for compliance is that those not accredited by this time will be ineligible for events or promotions

organised by the industry body, New Zealand Winegrowers (NZW). But so far with over 93% of vineyard area and 80% of production accredited, or on a path to accreditation as of 2010, things are looking positive in terms of hitting the target. SWNZ is at the forefront globally in terms of its industry-wide support and participation, and it is one of the oldest programs of its kind in existence.

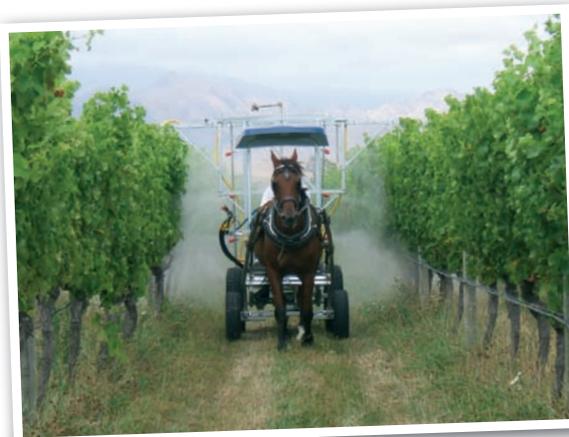
New Zealand's efforts are to be admired for the fact that it's a national effort with no region trying to beat another—a baseline of sustainability is a national and united goal. It was disappointing to see in Australia that the Cowra Region Vineyard Association has made environmental sustainability its “priority task” because its mission states it wants to “produce wine of regional character with the least environmental impact of any region in Australia”. Admirable in one respect, but disappointing that one region has an objective to compete with the rest of the country and that there isn't the same national objective that NZ has adopted.

And perhaps the criticism is harsh given that EntWine, Australia's national environmental certification scheme run by the Winemakers' Federation of Australia, was only announced last December (and judging from the EntWine Facebook entry not much has happened so far).

But noticeably they have recruited a manager for Natural Resources named Mr Green, so at least in name only, they've made a start! But in this movement towards sustainability, Australia is more than 12 years behind NZ.

At Pinot Noir 2010 in February, there was a panel session devoted to sustainability and NZ's position in the global industry. Steve Smith MW, managing director of Craggy Range Vineyards, gave a tongue-in-cheek view of the only form of sustainability that one should be taking, given the impact of the past 12 months with the GFC and the issue of oversupply (which Smith prefers

to think of as “under-drinking”), and that was sustainability of ourselves! Smith, self-acknowledged as a “slight sceptic” particularly in the area of biodynamics



Top: A horse-drawn sprayer in use at Wairau River Wines in New Zealand. Above: The Herbfarm.

where, he says, “It's hard to get his scientifically-trained mind around systems based on just philosophical beliefs”, has come to realise that the subject of sustainability looks very different when you change the viewing angle. He says it's a topic that “has become a very poorly understood and abused subject by all with an agenda”. But he believes the best definition encompasses the three pillars of social, environmental and economic sustainability.

“Sustainability in the wine business 10 years ago used to simply be an argument about whether technical farming or organic farming was better. And if you tried to have an argument with someone who was practising biodynamics they would never argue because they were just at peace with the world. Now it's impossible to find a biodynamicist who doesn't want to have an argument—and

is also pretty smart technically,” he said.

Smith believes New Zealand Winegrowers has made a good start with its sustainability program and its targets, but believes there's a lot more work to be done with respect to the social and economic impacts. He also believes there are two bigger issues facing us, “water-use and anthropogenic climate change”—or as it's more commonly known, global warming.

NZ has some excellent examples of people who are pioneering green practices both in the vineyard and the winery, and there are even vineyards that are putting all those sheep to good use. Yealands Estate set out to make 1,000 hectares of vineyards more sustainable by using NZ sheep instead of tractors to do 3,500km of mowing. Well actually, that's not strictly true. Peter Yealands, not happy with the selection of the 34.2 million sheep already in NZ (nor happy with the guinea pigs he used for earlier tests as they proved unviable on a commercial scale), imported a new breed of Babydoll sheep—from Australia. Not only are they “just so bloody cute” according to Yealands, but they're also particularly short—a huge advantage if you want just the benefits of having sheep in the vineyard and none of the downsides, i.e. eating your vines and grapes!

Apart from the sheep, Yealands Estate has made green upgrades in the winery with solar reflective high-insulation cladding and a rooftop rainwater collection system. He also has motion sensors for lighting and a heat recovery system from the refrigeration system. Wastewater is also treated on-site and reused while organic matter from the vineyards is composted and used as mulch. And of course solar panels and wind turbines are used to take advantage of the dry, windy Awatere Valley in Marlborough. Yealands Estate, with a goal of transforming NZ's largest privately-owned vineyard into the most sustainable in the world, has achieved carboNZero certification and is certainly one of the leaders in the NZ industry in terms of green innovation.

So do all of these expensive technological upgrades make you green with envy? And by the way, don't think you can economise and just go with the Babydoll sheep idea as each one cost



Peter Yealands with an imported Babydoll sheep.

NZ\$3,000 to import into NZ—but that does include quarantine costs!

But even small vineyards in NZ are making efforts to be green—and for the right reasons. Phil Handford, who runs Grasshopper Rock, an 8ha vineyard in Central Otago, has an accredited sustainable vineyard under the SWNZ program. The five shareholding families that own the vineyard are all from farming backgrounds. “We are sustainable because we believe in it and we see it as a responsibility that comes with owning and managing the land,” explains Handford. “Winegrowing is a long term game and to be a great vineyard in 50 years’ time you must farm in a way that will be sustainable in the future.”

Handford says the short-term cost to become sustainable is “not as big a cost as it will be in the future if we damage the land now.” Grasshopper Rock is a relatively young vineyard and they haven’t moved into any new export markets or new accounts because of their ‘green’ badge—but that’s not what drives them. They, like many vineyard owners in NZ, believe that NZ’s advantage as a winemaking nation is its ability to be a leader from a farming and winegrowing perspective.

Through my Twitter community, which includes some avid wine consumers in NZ (and elsewhere), I had one tweeter tell me that they had “a major issue with wineries who talk the talk but fail to walk the walk” and quoted a NZ winery who made a big

fanfare about acquiring its ISO 14001 certification, however continued to make a wine that this tweeter described as being “massively over-packaged with a box as well as a wrapping over the bottle”. They felt that the extra drain on the environment by shipping that wine and its extra packaging meant that winery clearly cared more about the marketing than the environment.

In his eyes, using the environment and ‘being green’ as a marketing tool was a far bigger crime than not doing anything at all. “I vote with my wallet and my voice. I will not buy any wines from these wineries and I make sure that all my friends and family are aware of my views on it, and if they were to suggest a wine from someone on my black list I’d suggest something equal or better for the same money to ensure that the sale does not go the way of them,” he said.

But by and large, most NZ vineyards are green for the right reasons and Seresin Estate is another good example. It’s a certified organic vineyard and currently going through biodynamic certification. On why they chose to take that path, Michael Seresin says, “It has nothing to do with sales or marketing. I just believe it’s right. In essence it’s traditional agriculture—it’s how it was done before the chemical regime came along. And wine’s been around a lot longer than the chemicals have.”

Wairau River Wines, a 200ha Marlborough-based vineyard with 30 vintages under its belt, is SWNZ accredited and now undergoing its third year of carboNZero accreditation. Lindsay Parkinson, general manager, explains that, “The key components of a winery’s carbon footprint are packaging, which is mainly glass but also screwcaps, electricity, fuel and shipping freight miles.” He’s very focused on reducing his carbon footprint and has even replaced the helicopters and gone to wind machines for frost protection.

Parkinson says there is a growing interest in the carboNZero story from all markets but especially in the UK and US. “There is no doubt that adding ‘green credentials’ gives you something different to what others offer and perhaps allows you the chance to get in front of the gatekeepers, however many factors go into purchasing decisions and hopefully the quality of the wine in the bottle remains the key element,” he said.

Although he spends a good deal of his time gathering data and measuring their operation's carbon footprint, Parkinson says he can't really measure improvements in the vineyard or the wine as a result of the process. But he is able to measure improvements in reducing their footprint, which ultimately means they are reducing costs and thereby becoming more profitable, and that translates to a more sustainable future.

Ron Zimmerman is the owner of The Herbfarm, a Washington State 'EnviroStar' restaurant with their highest five star rating, with an organic farm attached to the restaurant. They recycle and compost kitchen waste, use only organic cleaners and their tractor runs on cooking oil biodiesel. The Herbfarm also happens to be rated as one of the top restaurants in the world and has a wine list of 4,250 wines that put it in the 'Top 5' in America—so it's a list that every winery aspires to.

Zimmerman's view on what green means from a wine perspective is largely vineyard focused, with minimal or zero use of pesticides or manufactured

fertilisers. And although he agrees there are considerations with respect to packaging, carbon footprints and food miles, he's also pragmatic and understands Australia's and NZ's export imperative.

In terms of perception in the US, Zimmerman says, "Ten years ago, organic was not particularly attractive on a label. At least in America, it conjured up a possibly lower quality wine made by an ex-hippie. That has changed. Discerning wine drinkers more and more understand that 'organic' and 'biodynamic' indicate another layer of commitment and possibly quality in a wine."

And at the end of the day, when The Herbfarm chooses wines for its extensive list, the quality has to be in the bottle, says Zimmerman. "But of course, anyone spending enough time in a vineyard to make biodynamic growing work, is probably making a good product," he says.

In terms of the terminology that is being used, Zimmerman says, "In my mind, 'sustainable' has become an overused word in the US—just as 'natural,' 'pure' and 'organic' have run

their race. Sustainable will be phased out. The next big thing will be 'ethical'."

There's no question that navigating the new green world is daunting. It seems that taking one green step and mentioning it leaves you open for criticism on why you haven't taken further steps; terminology is ambiguous and it may alienate some and confuse others; and using green in your marketing efforts seems to have potentially more negatives than positives and it's not a driver in gaining new business.

This issue is really a religious debate: whatever green belief you subscribe to, it should be done for the right reasons, and you should follow it in good faith no matter what 'brand' of beliefs you follow. This is not something you need to advertise, nor talk about in polite company. And in New Zealand, it's now where the bar has been set—you *must* subscribe to a set of beliefs just to be in the game.

MISHA WILKINSON owns Misha's Vineyard Wines in New Zealand. Phone +65 9828 5735 or email misha@mishasvineyard.com

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SPLATT ENGINEERING GROUP PTY.LTD. ABN 17 004 797 040
49/51 GEDDES STREET, MULGRAVE 3170, VICTORIA AUSTRALIA
PHONE: +61 3 9562 2844 FAX: +61 3 9562 2790
AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND PHONE: +64 9 309 9121 FAX: +64 9 309 9120
EMAIL: info@splattengineering.com.au WEB: www.splattengineering.com.au

