

SHOW OF HANDS

WORDS MISHA WILKINSON

Hands play a big role in wine production. Vines are hand-pruned and hand-sorted, wines are hand-plunged, the marketers are fond of handmade on the label and sommeliers take great pride in hand-selecting them. Hands up who's confused? Misha Wilkinson reports.

What's your understanding of the term *handmade* when it comes to wine? Is it the same as handcrafted? In fact there's a whole host of hand-related terms when it comes to growing grapes and making wine – hand-pruning, hand-picking, hand-sorting, hand-plunging and then eventually there are the sommeliers who hand-select wines for lists and retailers who hand-sell. So does the intervention of a hand necessarily mean the wine is better? One assumes if it's designated as handmade or handcrafted it's going to be wine produced on a small-scale. That generally means less cost-effective, thus the wines will be more expensive. So perhaps the term handcrafted is a just good marketing tactic to attract a price premium?

We find that among New Zealand wine producers these terms imply quite different things. For some it's just the opposite of factory-produced wines and necessitates that much of the work is actually done by hand. It's also understood to imply an artisanal approach to winemaking involving attention to detail in the vineyard and winery. It can also denote a minimalist or hands-off winemaking approach and a traditional versus a modern winemaking methodology. And for others it implies the same person is a part of the entire cycle from growing, to picking, to making the wine and a belief that every grape bunch is an individual and should be treated as such.

William Hoare is general manager at Fromm Winery in Marlborough, which produces 6,000 to 7,000 cases per year across 15 different wines and eight varieties. "At Fromm, we do everything in the vineyard by hand including pruning, wire

lifting, leaf plucking and canopy management," he says. "In the winemaking process we handpick all fruit into small 10kg bins and manually place it in the destemmer. This is obviously a very labour-intensive process, but we believe the costs are outweighed by the quality of the end product. I think *handcrafted* is an over-used term but means the wines are made with minimal intervention. To me, handcrafted means hands-off winemaking."

Hoare says there are two schools of thought on winemaking – traditional and modern. "Fromm is definitely in the school of traditional, old-style winemaking. When your focus is on making wines that have a sense of place, you do things like dry farming where the vines have to send their roots deep for moisture, thereby giving the wines the flavour of the vineyard," he says. "Then by hand-picking and using natural yeasts that come from the vineyard, the wines are truly specific to that vineyard and should be called handcrafted. But these wines are generally more expensive, as the cost to make them is higher. Whereas if you are winemaking with modern methods, you use irrigation which means the roots stay shallow and makes the wines more varietal than site specific. Then by using winemaking technology you get wines that are much more uniform and fruit driven rather than site driven. These wines are generally less expensive."

At Fromm they do some unusual things with their hands – like pushing large-wheeled antique prams down the rows. "The prams are used to transport the small 10kg bins along the rows. This prevents dirt from getting on the bottom of the bins (and therefore into the fruit when the bins are stacked), and is also kind on the pickers' backs," says Hoare.



Winter pruning at Misha's Vineyard. Photo by Tim Hawkins.

He says the advice to pickers is, “If there’s anything on the bunch you wouldn’t eat, don’t put it into the bins.” He says by doing this, the pickers take their time to look at each bunch and so they get much cleaner fruit.

So, is there a benefit in hand-picking over machine harvesting? “We would not consider machine harvesting, as machine harvesting squashes the berries and starts the oxidation process in the vineyard. So if you machine harvest you have to add sulphur as a preservative. By hand-picking we don’t have to add any preservative chemicals in the vineyard,” says Hoare.

Robin Ransom, proprietor of Ransom Wines, is also a proud advocate of handcrafted wines. “Hand crafted, handmade – I don’t really distinguish between those phrases. The former sounds a bit more affected if you like, and the latter a bit more honest,” he says. Producing about 4,000 cases of wine a year from his 10 hectares, he used to have almost 10 varieties, but he’s slimmed it down to just seven. “We mow, spray and trim

pick bunches you are unhappy with.” And as he rightly points out, on our steep rocky site it probably wouldn’t be much cheaper to pick by machine anyway once all the logistics were accounted for given that we pick as little as three or four tonnes on some days in accordance with what Masters pronounces as “ready to pick”.

In the winery, Masters explains, batches are kept small and individual until a deliberate decision is made to put them together – rather just for logistical ease. “Reds are hand-plunged, temperatures are taken by a person and then controlled manually. This ensures all the fruit achieves its maximum potential as wine. Many decisions are based on taste rather than numbers,” he says. “It means a thinking person takes responsibility, makes decisions and responds to the situation all the way through the process.” For Masters, handcrafted wines implies “one person, or the same team of people, made all the decisions – about how the grapes were grown, when they were picked and then how the wine was

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using the tractor. Everything else is done by hand,” says Ransom. “It sure as hell is more expensive, but we assume it produces better quality wine in the end.” He says that perhaps the best way to understand what handcrafted wines really means is to look at the opposite – factory-produced wines. “Factory-produced wines are made from grapes grown in huge vineyards, where much of the work is done mechanically,” Ransom says. “These grapes are harvested by machines which agitate the vines so vigorously that individual berries are shaken off the vine on to a conveyor system which deposits them in a large bin. All grapes, ripe and rotten, and all manner of other rubbish is also shaken into the bin – dead leaves and other plant material, bird nests and whatever insects, spiders and caterpillars are there at the time. The process is so thoroughly mechanised that it is not possible to remove this stuff. After fermentation and a time of ageing, these wines are likely to require a good deal of treatment before they are bottled, to remove off-odours and off-flavours which may have resulted from the effect on the wine of this extraneous matter.”

I asked Olly Masters, our winemaker at Misha’s Vineyard, about handcrafted wines. From a vineyard perspective, Masters believes the hand work is necessary “to reflect the variation in the vineyard soils and aspect”. “Each vine and bunch is treated as an individual right through the season to maximise its potential,” he says. “In terms of machine harvesting, stylistically you will get more phenolics and potentially juice oxidation, also it’s one less chance to not

made, blended and finished.” Naturally, he says, this tends to imply smaller volumes simply because the workload gets harder to manage. But he adds, “It doesn’t exclude a big company from having handcrafted wines in their portfolio.”

He’s right – even Pernod Ricard, New Zealand’s largest wine producer and exporter of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, handcrafts wines. Earlier this year its leading brand, Brancott Estate, announced a new iconic Sauvignon Blanc – Chosen Rows – which surely must be classified as a Super Marlborian at NZ\$80 a bottle. Both the name of the wine and the way Pernod Ricard describes it as “hand-harvested grapes from our most prestigious chosen vines, masterfully crafted to bring you a truly distinctive, age-worthy Sauvignon Blanc” certainly denotes the ubiquitous presence of the hand.

Driven by Pernod Ricard’s chief winemaker, Patrick Materman, Chosen Rows is the ultimate expression of handcrafted and represents years of vineyard and winery trials as well as research work in the area of Sauvignon Blanc aroma compounds. “We have identified the vineyard blocks, and then chosen rows within these blocks that provide the greatest palate weight and structural complexity we see anywhere in Marlborough – and that is on Brancott Vineyard itself,” Materman says. All the pruning, shoot-thinning, leaf plucking and bunch thinning (which is down to one bunch per shoot), is done by hand. After hand-harvesting the grapes are gently pressed on a Cocquard Champagne basket press to ensure minimal phenolic pick-up and then most of



Hand-picking Sauvignon Blanc at Misha’s Vineyard. Photo by Tim Hawkins.



Rich Williams, vineyard manager at Misha’s Vineyard, hand-pruning. Photo by Tim Hawkins.

the wine components go through indigenous fermentation across a range of different sized oak vessels. And then there’s some lees stirring post ferment. “Finalising the blend for this wine is painstaking, with numerous bench blending sessions done to fine-tune the end result,” says Materman.

He says Brancott Estate makes numerous wines which are very much handcrafted and where there is a lot of hand-work in the vineyard. “We have the largest grape hand-harvest program in New Zealand, handpicking for Methode Traditionelle, as well as for many of the table wine Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc products,” he says. “Some of the greatest differences between handpicking and machine-harvesting are seen in Methode Traditionelle where very low phenolic levels are desired, and in Sauvignon Blanc where the decision to hand-harvest drives a very different style structurally and aromatically. That said, for most wine styles, the quality levels associated with hand-harvesting and machine-harvesting are merging as harvester technology advances. The cost of hand-harvesting is around tenfold the cost of machine-harvesting, so the decision needs to be based on wine price point as well as wine style aspirations.” In the winery Materman says they also do some “hand operations” which he acknowledges are “labour intensive but important drivers of quality”.

But no other wine at Brancott Estate has had quite as much hand-holding as Chosen Rows. It’s about time, because Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, a star performer on the world stage, has never quite commanded the respect and price that a superstar should receive. So it’s a noble endeavour for any producer to try and further elevate her position – and also to try and increase those Perrotti-Brown points to somewhere near what a very good Pouilly Fumé or Sancerre might be awarded. If that requires more hand intervention – in the vineyard, the winery and the marketing, so be it!

For Materman, it certainly sounds like his Chosen Rows gets the “fanatical attention to detail both in the vineyard and winery” that he believes goes hand-in-hand with a handcrafted approach to winemaking. “Making handcrafted wines is not just the domain of small producers, and in fact larger producers can be better resourced to craft such wines,” he says. “Ultimately the stand-out qualities of such wines may be as a result of the attention to the smallest detail, rather than necessarily the fact that all steps have been carried out by hand.”

So perhaps the hand isn’t as important in this concept of handmade wines as “trying to best reflect a terroir and a winemaker’s personality”, as Materman puts it, or producing “wines that reflect their sites and soils” as Hoare states. Or as Masters concludes, “reflecting the intent of the grower/maker rather than the demand of the market”. At last – agreement.

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