

Misha Wilkinson

IS NEW ZEALAND SAVVY ABOUT AROMATICS?

Misha's Vineyard (photo by Odelle Morshuis).

New Zealand's accomplishments are diverse—dramatic landscapes that have inspired artists and filmmakers alike, a rugby team that's known the world over, and inspirational individuals like Sir Edmund Hillary, Kiri Te Kanawa, and let's not forget Xena, the warrior princess. New Zealand has given us the bungi, the pavlova (yes it is originally from New Zealand), and has provided inspiration for millions of jokes about sheep. More recently they've proved their prowess with Pinot Noir and sent Sauvignon Blanc to the world. But apart from the spectacular scenery, the All Blacks, Sir Ed, Dame Kiri, the bungi, the Pinot and all that Savvy, if we were to look at aromatic wines, one would have to ask, what have the Kiwis ever done for us?

Well actually New Zealand has given us world-class Riesling, Pinot Gris and Gewürztraminer. The infinitesimal quantity of these aromatic varieties that do manage to slip out of the country, win amazing accolades on the world stage. For example at last year's *Decanter* Wine Awards, the world's largest wine show with more than

10,000 wines entered, a New Zealand Pinot Gris won the International Trophy for Best White Single Varietal Under \$10, a New Zealand Riesling won the International Trophy for Best Sweet Wine over \$10 and a New Zealand Gewürztraminer won the International Dry Aromatic over \$10 Trophy.

Let's face it, New Zealand is geographically advantaged to produce 'amazing aromatics'—the term New Zealand Winegrowers use in overseas marketing campaigns to increase the focus on this trio. The climate is temperate and predominantly maritime but also has a range of very diverse microclimates, and soils are relatively young (most are less than 10,000 years old) and largely volcanic—although this varies greatly by region. But it's New Zealand's long ripening period that enables that acid/fruit balance which is the key to great aromatic wines, with a more textural and complex style of aromatics coming from the northerly regions while the cooler southerly regions deliver the focused, fragrant and linear styles.

John Kavanagh, winemaker from Neudorf, one of New Zealand's most

respected wineries who win particular acclaim for their white varieties, believes aromatics "will be a key to future recognition of New Zealand as a great winemaking country". He also points out that as far as the New World goes, there are few competitors for the flavour profiles that New Zealand can achieve in its cool climate conditions.

Kavanagh is getting ready for the second triennial Nelson Aromatics Symposium in February which will be chaired by Neudorf owner Tim Finn. "This Symposium gives us the opportunity to show some of these wines to an influential international audience," says Finn. And it is indeed a star-studded cast of 160 media, wine trade and winemakers who will make their way to this sold-out event which includes such luminaries as Mosel superstar winemaker Ernst Loosen and wine commentators Oz Clarke and Andrew Caillard. "New Zealand is known internationally for its unique Sauvignon Blanc, but it is not widely recognised that we also produce great wines from other varieties. From a marketing point of view we have too many eggs in one basket," adds Finn.



Top: Asian seminars (photo by NZ Winegrowers). Above: The Nelson Symposium lunch (photo by The Wandering Palate). Above: Misha's Vineyard (photo by Tim Hawkins).

Yet with all this natural ability, is New Zealand really prepared to take advantage of what is potentially within its grasp? Well, from the statistics, it would appear not. If you look at the actual tonnage of grapes produced as of the year ending June 2009, Pinot Gris, Riesling and Gewurztraminer combined were just 7% of the total national crop compared to Sauvignon Blanc which represented 62%. The forecast for producing hectares according to statistics from the last New Zealand Winegrowers Vineyard Survey shows that from 2008 to 2011, there will be a 10% growth in vineyard producing area for Sauvignon Blanc, just over 9% for Pinot Gris, 2.5% for Riesling and absolutely stagnant growth for Gewurztraminer. When you translate this producing area into tonnages (given Sauvignon Blanc's higher cropping level), it means that by 2011 aromatics will be a slightly smaller percentage of output as compared to Sauvignon Blanc.

Then if you look at what gets exported, it seems the Kiwis are keeping the good stuff at home for themselves because although the three aromatics are 7% of the national

crop, their export volume accounts for only 2.6% of total exports versus Sauvignon Blanc which, at 62% of the national crop, accounts for 81% of exports.

But Curtis Marsh, an Asia-based wine, food and travel commentator, doesn't think this is an issue at all. "Forget the stats," he says. "New Zealand aromatics will continue to get onto wine lists around the world." Marsh believes aromatics are a niche opportunity for New Zealand—"it's about placement, not volume"—and therefore the quality focus is much more important than the quantity produced.

"New Zealand has already made a name for itself with aromatics—it's miles ahead of Australia in terms of aromatics," he says. "Just look at wine lists in the top restaurants in Australia and you'll see plenty of New Zealand aromatics—in fact on some lists 40% of the white wines are from New Zealand!" Well, perhaps that's a tad overstated, but then Marsh is very pro New Zealand (given he's *from* there), but he's also certainly well qualified to speak on wine given his earlier history as a sommelier in top restaurants, a wine distributor in Australia and then eight

years of wine journalism based out of Asia.

The good news for Australia (although this is perhaps treading on already sensitive toes), is that over 40% of New Zealand's Pinot Gris exports find a home there along with 25% of the Gewurztraminer exports. With Riesling it's a different story and there are no surprises here, with most of New Zealand's volume going to the UK and the US, leaving Australia to chew on its own bone-dry version. But we are talking small quantities with just 2.5% of New Zealand's total exports to Australia being the 'aromatic threesome' with Pinot Gris comprising 90% of that mix. To put that into even clearer terms, it's only 2.7% of the volume of Sauvignon Blanc that's shipped to Australia—so the supermarket stacks of Savvy are safe!

However small these volumes, Marsh believes there is a future for Pinot Gris in particular, and he's sure it's the next big thing. Kavanagh is a bit more reticent, saying Pinot Gris is not as trendy as it was for a brief period, but believes that's a good thing because "wineries need to work harder to make wines of great

integrity and place rather than just filling market demand with any grapes they can get". The sudden gold rush for Pinot Gris is evident when you look back at the vineyard producing area between 2005 and 2008. There was a three-fold increase after which things slowed remarkably. But like Marsh, Kavanagh isn't worried about the volumes either. "It is always good to be in an undersupply situation rather than oversupply, that way production can grow to satisfy demand while maintaining price points," he says.

That's indeed true—remember those heady days when no one could get their hands on the iconic Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc because there wasn't much around, but they also intentionally under-supplied each market to preserve their price and position.

Probably one of the most knowledgeable people on the opportunities for New Zealand wine is Erica Crawford. She has been a small producer, a medium-sized one, a large one (as Kim Crawford wines) and then worked for the biggest wine company in the world—Constellation. Her view is that "aromatics, excluding Sauvignon and Chardonnay, are very hard to sell". She's certain that producers get "sucked in by the gatekeepers and trade, who are led by their own palate and flavour desire", however consumers may not be ready to buy them yet.

With respect to Pinot Gris, although Crawford also sees enormous potential for New Zealand with this variety, she thinks style-wise "our Pinot Gris is a little all over the place".

"The wines from Central have a delicious intensity of acid and zing. On the other hand, Gisborne is luscious and generous and immediate. So both technically and regionally the wines are so *different*, the poor old consumer has no idea what to expect of a varietal that is relatively new to us here in New Zealand and Australia," she says.

Crawford also believes New Zealand's success with Sauvignon Blanc has been largely because the wine is distinctive in style and "sort of the same every time". This means the consumer knows what they will get and the flavours are *big* and exciting. But the question she poses is, "Can we do this with other aromatics?"

As a North American market specialist, Crawford has analysed enough market



data to know that there is a great opportunity in the US as a result of the popularity of Pinot Grigio, especially in the major chain restaurants where she quotes 16% of white wines sold by the bottle is Pinot Grigio along with 20% of by-the-glass sales. "Why don't we have a share of that? I think we should go get it," she says.

Since the category of Pinot Grigio is so well established in the US, should New Zealand perhaps consider changing the name and style to Pinot Grigio and work hard to be placed in that category? Crawford says this would of course take time and she suspects it would mean a sacrifice of principle for some but concludes that there is room in the market for the small boutique wineries to create interest and develop style and awareness along with the big brands creating volume in the category in the off-trade. And on the question of whether there is enough Pinot Gris planted—"Hell yes!"

And what about Riesling? Curtis Marsh signals the "worldwide renaissance of Riesling" but Crawford says "no, the Riesling revolution is not going to happen. We have been talking about this for the past 15 years and are still waiting." I guess it all depends how you define a revolution or a renaissance! Clearly Riesling is sold in smart restaurants, by hand, to match food, but it's not likely to be sold in any volume off the shelf. "Gewurztraminer suffers an even worse fate—and the name is unpronounceable to the average consumer," adds Crawford.

So is there a conclusion to all of this? New Zealand may well be savvy about making some great aromatic wines, but

with Riesling and Gewurztraminer there's not much investment in the vineyard area to support anything other than niche, hand-sell, on-premise opportunities where price points can reflect the boutique nature of these wines. Marketing activities like the Aromatics Symposium and the aromatics masterclasses that New Zealand Winegrowers conducts in countries where they see potential, are noble efforts but is it just the trade talking to the trade? With Pinot Gris, there may be more of an opportunity ahead, but is New Zealand savvy enough from a marketing perspective to make something happen in any real volume?

Crawford's view is that New Zealand needs to formulate a Pinot Gris strategy—and chase it. This will require working together as producers—or alternatively "have a high flyer crack the category". She says the key is to know the consumer a lot more intimately and understand what makes them lift a bottle off the shelf. "It's not that hard, really, and has been done many times before. As Kim Crawford, we pretty well forged the category of unoaked Chardonnay here in New Zealand and the US to an extent. It took over 10 years there."

Lisa Perrotti-Brown MW, (one of the increasingly important journalists for Antipodean wineries given her new role with Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate*), urges New Zealand white wine producers to first and foremost understand which varietals work best with their *terroir* and to stay true to that. She warns producers not to create wine using a cook-book recipe and to retain individual style that is a reflection of the vineyard, not the winery. She also advises to "make sure that you *love* your varietal(s) because if you don't, it will undoubtedly show in the wine."

Being true to one's *terroir* is fine, and loving one's varieties, but somehow this still needs to translate into wines you can sell. Crawford's view is "we are, after all, in the business of making money out of wine. At least I am—apart from the biodynamic block, aptly named *The Love Block*."

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