

TEXT BOB CAMPBELL MW

UNSUNG HEROES

If you thought you knew all the best names in New Zealand wine, think again. NZ editor Bob Campbell MW unearths the quiet achievers who are being tipped as the new guard of winemakers we'll be talking about in 2009.

Anyone who has a few bottles of 1982 Te Mata Coleraine, 1991 Neudorf Chardonnay or 1997 Felton Road Pinot Noir will feel pretty smug that they spotted a winner before those wineries developed cult status. They'll also deserve to feel smug about having paid a less-than-heroic price for their treasured bottles.

I do most of my tasting blind so when I unveil a top-scoring bottle and don't recognise the label I take a special interest in the producer. An increasing number of new winemakers are getting off to a strong start because they are well financed, have done the hard yards when prospecting for good vineyard sites and have a clear vision of what they want to achieve and how they're going to get there.

I've chosen several fine producers that are too small or too new to be well known. Some, such as Dada, have been selected on a hunch and are therefore highly speculative. Others, such as Lowburn Ferry, Mahi and Kusuda are a safer bet. They've made great wines from favoured sites over several years. They're cults waiting to happen.

My list includes larger producers. Yealands, Elephant Hill and Greystone Wines have got off to a flying start. Production volume brings fame sooner if high-quality standards are maintained throughout. You may have heard of these relatively bigger producers, but you may not be aware that they are very good and getting better.

Producers are grouped by region, starting in the south and heading north.

Central Otago

WILD EARTH

When a 2006 Wild Earth Pinot Noir won four trophies, including top pinot noir, at London's International Wine Challenge in 2008 (I was chairman), I began to take an interest in a wine producer that was relatively unknown to me. My record of tasting notes showed a solid performance until the 2006 and 2007 vintages when the wine really found form. Riesling and pinot gris from the 2007 vintage also earned high ratings.

American owner Quintin Quider made a fortune diving for abalone. He lives in Queensland and bought two vineyards in Central Otago as a retirement fund. Quider wisely took advice and bought land in top locations: Bannockburn and the Pisa Range area near Cromwell. Talented winemaker Michelle Richardson made his wines from 2005 to 2007, with Grant Taylor (formerly of Gibbston Valley, now with his own label Valli Estate) taking over last year.

Wild Earth clearly has a great future, and with 35 hectares of vineyards there'll be enough wine to make a decent splash.

KINGSMILL

Kingsmill has only made four wines: two vintages of pinot noir and riesling. I've tasted three of them. I gave both vintages (2006 and 2007) of pinot noir a resounding gold-medal rating, and a high silver-medal score to the 2007 Kingsmill Riesling. That's a good start.

It's easy to understand the secret behind the success when you visit the small vineyard

of owners Philip Horn and Donna Abrams. It's in the throbbing heart of Bannockburn, Central Otago's most successful wine district. The wine is made by Matt Connell at neighbouring winery Olssens.

Only a few hundred cases of pinot noir are made each year, but you can buy it through the winery's website www.kingsmill-wines.co.nz; a six-bottle carton of the terrific 2007 vintage retails for a relatively reasonable NZ\$270 plus freight.

LOWBURN FERRY

A modest three-hectare vineyard in Lowburn has produced a string of cracking pinot noirs since the first vintage in 2003. That inaugural vintage won trophies for top wine and top pinot noir. I tasted a barrel sample of the 2005 and immediately ordered a case. After release, I scored it gold. Similarly, for the



BARREL O' FUN
Kingsmill winemaker
Matt Connell

NEW ZEALAND WINEMAKERS



ALL TOGETHER NOW
Brian and Nicola
Bicknell (third and
second from right)
with the Mahi team.

2007 vintage, although in the intervening year it only rated high silver.

Owners Roger and Jean Gibson have lived in the Lowburn Valley for 15 years. They began selling wine through their online wine shop www.otagowine.com before becoming winemakers. They are assisted by Carol Burn, who is a contract winemaker with Vinpro. You can buy the 2006 and 2007 vintages via www.lowburnferry.co.nz for NZ\$38.95.

Waipara

GREYSTONE WINES

Accountants have a reputation for cutting costs to the bone – a practice that doesn't tend to make the best wine. Greystone founder, former chartered accountant Bruce Thomas, is not your average accountant. In fact, he looks more like a Spitfire pilot than a number-cruncher. Thomas purchased a hillside farm in Waipara and, after carefully mapping its soils, aspects and altitude, planted sauvignon blanc, riesling, pinot gris, chardonnay, pinot noir and syrah on areas of the vineyard that best suited each variety. I remain sceptical about the syrah, which I've not yet tasted, because it demands more heat than I believe Waipara delivers, but the rest of Greystone's wines are excellent.

By a stroke of genius, Thomas employed former Penfolds viticulturist Nick Gill who managed most of the vineyards supplying Grange. Kiwi winemaker Dominic Maxwell is equally inspiring. Forty hectares of vineyards, with more to come, means Greystone Wines should be relatively easy to find.

Nelson

REDOUBT HILL

Daniel Jackson left the security of the IT industry to try his hand at winemaking in Nelson's Motueka Valley, an untapped area. Redoubt Hill is New Zealand's only vineyard planted in granite. To be more precise it is called Separation Point granite and is the country's oldest rock structure. Thankfully for Jackson, the granite weathers readily,

allowing the vines to be planted with a shovel rather than dynamite.

Redoubt Hill's first three wines, all from the 2008 vintage, are sauvignon blanc, pinot gris and riesling. They are striking and distinctive drops with gentle fruit flavours showing impressive purity and depth. Only five to six hectares of vines are planted so bottles will be relatively hard to find. This is a speculative choice.

BLACKENBROOK

Blackenbrook is small (four hectares of vines) and new (first wine from 2004), so it's hardly surprising it's little known outside Nelson. Swiss owners Daniel and Ursula Schwarzenbach have the meticulous approach to winemaking for which their countrymen are famous, while Daniel has some serious winemaking experience under his belt. He has worked for top producers in Austria, Germany, Switzerland and France, and has judged wine at competitions in Switzerland, France, Germany and China.

Blackenbrook makes a decent pinot noir and an even better montepulciano. Its greatest strengths are pinot gris, riesling, sauvignon blanc, gewürztraminer and chardonnay – not necessarily in that order. Quality has crept up in recent years to an impressive peak in 2007 and 2008. If it continues, Blackenbrook has a very bright future.

Marlborough

TERRAVIN

It's difficult not to be caught up in the enthusiasm of Mike Eaton, owner of this small, classy wine producer. Eaton loves hillside vineyards. He planted Clayvin vineyard, which is the source of Fromm's best wines, and was Marlborough's first hillside vineyard of any size. After selling Clayvin to Fromm, Eaton planted vines on his current hillside site and established the TerraVin label. He also uses grower grapes but maintains his high standards by paying on a per-hectare basis and taking full control of the vineyard.

TerraVin's signature wines are a powerful Hillside Reserve Pinot Noir and TerraVin J, a cabernet merlot malbec that achieves seemingly impossible levels of ripeness and concentration in Marlborough's totally unsuited climate. Hillside Reserve Pinot Noir is a great wine; TerraVin J is a miracle. Another miracle is TerraVin's botrytised sauvignon blanc – it's the best of its type I've ever tasted. Like others in my list, Eaton has a love affair with his vineyard and his wines that borders on an obsession. TerraVin is a precious gem waiting to be discovered.

MAHI

Mahi was developed by Brian Bicknell, a talented winemaker who made wine for Errázuriz in Chile before returning to New Zealand to become winemaker at Seresin. In 2001, while still at Seresin, Bicknell began making wine under his own Mahi label – a reaction against the trend to blend wines from many sites. His experience inspired him to focus on producing wines of texture rather than the fruit-bomb Marlborough styles that dominate the market. His single-vineyard wines are hand-picked and whole-cluster pressed. Fermentation is achieved using indigenous yeasts. Pinot noir is hand-plunged and, to date, has been bottled unfiltered.

Mahi produces hand-made wines with character and without compromising quality. They may not always be easy to understand, but once you do, you'll love them.

Until recently Mahi wines have been made in microscopic quantities. In 2007 Bicknell purchased the Cellier le Brun winery. Production has increased significantly and quality remains as high as ever.

YEALANDS

Peter Yealands has achieved the seemingly impossible with consummate ease. When he began planting vines on a grand scale, many Marlborough winemakers smirked into their glasses of beer that he wouldn't last a year. He did, and now has 1150 hectares of impressive vineyards, most in the Awatere Valley. In the process, Yealands literally moved mountains. He reshaped the terrain with bulldozers, doing some of the work himself. An announcement that he was building a winery



GREAT MINDS
Clockwise from
above: Peter Yealands;
Greystone's Dominic
Maxwell; Kingsmill's Philip
Horn and Donna Abrams;
Greystone's owner Bruce
Thomas; Blackenbrook's
Daniel Schwarzenbach.

