



BY CRAIG SISTERTON

GRAPEVINE

## Getting competitive

We see the medal stickers on bottles, but what really goes on behind the sipping and spitting at wine competitions?

**W**ines from the Top of the South, particularly Marlborough Sauvignon Blancs, already do very well on the international stage – but in future they may do even better, says experienced international wine judge Daniel Schwarzenbach. “Wines from New Zealand tend to do very well because of that ‘up front’ taste ... when you have a flight of Sauvignon Blancs from around the world, the New Zealand ones really stand out,” he says. “Occasionally an older ‘Old World’ wine judge might not like it because it’s not his preferred style – but the younger judges tend to prefer the New Zealand style.”

Schwarzenbach, who along with wife Ursula owns and runs eco-friendly Blackenbrook Vineyard in Tasman, should know; along with winning medals and trophies both nationally and abroad for his own exceptional aromatics, he is the sole New Zealand wine judge for Paris-based ‘Office International de la Vigne et du Vin’ (OIV). As such, Schwarzenbach regularly represents New Zealand at several international competitions, including Mundus Vini in Germany, Mondial du Pinot Noir in Switzerland, and the Vinales Internationales in both Paris and Qingdao, China.

When we spoke, he’d recently returned from judging the largest international wine competition in North America, the Sélections Mondiales des Vins Canada. But even that Quebec-based event – 1,836 wines from 600 wineries in 32 countries – is dwarfed by the Paris (3,500 wines) and Germany (5,000 wines) competitions. Fortunately for Schwarzenbach’s liver and palate, under the OIV system the 100 or so judges (50% French, 50% international) are divided into seven-person groups that each score ‘only’ 40-50 wines per day during the weeklong events. “Normally I gain four to five kilos during the competitions,” he chuckles. “It’s the wines, lunches, and dinners you’re having outside the actual judging ... everyone there is so passionate about food and wine!”

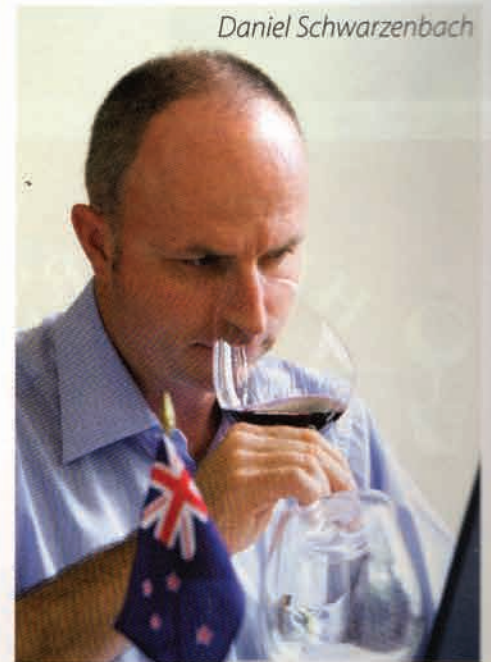
That passion transcends geographic and vocational boundaries. “It’s not just judges from all around the world, including ‘New World’ countries like Argentina, China, Brazil, and Thailand, but also from all works of life,” says Schwarzenbach. “We have journalists, winemakers, wine buyers, consumers, sommeliers ... so everyone has a different way of looking at wine and what they think makes a



wine special.” And although every judge uses the same 100-point criteria (aspect, nose, palate, and global judgment), Schwarzenbach has noticed differing backgrounds corresponding to different approaches. Winemakers like himself tend to begin with 100 points before deducting marks for flaws, he says, while sommeliers and consumers start with a low mark and add points for what they like.

But everything possible is done to give each wine its best chance: wines are independently tasted and scored before the group moves onto the next; tasting rooms are completely neutral – no smoke or smell of paint; and correct lighting to give true colour; the judges use special wine glasses to view Champagne effervescence; and bottles are replaced even if only one judge thinks the sample has an off odour.

In the end, however, wine judges, just like consumers, are looking for something more than just the sum of a wine’s looks, smell, and taste parts, says Schwarzenbach. “A wine is more than just analytical – it’s the total impression it leaves behind.”



Daniel Schwarzenbach