

ACROSS THE DITCH

EXCUSEZ-MOI, C'EST SYRAH!

Misha Wilkinson

Why does New Zealand call its wine *Syrah* when its larger neighbour calls it *Shiraz*? Are we being a little pretentious, *peut-être*? Maybe Kiwis believe their wines have more nuance, subtlety and a little more of that *'je ne sais quoi'* appeal? Perhaps the naming was due to a clique of Hawke's Bay winemakers conspiring to be different to Australia, or was it less about conspiracy and more a decision *en masse* to honour the grape's French origins? Or could it just have been a *faux pas*? The plain-talking Warren Gibson, winemaker at Trinity Hill, one of the earliest Hawke's Bay Syrah producers (and also proprietor of boutique producer Bilancia) believes NZ's naming was "probably just the sheep mentality – once the first bloke did it then everyone followed!"

The bloke he refers to is Dr Alan Limmer from Stonecroft – one of the first vineyards in the Gimlett Gravels region of Hawke's Bay – who reputedly rescued some Syrah vines from a viticultural research station. The vines were part of a research program to test virus elimination techniques and were due to be disposed of so Limmer took the entire collection and planted them. His first commercial Stonecroft Syrah subsequently made its debut in 1989. Those first vines were assumed to be imported from Australia with recent evidence suggesting they may have been from Adelaide's early botanical collection, but there is little doubt the origins were French and likely linked to a high quality Sirene clone still used today by a few producers in the Rhône.

The reality is that NZ had *carte blanche* to call the variety by whatever name it chose – other than a French-protected 'designation of



origin' which is of course why Australia had to abandon the word *Hermitage*. With France, Europe, Argentina, Chile and most of the US calling it Syrah, it seemed like a sensible choice of name, although Australia obviously thinks differently. Of course there is that old chestnut about the city of Shiraz in Iran which produced a Shirazi wine, which some claim is where the varietal originated. The story goes that it was subsequently brought to the Rhône and that 'Syrah' is merely the local French synonym of its proper name 'Shiraz'. But a debate over origins may last for centuries and we all know Australians never like to give things up easily. (And just for the record, Crowe, Phar Lap and pavlova all originated in NZ).

There is however more than just a difference in name between what Australia and NZ produces. Sam Kim of Wine Orbit is a NZ wine journalist who says it's the perfumed bouquet and supple mouthfeel of NZ Syrah that makes it different and makes it a much better food partner than "grunty Aussie Shiraz". Kim seems to think NZ producers have wanted to stay clear from the Shiraz name

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because of what that conjures up from an expected style perspective. Consider, for example, a South Australian Shiraz which Kim says is "the most powerful expression of the variety". He says the NZ examples are not as deeply coloured, not as opulent and not as dense." Even Gibson describes his Australian counterparts as "big, ripe and alcoholic" (he's talking about the wines), and says he gets frustrated with certain things about most Australian Shiraz – although he admits you could possibly get confused between the cooler climate Australian Shiraz and NZ Syrah. In general, he says that base eucalypt character that underpins most Australian Shiraz just isn't in the NZ version, which he believes has a greater purity of style.

The biggest reason for these differences of course is the climate with Australian Shiraz generally ripening earlier and developing a different flavour spectrum than in the cooler climes of NZ. Hawke's Bay is where two-thirds of NZ Syrah is planted and Kim is sure that will continue to be the home of NZ Syrah. "It's the Gimlett Gravels that will produce the most consistent and outstanding wines, even though there are some promising examples from other Hawke's Bay districts," says Kim. Gibson mentions Waiheke Island in the Auckland region as having some success with Syrah to date, but quickly adds that

although there is definitely potential there, it would still be a small opportunity compared to Hawkes Bay. "Hawke's Bay is just a better bet than anywhere else, especially when you need to ride out the cooler vintages," he says.

A relatively new Hawke's Bay producer, who established in an untested part of the region, is Elephant Hill Estate where Steve Skinner is the winemaker. He started out at Trinity Hill and is now into his eleventh year of making NZ Syrah. When you ask him what the focus is at Elephant Hill, he says it's the Syrah, although admitting it occupies only 4 hectares of the 25 hectare vineyard. "Syrah wasn't planted in big quantity as we're located near the coast – that was a big risk," he explains. In fact the Te Awanga vineyard is right on the coastline and therefore experiences lower peak temperatures than the renowned Gimlett Gravels 20km inland. And of course it has a different soil composition as it's not the pure shingle that defines the Gravels. But things are paying off in this new area and now after just five vintages the wines are winning gold at international competitions.

But why are we even talking about NZ Syrah? Why is *anyone* talking about it? There are barely 300 hectares planted and it ranks in eighth position on the list of NZ production volumes last year, compared to the position it holds in Australia as the number one variety with 44,000 hectares invested. "Good question!" says Gibson, who also doesn't completely understand all the hype but thinks Syrah is probably where Pinot Noir was some time ago. "Everyone seems to be having a go at the moment and many are doing so with great success," he says. "NZ Syrah has become very chic – it's the 'wine du jour' and even the national trade body, New Zealand Winegrowers, describes it as 'the darling of the international wine media'."

In fact Gibson's own Bilancia La Collina Syrah has had Tyson Stelzer critiquing it as the greatest Syrah to come out of NZ, saying "it could eclipse every Euro, Aussie and everywhere-else red so far this year". These sorts of accolades have certainly helped position NZ among some great Syrah producers of the world in a very short space of time. Bob Campbell MW has also listed this wine at 98 points and at top billing in a list of NZ's best Syrah, with equal second position taken by Craggy Range Le Sol and Trinity Hill Homage – two more of the icon Syrahs from NZ. (And at a price tag of \$100 or more per bottle, these wines need to be good!). Even

Skinner's new 2009 Elephant Hill Syrah recently won the New Zealand Red Rhône Varietal Trophy at the *Decanter* World Wine Awards, proving that a Syrah made with six year old vines and grown on a new coastal region can quickly take a premier position.

So can Hawke's Bay Syrah be the tour de force that Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc or Central Otago Pinot Noir have been? Skinner hesitates but says "yes", adding Syrah is definitely being seen as "the glamour grape". But he quickly acknowledges one of the biggest issues. "Everyone has piecemeal vineyards in Hawke's Bay – we grow lots of varieties," he says. In fact even in its Hawke's Bay home, Syrah sits at seventh position in terms of total vineyard area. Both the Marlborough and Central Otago regions have risen to fame by having a single-minded focus with a grape variety that represented more than 75% of plantings – that single variety has been what each region has hung its chapeau on. In both cases, the varietal has been distinctly different from that grown in other regions – and better. Vive la difference!

Does Hawke's Bay Syrah hold that distinct and unique position in both a domestic and international context? When Gibson recounts a recent visit to the Melbourne Food and Wine

Festival, he says that at a masterclass it wasn't obvious for the connoisseurs which wines were from NZ and which were French? It's wonderful to hear the quality can match the best from France, but is that enough to capture the attention of an increasingly competitive marketplace? And Gibson admits that in general, NZ Syrah is overpriced simply because economies of scale don't work when you have such petite plantings. Even Trinity Hill, one of the biggest and oldest Syrah producers, harvests only 100 tonnes a year.

It seems that NZ wineries really aren't taking much of a gamble on Syrah. Will more people start to embrace NZ Syrah? "Ha!" says Kim. "It's like asking, 'are people going to drink more Riesling?'" Jokes aside, Kim does think there will be a shift from Pinot to Syrah. "It may take five years or more but NZ Syrahs are just too good to be ignored for long." In spite of his optimism, it still seems this variety will be very much the domain of artisan producers rather than being NZ's next coup in the world of wine. *C'est la vie!*

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