

ACROSS THE DITCH WITH MISHA WILKINSON



Wine for Asia (Singapore) in 2006 when NZ made an impact at a show! Photo: NZTE.



Clive Weston (left) and Bollinger's Vianney Fabre at the Hong Kong International Wine & Spirit Fair. Photo: Florence Luk.



Wine for Asia in 2006. Photo: NZTE.



Hong Kong. Photo: Florence Luk.



Wine for Asia 2006. Photo: NZTE.



Wine for Asia 2006. Photo: NZTE.

Showing off in Asia

Making decisions as to which shows to attend across Asia is becoming increasingly difficult for New Zealand wine producers. Should you succumb to the dazzle of the big international wine extravaganzas or take to the stage under a national banner at a smaller more intimate presentation? Wine for Asia, Singapore's biggest wine show, was held at the end of October and the following week the spotlight was on the much grander scale Hong Kong International Wine & Spirit Fair. National industry group, New Zealand Winegrowers (NZW), instead chose to showcase New Zealand's substantial talent by staging their own events in both markets. So what strategy will find the biggest and/or most receptive audience for New Zealand wines?

Lacking the sparkle in Singapore

In its 8th year, Wine for Asia (WFA) could hardly be called a 'must-attend' wine show in spite of its billing as 'Asia's Most Comprehensive Wine Exhibition' and its glitzy address at the new Marina Bay

Sands Expo and Convention Centre. This year, with organisational and logistical management that left much to be desired, the bigger issue was the very poor trade attendance and the lack of premium exhibitors, although I did get a little taste of wine from Georgia (as in former Soviet Union, not USA) which was a treat since my only other Georgian encounter had been of a folk dancing variety.

The official number of expected visitors for WFA was 5,000 but it was embarrassingly less than that, although official figures were neither released nor provided when requested. The show did however have the Wine Style Asia Award (WSAA) as an adjunct to the event but even that only managed to attract a total of 460 hopefuls. Suzanne Brocklehurst, freelance wine journalist and consultant based in Singapore who judged at this year's event, feels the WSAA works more "as a platform for producers who as yet don't have a place in the market or who are new to the market". She said that "anything that is really well made, really sticks out". So if you're making a decent wine you might want to think about these

awards as there's a good chance your wine will perform well.

New Zealand had only a bit part in this year's show – one shell-scheme booth shared by two tiny producers from Martinborough (Ma Maison) and Lake Taupo (Omori Estate). Their reasons for attending WFA instead of the New Zealand Wine Fair the prior week, was that they didn't want to be 'one of many' at a New Zealand event and up against much bigger names. And that's a fair call but with WFA's random collection of producers with no top-liners amongst them, compounded by the show's poor track record over the past few years, there may be better ways to spend one's time and money. If finding an agent was your prime objective, then two days spent knocking on doors may have yielded greater success as judging by the lack of attendance by Singapore's best distributors, it seems they were all relaxing in their respective offices with their feet up during the two days of the show.

A couple of brighter spots were around the Seminar program with headliner

Michel Rolland – 'the world's foremost consulting winemaker' – who presented the seminar 'Forging Iconic Wines for Markets Old and New', and also The 1st Asian Riesling Forum chaired by Lisa Perrotti-Brown MW and the Landmark Australia Master tutorial chaired by Andrew Caillard MW. A few other tutorials also ran with varying degrees of success depending on whether they managed to start on time, if the wines had actually arrived prior to the seminar and then if there was someone on hand to pour them. Those seminars that didn't deteriorate into a circus did get some good feedback and as Brocklehurst says, "The seminars are an important feature for a show like this – in fact there's more value to be at a seminar than at the actual show itself."

So what was the situation at New Zealand's own event the prior week? Less than 150 trade attended which was 40% less than the previous year. Of the trade that came to what turned out to be a well-organised event at a smart hotel venue, 39% were distributors, so if you were looking to get a start in the market there was a good chance you could find a potential suitor although most of the distributors attending were the smaller and less experienced ones. If you already had an agent and were just looking to build your fan base around town and 'get more gigs' with some big hotel or

restaurant listings, then unfortunately this event didn't quite hit the mark.

A few well chosen side acts around the main tent including a consumer master class, an upmarket consumer tasting and a themed brunch, all of which managed to get the New Zealand message to a further 160 people. There were also three excellent trade master classes and a 'media mingling' but overall the main trade showing just didn't offer the exposure that most wineries were seeking.

So do you really need to bother with the Singapore market? The answer is yes. Although Singapore's drinking declined slightly during the world financial crisis, drinking has begun again in earnest and in the first seven months of 2010, the volume of wine imported increased by 20% and by over 32% in value, compared to the same period last year. It's an easy place to export wine given there is no requirement for any labelling change from one's domestic label, business is done in English, there are a huge number of hotels and restaurants and it's a very well-heeled local market. It's also a great place for a stopover for a few days when heading to destinations further afield which makes it an easy market in which to maintain some level of brand support and promotion.

But participation in neither WFA nor the country-themed Wine Fair was the right answer for how New Zealand can

increase its celebrity appeal in Singapore. Chris Yorke, global marketing director for New Zealand Winegrowers, says, "Balancing the needs of new wineries seeking distribution and more established wineries looking to expand their listings and make sales" is the biggest issue his team face especially with Singapore and Hong Kong. "These markets are mature and competitive but relatively small in terms of total volume".

The glitz and glamour of Hong Kong

Yorke and his team conduct a review after each event to determine their level of success and to make decisions about subsequent events. New Zealand Winegrowers participated in the Hong Kong International Wine and Spirits Fair (HKIWSF) last year but Yorke said "the level of negative feedback we received from wineries participating in the Hong Kong Wine Fair in 2009 led us to organise our own event in Hong Kong this year." However the home grown NZ branded show, staged two weeks prior to this year's Fair, also attracted an audience of less than 150 trade. Whereas the official box office takings from the HKIWSF recorded over 14,000 trade buyers visiting nearly 700 exhibitors from 30 countries and regions with an overall attendance that was 19% more than the previous year with significant trade buyers coming from



The lavish Jebson Fine Wine Booth at the Hong Kong International Wine & Spirit Fair this year. Photo: Florence Luk.



Wine for Asia 2006. Photo: NZTE.



Wine for Asia 2006. Photo: NZTE.



2010 Hong Kong International Wine & Spirit Fair. Photo: Florence Luk.

China, Australia, USA and Japan.

There was a New Zealand section at this year's Fair. Dave Kenny, sales and marketing manager for Wairau River Wines, was the one and only New Zealand winery exhibitor proudly displaying his wares under the country's banner. Kenny said, "There's a huge amount of value in being here – and we were here last year on our own stand and not on the New Zealand Winegrowers stand.

"We didn't realise we'd be the only winery from New Zealand to exhibit this year but actually it's a huge advantage being the only one. People have been coming to see New Zealand and in the end they are coming to see Wairau River Winery," said Kenny. At the previous year's show Kenny made a lot of valuable contacts and has been successfully trading with two of them since that time. Although they have a distributor in Hong Kong, Kenny chose to exhibit on his own stand because of their regional expansion objectives. The winery's aspirations are to grow throughout Asia and are targeting four or five countries and looking to the show to help with potential distribution options in Japan, Taiwan as well as further expansion throughout mainland China.

Kenny reminisces about a time when New Zealand made a real impact at a show in Asia. It was the bold participation at Wine for Asia in Singapore back in 2006 – a time when the Wine for Asia event was at its best and when New Zealand Winegrowers combined forces (and dollars) with New Zealand Trade and Enterprise to create an impression – and it worked. It was a simple but striking impact that included all the cast members of the 37-strong bevy of brands to be dressed in matching New Zealand black shirts. Real excitement was generated and the New Zealand booth buzzed throughout the show and was the brand envy of all other exhibitors. It's actually hard to remember a time in Asia since that show where New Zealand has made that sort of impact.

Kenny says that "standalone shows like NZW is doing across Asia are just so hard to get people to attend". He believes a strongly branded New Zealand stand in Hong Kong would make a big impact and

that NZW should be targeting events like the Hong Kong Fair. In summing up this year's Hong Kong Fair, Kenny said, "Spain is amazing – they have a great stand and they have been a stand-out at the show. The Australians are really good at fragmenting themselves – they tried to have a united presence but come across as a random collection of producers."

Apart from the one exhibitor under the official New Zealand flag, there were 19 other New Zealand brands represented in some form on various distributor stands with seven of them having winery staff travelling to Hong Kong to stand behind their brand. One of those was Brett Taylor who handles marketing for Destiny Bay Vineyards. It's part of The Specialist Winegrowers of New Zealand (TSWNZ), a troupe of six producers each specialising in a specific varietal (and therefore not competing with one another so the theory goes) who have formed a group in order to get greater benefits from marketing and branding activities. Taylor also represented his group at the NZW event a couple of weeks earlier. Taylor said his biggest issue is that NZW doesn't have any on-the-ground support in Hong Kong and he was disappointed with the outcome of the NZW event and confirmed that the group wouldn't be participating again. "The venue wasn't well set-up and there just weren't enough trade attending the event".

However he does plan to have his own stand at next year's Wine Fair but would also be happy to part of a New Zealand stand if that was on offer. Taylor's feedback from this year's HKIWSF was that, "apart from sore feet, we've been meeting a lot of trade, particularly restaurants and it's been really key to meet these people face-to-face. We have also had distribution leads from Russia, Japan and mainland China and even the US".

Clive Weston, general manager of Negotians New Zealand and also CEO of Nautilus Estate, who was visiting the HKIWSF described the event as a "world class show" but quickly pointed out that it's an expo and questioned what exhibitors would get out of it. He said, "If you do participate, you'd better be making world-class wine as you're going to be compared internationally." In terms

of New Zealand's presence Weston said, "Having one winery doesn't look good for New Zealand at all – Hong Kong is the Asian hub of the wine trade." He went on to point out that the value of wines at auctions in Hong Kong has overtaken London and is set to overtake New York very soon. "If New Zealand is serious about Asia we need some strength in numbers. The industry needs to look at Hong Kong if New Zealand is serious about the Hong Kong and China market but under what guise I don't know."

Weston felt Australia certainly had a strong presence at this year's show – and indeed they did as Australia was the official partner nation for this year's Wine Fair. Interestingly the Australian Pavilion which housed nearly 70 companies "is the only wine show the Australian government supports" according to Phil Ingram, Senior Trade Commissioner and Deputy Consul-General, Australian Trade Commission in Hong Kong. So obviously some countries think the HKIWSF is an important show! Wine Australia even opened a Hong Kong headquarters in October with its newly appointed director of Asia based there.

John Macpherson, director of Advintage, a retailer from Hawkes Bay in New Zealand, was also visiting the show and said, "If I was a wine producer with existing sales I'd consider participating in this show but not if I didn't have distribution here. I don't think it's a vehicle for sales – it's for brand reinforcement – it's just a showcase." On New Zealand's lack of presence, Macpherson believes people wouldn't even notice who was or wasn't at the show since there were so many exhibitors vying for attention. He did comment that it was the distributor stands that were the busiest rather than the individual producer stands, many of whom were there to try and woo an importer. "People gravitate to the stands where they are more familiar with the brands."

New Zealand still managed to have a virtual presence with their wines in the spotlight at the Cathay Pacific Hong Kong International Wine and Spirit Competition which is now the largest pan-Asian wine competition and run in conjunction with the

Fair. New Zealand won seven trophies, 13 gold, 38 silver and over 88 bronze awards and was second only to Australia in terms of her medal haul but it was the Kiwi wines that took centre stage in terms of best matching options with Cantonese dim sum and abalone – and both were Pinot Noir!

At least from a media perspective, the headlines in Hong Kong were all about the Antipodean triumph with Tim Atkin MW, international guest chair of judges, highlighting the food pairing trophies as "particularly exciting" noting that they "will be highly beneficial in helping lovers of Chinese food match the perfect wine." It's just a shame New Zealand wasn't present this year in Hong Kong – "undoubtedly one of the most exciting wine markets in the world at the moment" according to Atkin – to accept her accolades.

Picking the best shows

Yorke more than anyone knows the difficulties of finding the right opportunity to get brand New Zealand some star billing. He has to work with nearly 700 producers who all want their turn in the limelight whether they are 'up-and-comings' or already have star status. Yorke also knows that the New Zealand wine brand needs to have a profile at the key international wine fairs but the issue is trying to find the right funding model. "Hong Kong and Singapore are definitely changing fast and we need to find new ways to engage with key trade as we are no longer the new kid on the block," says Yorke. "It is crucial that we push brand New Zealand strongly and find the right things to do that will make an impact."

From a winery's point of view, how do you decide which shows will help your star status? Having a strategy for each market is very important so that you can analyze what's appropriate according to whether you're planning to make an entrance in that market, support your agent, build your fan base or just maintain your star presence.

For whatever you choose, break a leg!

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