

PASSION AND EXPERIENCE, THE PERFECT BLEND

Michael Franco talks to the power couple behind New Zealand's young superstar winery, Misha's Vineyard.

When long-time Singapore residents Misha and Andy Wilkinson met with the man who was to become, as Misha calls him, "the godfather" of their vineyard in New Zealand's Central Otago region, he said to the couple: "The vineyard business is a three-legged stool. You either know something about grape growing, or something about winemaking, or something about marketing. What do you buggers know?"

Fortunately, thanks to Misha's various marketing jobs for a variety of big-name clients like Dell and Intel, and Andy's experience running companies around the Southeast Asia region, the marketing leg of their stool was solid. That experience combined with a philosophy the pair describes as "no compromise" has served them well indeed. In just a few short years, they have taken a grapeless lakeside slope in New Zealand's Central Otago region and turned it into a vineyard that was just named one of the 20 best in the country by Decanter magazine.

Of course, it's not just their corporate experience that has led to their success; there's a good dose of passion involved as well. After a long-time love affair with food and wine, Andy and Misha decided to make it their post-corporate vocation. But, in keeping with the "no compromise" philosophy, this was to be not just any hobby vineyard. They had a mission, as Andy puts it, "to create a really special style of wine; something that would work particularly well in Asia and something that would be the very best expression of New Zealand wines."

And so, first came the land. Because the fledging winemakers wanted to guarantee their distributors a steady supply of their product, it was important to find an area of Central Otago that remained frost-free so that grape production wouldn't be affected—a tall order indeed in the southernmost winegrowing region of the world. After two years of looking, they overcame a cast of naysayers (and their own doubts) and finally found the slope that would become Misha's vineyard. According to Andy, when the land was examined by master viticulturalist Dr. Richard Smart, he gave Misha two pieces of advice: "One, buy more of this land; it's the best pinot land I've ever seen. And the second piece of advice is don't be a pinot princess, this land can grow fantastic aromatics as well as pinot noir."

Taking the good doctor's advice, Misha's Vineyard now produces not only superlative pinot noir but pinot gris, riesling, sauvignon blanc and gewürztraminer as well.

Next came the winemaker. Through a chance meeting at a conference in the US, the couple found out that Ollie Masters, the winemaker from the consummate Ata Rangi vineyard, was available. And once again, the land did the selling. Once Misha prevailed upon Masters to make a trip to the vineyard, he was summarily won over and signed on with the Wilkinsons where he now turns the "new gold" of pinot noir grapes into pure treasure for the palate.

With all three legs of their stool in place, Misha's Vineyard is indeed "sitting pretty."

You can buy wines from Misha's Vineyard here in Singapore by visiting www.asiawinesociety.com

