



TEXT BOB CAMPBELL MW





RISING STARS

Today's bargains can be tomorrow's cult wines. Bob Campbell MW gives his tips on wineries worth watching in the Land of the Long White Cloud.

It's great to pick a winner before everyone else discovers it and the odds shorten. So, if you've got a bottle of 1951 Grange, a '58 Hill of Grace, an '82 Coleraine or even a '97 Felton Road Pinot Noir, congratulations, you bought a bargain – provided you've had the wine since its first release.

Like many wine enthusiasts, I bought a case of Penfolds 1997 RWT because I wanted to secure the first vintage of a wine that was clearly going to be second-in-command to Grange. It has more than doubled in price since then, but I will take my profit when I savour a mature wine worth many times more than I paid for it.

There has never been a better time to buy great wine at a reasonable price before the rush starts. At least once a month, I encounter an eyebrow-raising wine that's under-priced simply because it hasn't been discovered, and I get really excited when the next vintage is as good or even better.

I've compiled a list of New Zealand wine producers that have at least an outside chance of achieving cult status. I've put my money where my mouth is by buying wines from every producer on my list. Those wines will either escalate rapidly in price or continue to sell at current levels. In the first case, I will gain pleasure from buying right; in the second case, I'll gain pleasure from continuing to buy quality wine at a reasonable price. That's the sort of gamble I like.

Auckland

PASSAGE ROCK WINES

Take a 35-minute ferry from downtown Auckland to Waiheke Island. Spend a day touring the island and try to tell me you didn't feel a sneaking envy for the lifestyle of the people who live there. If you like sun, sea and a get-away-from-it-all atmosphere, this is a pretty impressive place.

The island also makes standout wines, and all of them command reassuringly expensive prices. In fact, modest wines at hefty prices have somewhat tarnished Waiheke's vinous image in recent times.

Thankfully, Passage Rock charges fair prices for wines that threaten to polish up Waiheke's wine reputation. I visited this winery after a couple of its wines had put a very broad smile on my face. A tasting of barrel samples convinced me that this is one winery well worth keeping an eye on.

Grape expectations: Syrah and viognier are my two top picks.

PURIRI HILLS

You can be forgiven for not having heard of Clevedon, let alone the region's most exciting producer, Puriri Hills. Thirty minutes' drive south of Auckland, Clevedon is a rolling, rural area on the east coast. It looks too green and grassy to be able to make serious wine, but Judy Fowler runs Puriri Hills' immaculate vineyard and makes classy red wine to boot.

Fowler is well qualified to nurture her wines from vine to bottle and then to market the end product – she's a qualified chemist with an MBA and a diploma in viticulture and winemaking. However, it's not her qualifications that make one feel sure that today's Puriri Hills could be tomorrow's Screaming Eagle, it's her passion – not to mention her love and understanding of what great wine is all about – that does it.

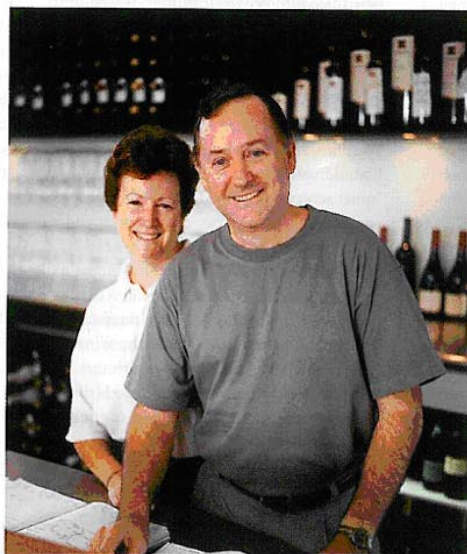
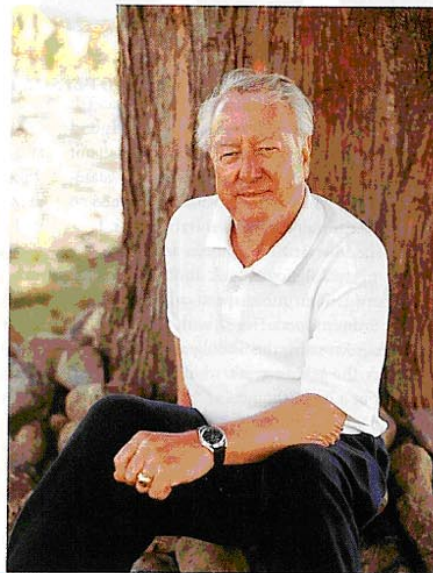
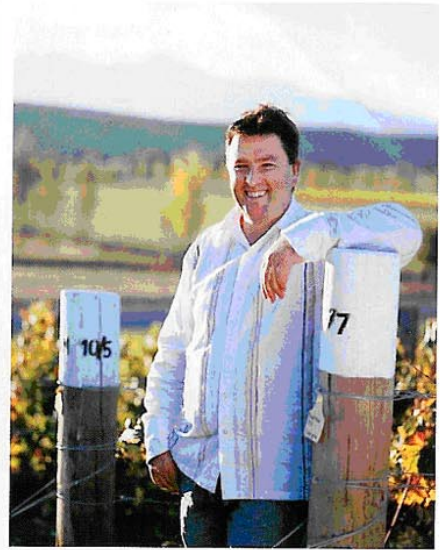
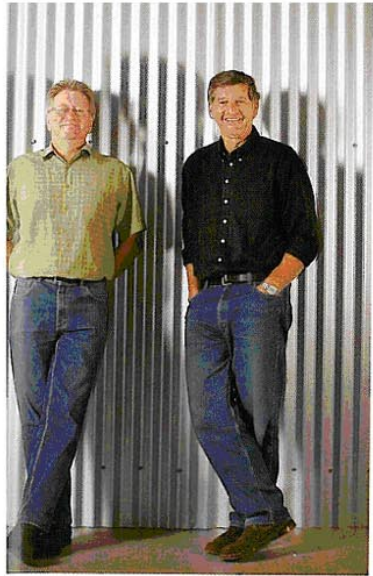
I've tasted several vintages of Puriri Hills' merlot-dominant blends and they're all beautifully taut and elegant wines with an impressive harmony of texture and flavour. The progression in quality and style in just four years is even more impressive. When I connect the dots and extend the graph, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that this is going to be one heck of a label.

Grape expectations: Trust me – buy now while you still easily can.

TE WHAU VINEYARD

Tony Forsyth is a wine enthusiast's wine enthusiast. He's also what a plain-speaking friend of mine would call "a competitive bugger". After running one of the country's top management consultancy firms, Forsyth decided to chuck it in and start his own winery, and so far it seems to have paid off.

Forsyth doesn't do things by halves. He chose the sort of vineyard site that your average winemaker would describe as exciting



CULT LEADERS

A "competitive bugger", Tony Forsyth, with wife Moira (left), is in control at Te Whau Vineyard, while Judy Fowler (far left) maximises her MBA in winemaking at Puriri Hills. Stunning doesn't begin to describe the scenery around Marlborough's Fromm Winery (above), but it's the reds by Terry Peabody at Craggy Range (centre) that have him laughing all the way to the bank. Terravin's vines (above, far left), planted on sunny slopes, give winemaker Mike Eaton (top right) something to smile about. Fromm's hills (top centre) capture the imagination as James Healy and Ivan Sutherland (top left) ensure that their Dog Point wines captivate the palate.

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NEW ZEALAND COLLECTABLES



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but uneconomic. It faces due north and is so steep I get vertigo from just looking at photographs of it. Forsyth planted the vines close together and bought a skinny-tracked vehicle to do the hard yards. A circular winery and restaurant is positioned above the vineyard and has views to die for.

In fact, the restaurant has been such a huge success that it seems to soak up most of Te Whau's production – which is a pity because Forsyth's dense and elegant merlot cabernet sauvignon, The Point, coupled with his elegant and full-flavoured chardonnay, remain moderately well-kept secrets.

Grape expectations: If you visit the island, get The Point.

Central Otago

There are simply too many new Central Otago vineyards with exciting potential to make a call. Carrick Wines, Gypsy Dancer Estate, Valli Vineyards, Olssens, Kawarau Estate, Pisa Range Estate, Two Paddocks, Mt Difficulty Wines and Peregrine Wines are just a few of the established producers that have shown form in recent vintages.

Grape expectations: As good as Central Otago pinot noir is right now, we ain't seen nothing yet.

Gisborne

VINOPTIMA ESTATE

Vinoptima is the appropriate name for the wine of an optimistic and experienced winemaker. Nick Nobilo was winemaker/general manager of Nobilo winery for many years until he sold the farm and received the big cheque from Australian wine giant Hardys.

Most of us would have invested wisely and clicked into permanent holiday mode: not Nick Nobilo. He blew the lot on a state-of-the-art vineyard and winery designed to produce – wait for it – gewürztraminer.

The vineyard brings tears to my eyes. It has a “stuff the cost” look about it. And the winery is even more spectacular – imagine the Sydney Opera House with stainless-steel tanks. Actually, the indulgent bit isn't so much the building, it's what's in it. Nobilo has put a lot of thought and dosh into creating a winery that he can run entirely on his own – an endeavour risky in the extreme.

However, any doubts I might have had about the financial viability of the venture faded when I tasted Vinoptima's first vintage (2003). Take it from me, the wine is terrific.

Grape expectations: Vinoptima puts new spice into gewürztraminer as well as adding a massive, spicy hit to the New Zealand wine scene.

Hawkes Bay

BILANCIA

Warren Gibson and Lorraine Leheny are what I would call “classic Kiwis”; others might say “quiet achievers”. They're a husband-and-wife winemaking team who obviously spend as much time thinking about vine-rearing as they do about child-rearing, and manage to do both with the same level of care.

Gibson has a day job as winemaker at Trinity Hill, where they shape the wine that they have created on their one-hectare hillside vineyard in the Gimblett Gravels district of Hawkes Bay. The couple also buy grapes to provide more economy of scale.

Bilancia's pinot gris has certainly made a name for itself, but it's the product of the hillside vineyard that set my pulse racing. To be specific, it's a syrah/viognier co-fermented red called Bilancia La Collina Syrah.

Grape expectations: The 2002 Bilancia La Collina Syrah is an absolute knockout – dense, complex and power-packed, it offers an amazing silky texture. And this from just the first vintage.

CRAGGY RANGE

This is a controversial choice. Craggy Range is the brainchild of Terry Peabody, who is based in Queensland and who also happens to be one of the wealthiest people I've met. I hate that last statement – he's a seriously bright, sensitive and generous man, but everyone seems to focus on his wealth because it's easier to measure than those other things. He's unfairly thought of as “the rich guy”, just as Craggy Range is sometimes dismissed – in particular by cash-starved winemakers – as the “rich guy's plaything”. There's no denying that Craggy Range has lavished money on the serious business of making great wine. And it's worked. Its best wines are world-class.

Grape expectations: As good as Craggy Range's syrah, chardonnay, pinot noir, riesling and Bordeaux-based reds are now, there's a lot more in store for the future.

Marlborough

DOG POINT

Dog Point is a gilt-edged investment for anyone with an eye on wine quality. It's a partnership between two very talented people. James Healy, ex-winemaker for Cloudy

Bay, is one of the brightest and most creative winemakers I've met. Ivan Sutherland was one of Marlborough's earliest vineyard owners and was Cloudy Bay's chief viticulturist for many years, supplying it with much of the production from his extensive vineyard holdings. After just a couple of vintages, Healy and Sutherland have already shown they can make world-class sauvignon blanc, chardonnay and pinot noir.

Grape expectations: Anyone who buys these wines now (especially the pinot noir) is onto a winner.

FROMM WINERY

Hätsch Kalberer, winemaker at Fromm, gets a pretty free rein to make the wines he wants. The result is a wide range of indulgent wine styles that are snapped up by those who are in the know. Fromm is a living example of the axiom "good wine needs no bush" – wine lovers find Fromm, and not the reverse. Try the winery's sleek chardonnay, super-elegant pinot noir or uncannily Germanic-style riesling and you'll instantly share my enthusiasm for Kalberer's wines.

Grape expectations: A low-key achiever that is set to avoid the hype surrounding many well-recognised cult-wine producers.

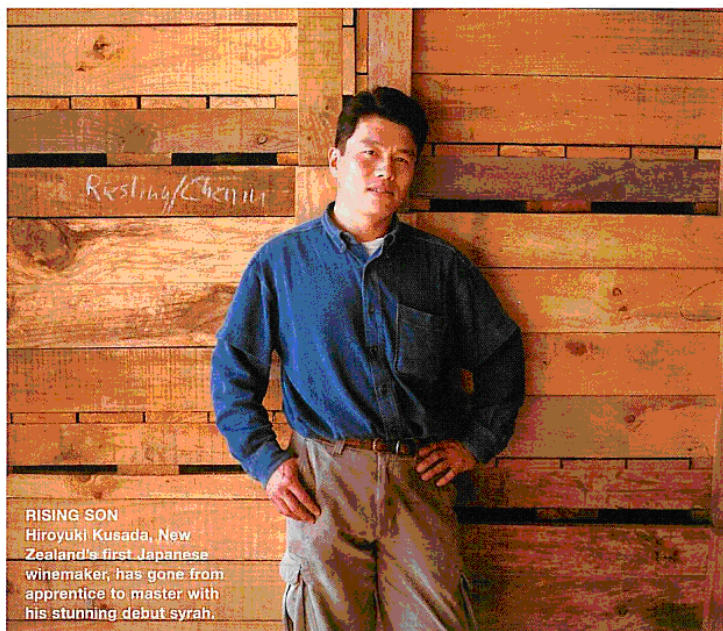
GRAVITAS

Gravitas is a relatively new label founded by expat Kiwi Martyn Nicholls, one of the few people in the world to earn an MBA in wine from Bordeaux university. I am as impressed by Nicholls' view of the big picture as I am by his first couple of vintages of sauvignon blanc and chardonnay. Nicholls has also bought a vineyard in the Spanish Pyrenees, where he has planted riesling – clear evidence of his savvy lateral thinking.

Grape expectations: I predict great things from this label.

TERRAVIN

Mike Eaton is nutty about slopes. Instead of doing the sensible thing and planting his vineyard on Marlborough's plains like everyone else, he headed for the hills. It's much more expensive to grow grapes on sloping land, but Eaton figured that he should be able to make better wine and get a higher price.



RISING SON
Hiroyuki Kusada, New Zealand's first Japanese winemaker, has gone from apprentice to master with his stunning debut syrah.

Eaton developed the now highly respected Clayvin vineyard before selling it and purchasing even steeper land. He's a red wine specialist making mostly pinot noir and "J", a blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and malbec that puts a smirk on the face of his fellow Marlborough winemakers – until they taste it and realise its potential.

I recently reviewed Eaton's entire range from the first vintage in 2001 to the barrel samples of 2004. A couple of early vintages are marred by winemaking faults, but the wines show enormous concentration and promise. Terravin's latest secret weapon is winemaker Mike Weersing (see Pyramid Valley Vineyards, below).

Grape expectations: Terravin is a cult winery waiting to happen.

Martinborough

ESCARPMENT VINEYARD

Larry McKenna has, as they say, got form. He was the driving force behind the rapid development of New Zealand pinot noir during the '90s. In 2003, McKenna was able to let his obsession loose and make the first wine from his own vineyard. I expected the best and that's exactly what he delivered with the 2003 Escarpment Kupe Pinot Noir.

Grape expectations: Well-funded, with a great vineyard site ... not to mention McKenna. This is a safe investment.

KUSUDA WINES

Hiroyuki Kusada is the country's first Japanese winemaker. He made some stunning wines at Schubert, a small Martinborough winery, where he worked with owners/winemakers Kai Schubert and Marion Deimling. Now he's released the first wines under his own label, including an impressive syrah that sells in Japan for about NZ\$100.

Grape expectations: Kusada is an absolute perfectionist; he won't settle for second-best. Looks like a cult winery in the making.

Waipara

BELL HILL

Bell Hill is the dream wine project of Marcel Giesen and Sherwyn Veldhuizen. The vineyard, situated about 15 minutes' drive west of Waipara, looks like something from a film set. Imagine a steep, north-facing slope that's adorned with low-trained, densely planted vines in a vineyard coated with bright limestone chip, and a romantic alpine chalet alongside. The vineyard, on the site of an ancient limestone quarry, is planted with pinot noir and a small amount of chardonnay. Although the first few vintages have been very good, they haven't met Giesen and Veldhuizen's high standards and were marketed under their Old Weka Pass Road label, but their best is surely yet to come.

Grape expectations: When Bell Hill Pinot Noir finally appears, buy it.

PYRAMID VALLEY VINEYARDS

"No risk", "a dead cert" and "top of the list" were the responses I got from a couple of winemakers when I told them I planned to include Mike Weersing's Pyramid Valley Vineyards in my list of wineries with cult potential. I share their enthusiasm, despite the fact that Pyramid Valley Vineyards has yet to make and release a wine. Conviction is based on two things: its exciting limestone-rich (and yet-to-be-proved) vineyard site, and the passion, skill and intelligence of Weersing – which together are unsurpassed.

Grape expectations: It's my guess that Pyramid Valley Vineyards pinot noir will be near the top of the charts within a year or two of release. Put your order in now. !