



WINEMAKING

SIR GEORGE FISTONICH

Passion and perseverance has seen Villa Maria's founder succeed on a global scale.

From an early age, George Fistonich had strong ambitions to become a winemaker. His father had other ideas. His parents immigrated to New Zealand in 1926 and following the Croatian tradition where the eldest son takes up a profession and the second a trade, Fistonich completed an apprenticeship in carpentry and joinery. But he knew he didn't want to be a builder.

Wine has always played a significant role among the Croatian community and from a young age Fistonich helped tend the vines at his family's vineyard. The more he saw how families in the wine business were progressing, the more fascinated he became by the enterprise and the potential for an industry in New Zealand.

When he was 21 his father leased him land in South Auckland. He planted an acre of vines and started making wine under the name Villa Maria.

In the early days of Villa Maria, Fistonich encouraged consumers to try wine with food as a part of a wine and cheese evening. This was an era when beer drinking and fortified wines were at their peak but Fistonich believed good-quality table wines were the future. He used to drive his wine to independent distributors all over the North Island.

In 1979, the winery was the first in New Zealand to launch a restaurant. The concept was regarded with much suspicion by many locals. But after two years of objections from neighbours and various local and licensing authorities, it opened and the Prime Minister attended the opening.

BOUNCING BACK

In 1985, due to continuous low prices in the industry, the winery entered receivership. Fistonich dug in his heels and managed to delay the receivership by two weeks. Serendipitously, at the Australian Wine Awards – on at the same time – Villa Maria won all three trophies available to New Zealand wines. Auckland grape-growers also took out ads in the *New Zealand Herald* in support of Villa Maria. Even Fistonich's staff put an ad in the *Herald* saying he was a great employer and winemaker. By the end of 1986 Villa Maria was once again trading profitably.

Villa Maria decided to move from cork to screw cap 15 years ago to ensure a consistently high-quality wine. "Significant change takes vision, nerves of steel and a fierce belief in yourself and your team," says Fistonich. Villa Maria continues to focus on sustainability. More than 30 per cent of their vineyards are organically certified and their objective is to reach 50 per cent by 2020.

His greatest achievement to date is receiving a knighthood in 2009 for service to the New Zealand wine industry. He was the first to be acknowledged for services to the industry. ►

HEAD ONLINE

Villa Maria has made it onto our insider's guide to South Auckland. Check out what else to do at mindfood.com/southauckland.