

Ground force

When your goal is to make the best wine you can, organic production methods make perfect sense.



YOU DON'T HAVE TO dig very deep to see the difference organic methods make to viticulture. Just plunge a spade into the ground at one of Villa Maria's organically managed vineyards, says Hawke's Bay Regional Viticulturist Jonathan Hamlet.

"Organic viticulture produces nutrient-rich soils, which dramatically benefit the vines," he explains. "It's not just about what's above the ground, it's about the life and biology in the soil."

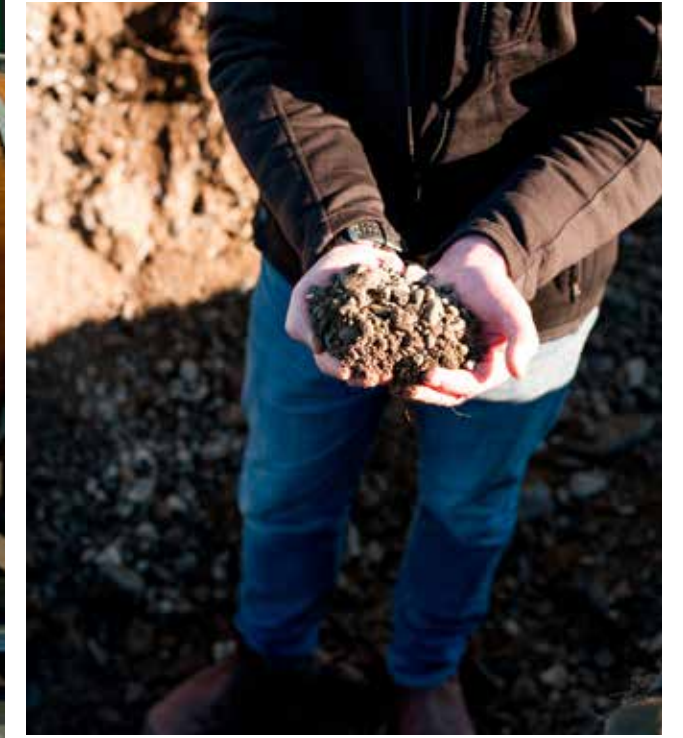
It's this kind of attention to detail and vision that has seen Villa Maria become New Zealand's most awarded winery. The company, which was founded by Sir George Fistonich in the early 1960s, is now a global brand with vineyards in the winegrowing regions of Auckland, Gisborne, Hawke's Bay and Marlborough.

"We're a family business," Jonathan says. "Villa Maria has been in business for more than 50 years and Sir George is motivated by the idea that the business will be in good condition for the family for the next 50. One of our most valuable assets is our land – that's what creates these exciting wines – so there's a clear motivation to keep vineyards healthy."

The company began moving towards using organic production methods at one of its Hawke's Bay vineyards in 2001. A decade later, it became the first major New Zealand winery to receive internationally recognised BioGro Organic Certification for the entire winemaking process. The first organically grown, BioGro-certified wine the company made – the 2009 Villa Maria Cellar Selection Merlot – won a gold medal at the New Zealand International Wine Show.



Richard Painter, Winemaker, Te Awa Collection, and Jonathan Hamlet.



"Organic management means learning to work with the natural systems to maximise quality and keep vines and soil healthy."

Now, nearly 30 per cent of Villa Maria's company-owned vineyards are organically certified and the company is planning to increase that to 50 per cent by 2020. The company is a founding member of Sustainable Winegrowing New Zealand and was the first major New Zealand winery to achieve the internationally recognised CEMARS (Certified Emissions Measurement and Reduction Scheme) certification. Since then, it has reduced its carbon emissions by more than 30 per cent per bottle of wine produced.

Jonathan, who has been with the company for 10 years, helps manage 400 hectares of vineyards in Hawke's Bay as well as overseeing nine contract growers in the region.

"Hawke's Bay is a very complex area," he says. "We grow 16 different varieties and while our biggest focus is on Chardonnay, our Bordeaux reds and Syrah, we have some great things happening with lesser-known grapes like Tempranillo and Albariño."

"One of the things that sparked my interest in wine is that all these individual sites can make truly exciting wine and none of them are the same," Jonathan says. "From 100 metres on one side of the driveway to 100 metres on the other, I can be growing completely different styles of Merlot or Chardonnay because of the different soil types. That level of complexity and the way it reflects the land and the climate is amazing."

Organic management means learning to work with the natural systems to maximize quality and keep vines and soil healthy, Jonathan says. "Having an organic block means you can't have man-made or synthetic inputs, so we use compost to add nutrients, humus and biology back

into the vineyard. Within our winemaking process we have seeds, stalks and skins left over after pressing off grapes.

"In Hawke's Bay, we take all that by-product and put it into an on-site composting facility with wood chips, cover crops and cow manure. We apply that compost back to the vineyard to close the nutrient cycle."

Other natural processes used to overcome growing challenges include planting between rows of vines with buckwheat and phacelia because both attract a parasitic wasp that predate a caterpillar that can create bunch rot at harvest. The use of sheep in winter cuts fuel use by reducing mowing and helps control weed growth under the vines. The company also chooses machinery that is as fuel-efficient as possible, and embracing new technology helps minimise water use.

"As a manager or a viticulturist, organic production makes you think outside the square," Jonathan says. "We've had organics for 17 years now and it's been a great process. You can't be reactive; you have to be very observant and proactive because you don't have a bunch of chemicals to get you out of jail. Hard work now means long-term gains."

Making the shift to organic methods is a logical choice for the company, he says. "With everything that we do at Villa Maria, the quality of the wine comes first. That actually makes our decision-making across all stages really easy, because we are all focused on what will be the best outcome for the quality of the wine."

"We're confident that managing our vineyards organically unlocks even more potential from the soil and allows us to make the highest quality wines. If you can do it this way, why wouldn't you?"