

Collaboration is a key ingredient in great wine – winemaker Nick Picone (left) and viticulturist Ollie Powrie work closely together all year round, especially at harvest time when they spend a lot of time on the road visiting vineyards.

*A good harvest means great things for winemakers and wine drinkers alike.*

WINEMAKER NICK PICONE starts imagining what next year's wine will be like while the grapes are still hanging on the vines. After 20 years he knows how important the harvest period is to winemakers and wine drinkers alike.

"It's a pretty short window and it's important to get it right. Each harvest has at least a three-year effect – it's one year to grow the grapes, a year to make the wine (or longer, depending on what it is), then the time the wine is out in the market, representing our work. It's a key moment for us, the decisions we make at harvest have a lot resting on them. When you pick the grapes will have a key impact on that particular wine."

As Group Chief Winemaker for Villa Maria, Nick has a lot of decisions to make. Now a global brand, the vineyard was started in the early 1960s by Sir George Fistonich. His initial five-acre plot of leased land has grown to numerous vineyards in the four major regions of Auckland, Gisborne, Hawke's Bay and Marlborough. Villa Maria has been New Zealand's most awarded winery at national and international wine competitions for nearly 40 years. In April this year, Villa Maria was named the fourth most-admired wine brand in the world for the second time in three years by Drinks International, and is the only New Zealand winery to make the top 10.

Nick's first harvest was in 1997, under winemaker Gordon Russell at Esk Valley Estate. After experiencing a few harvests

abroad, he joined Villa Maria full time in Marlborough in 2003. He now oversees the national winemaking team from his home in Hawke's Bay.

"The company has grown a lot in 20 years," he says. "As a team, we all work closely together to get the best out of a harvest. For me, it's great to have people I can rely on. Everyone goes into the season knowing what needs to be done. There's a buzz in the air at harvest, we're all working hard and working together."

One of the people who Nick works most closely with is Company Viticulturist Ollie Powrie. Ollie, who is also based in Hawke's Bay, has been with Villa Maria for a decade. Like Nick, he still gets excited about harvest.

"I love being part of the decision making process and seeing everything come together, from the grapes being picked to the fruit being pressed," he says.

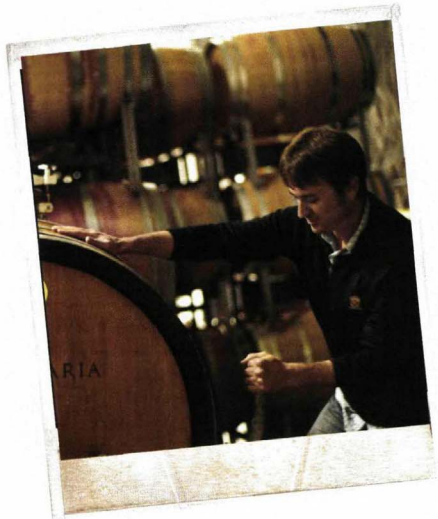
The pair spend a lot of time traveling around the vineyards, assessing the grapes' condition and forecasting when they should be picked. In theory, that should be as soon as the flavours are perfectly ripe – but that's without accounting for the vagaries of the climate or the state of the vines. In reality, it's part science, part experience and part intuition, Nick and Ollie say.

"Coming into harvest, we need to be testing sugars and acids, so we can keep an eye on the ripening process," Nick explains.

"As things get a bit closer, we make regular trips into the



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vineyards. Winemakers start to taste the grapes and monitor the process closely."

Harvest typically begins at Villa Maria's Auckland vineyards first, where the picking of Gewürztraminer, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Verdelho grapes can start as early as mid-February. The sun-drenched vineyards of Gisborne and Hawke's Bay are generally picked next, though winemakers and viticulturists keep a keen eye on the weather to make sure the harvest isn't subject to early autumn rain. Grapes from the Marlborough vineyards come in last, sometimes as late as early May. Most of the grapes are harvested over a four to six-week window at each winery.

"We have a lot of ground to cover, so when you have at least a couple of people making decisions together you can come up with the best plan," Ollie says.

"It's all go, every day is different," Nick adds. "In some areas, the climate is the same year in year out, and I think that shows in the wine. Here in New Zealand, there's a lot more diversity within seasons, which defines and shapes the wines."

The role of viticulturist and winemaker are intricately linked, he says. "It's exciting and rewarding to work closely with the viticulturists, and it's crucial for me to spend a huge amount of time in the vineyards. I wouldn't change that."

When the last load of grapes rolls in, it signals the end of the harvest process and the start of the next stage of the wine's journey from vineyard to glass. Not surprisingly, this is traditionally marked by a good old-fashioned knees-up.

"There's lots of wine," laughs Nick. "And some awkward dancing," adds Ollie.

"We have a party and bring all the staff together from the vineyards and wineries," Nick says.

"We tell a few stories, have a few laughs and look to send everyone home safe and happy in the knowledge that they have worked hard and contributed to what we do. Everyone does long hours during harvest so it's good to have a bit of time-out before we move on to the next stage.

"Even if the season is challenging, we still manage to make great wine. That's the sign of a fantastic company."

