

From vine to vine



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a big emphasis on how those parcels of grapes are doing on a particular piece of land. We’re always talking about the next new thing and different ways that we can improve what we do. There’s innovation along every step of the process so dialogue between the viticulturists, the nursery and the winemakers is really important.”

Senior Marlborough Winemaker Helen Morrison, who was inspired to join the wine industry after an OE in the UK and Europe, says being able to tap into Emma’s knowledge and experience is invaluable. “What Emma’s doing with the nursery is directly related to what the viticulturists and the vineyard managers are doing. What I’m doing is the end result of the work that Emma does, but there’s a three-year lag in-between.”

About a month after harvest, Villa Maria’s winemakers travel between the company’s vineyards in Auckland, Gisborne, Hawke’s Bay and Marlborough to blind taste samples from each vineyard block. Their findings go back to the nursery and viticulturists as evidence of how well each separate group of vines has performed.

“Once we’ve done those initial assessments it’s about going away and thinking about how to put them all together,” Helen explains. This means determining the perfect blend that best represents the varietal and the region.

“You want each wine to have its own identity, and to reflect the climate of the particular area that it’s from. You’re looking for aromatics, palate flavours and palate weight – how a wine tastes and feels in your mouth. If you have a sample of sauvignon blanc from the Awatere Valley for example, and you’re smelling crisp, cool, aromatics like nettles, herbs and lemongrass, it needs to follow through on the palate so what you’re smelling is what you’re tasting. That’s where blending comes in.”

It’s a complex process, requiring patience and perseverance in equal measures. “You have to be fiddling here and there – putting equal parts of your favourite aromatics with your favourite palate weight almost never works – five per cent either way can have a massive effect on the wine. You might try four or five iterations before you’re happy with a blend, or you might never be happy with it and have to start all over again. But once you get it right, you know.

“You can never know everything about winemaking and that makes it quite intriguing. I think the longer you are in the industry, the more you realise you have to learn.”



Making truly great wine means quite literally going back to the roots.

AFTER 17 YEARS in the wine industry, Emma Taylor knows all about hard graft. In fact, as Nursery Viticulturist for Villa Maria, you could say she specialises in it.

“Making grapevines is very labour-intensive,” she says. “There are 25 different processes involved and there’s a lot done by hand. But Villa Maria is constantly producing award-winning wines, so we’re obviously getting something right.”

Emma and her team are responsible for hundreds of thousands of baby vines grown each year at Villa Maria’s Hawke’s Bay nursery. Villa Maria is the only wine company in New Zealand that has its own full nursery, which produces a significant amount of the 3.5 million to 4 million vines planted in New Zealand every year. The winery, started by Sir George Fistonich in the early 1960s, is now a global wine brand that has dominated wine competitions at home and abroad for nearly 40 years.

Villa Maria’s continued success owes a great deal to getting things right from the start. Emma, who has been with the company since she was a cadet viticulturist straight from university, says attention to detail is crucial. The vines she tends are certified to the New Zealand Winegrowers Grafted Grapevine Standard, which ensures they are healthy, true to type and not carriers of disease or pests.

“Our vines go out to Villa Maria vineyards, Villa Maria growers and to the open market, so we are motivated to supply the

highest quality vines possible. Sir George believes the whole wine industry is bettered by everyone working together to advance the spirit of innovation in winemaking and vineyards, which extends to the nursery as well. It is always exciting to experiment with new varieties.”

Grapevines around the world are subject to pests that can compromise production and quality. Winemakers in New Zealand combat this by grafting European grape varieties onto American rootstock which is less susceptible to pests.

“At the nursery, we graft vines onto the rootstock, then look after them for a year to make sure the graft has healed well and that the vines are nice and healthy, then we send them out to the vineyard to plant,” Emma explains.

Rootstock has a huge bearing on how grapes grow, allowing viticulturists like Emma to conjure up combinations that will suit varying climate and soil variations.

“Some rootstocks can advance or delay ripening, so you can spread out the ripening season. Some will influence the tolerance for different kinds of soil, or change the density of berries on the bunch. Of special interest at the moment are rootstocks that have a deeper rooting system, which can reduce our need for irrigation. “It’s an amazing tool for us,” Emma says. “The neat thing about wine growing, compared with other horticulture, is that it places