

Alternative Varieties

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The Impact of a Name

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Is New Zealand's mono linguistic heritage stymieing the ability of the wine industry to broaden its horizons in terms of new varieties? The answer to that is a resounding yes, according to two men who have been at the forefront of alternative varieties. Geoff Thorpe, Riversun's Managing Director and Simon Nunns, Coopers Creek winemaker, both believe the ability to pronounce a wine variety is one of the most important aspects of a wine's ability to sell.

As Nunns points out, there are thousands of different wine cultivars throughout the world, but most people will only ever drink around half a dozen of those in their lifetime.

"That's not to say they are not interested in expanding their horizons, but most people will simply not want to make a fool of themselves in a public situation. So they will see something they think might be interesting, but will go 'oh I can't say it', so will order a glass of something else – something they can say."

That consumer reaction is not unusual and it's also not new. As Thorpe says, New Zealand has been making fantastic Gewurztraminers for years now – but when it comes to establishing a consumer following, there has been no traction.

"If consumers can't get their tongues around it easily, they hesitate to order or buy it. That is probably the biggest single resistance. If you put a different name on some of those wines and consumers tasted them, they would love it."

Coopers Creek have been a leader in terms of alternative varieties in New Zealand. They have been the first producers of Arneis, Gruner Veltliner, Marsanne, Albarino and this year are producing the country's first Vermintino. But they are carefully considering if they will continue on that alternative path.

"We are putting more and more thought into whether or not a certain variety is worth it, because a certain name might be so hard to say, no matter how good it might be, you are damned from day one in our English speaking home market."

He puts that hard to sell issue down to New Zealander's mono linguistic heritage. We are comfortable with words that are born of the English language, but those that aren't tend to scare us off.

"If the name is so hard that people are never in a million years going to come to grips with it, are you just banging your head against a brick wall? We now know people are scared of wine they can't pronounce, so is it even worth it? In some cases it is but the path to success is a very hands on one. You can't just make the wine and hope it will sell. It will only sell if you tell people about it. You have to explain to on-premise staff and wine store staff – increase their knowledge and give them the skills to increase the knowledge of the people they serve."

The issues Nunns raises are well known to Thorpe who says consumer reaction to the new varieties already in the market is filtering back down the chain.

"I have clients looking at what we have imported and a lot of their decisions about whether they buy are based on whether they can sell it, and that is now based a lot on the name of the variety. They look at say Fiano and it looks interesting and sounds like what it looks like on the label. Whereas something like Saperavi, Primitivo and many other varieties which are hard to pronounce, they are not keen on."

The fact we even have any of these new varieties is thanks to Riversun, who back in 2003 established an importation programme that saw close to 150 grape varieties come into New Zealand. Many of those are new clones of classics such as Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris and Chardonnay. But in amongst those 150 are 20 new varieties never seen in New Zealand prior to 2003. The importation programme is not for the faint hearted, given it take up to five years from woe to go.

"Firstly you have to source it, you have to make sure there is quarantine space available and then once you get it into the country it has to spend two years in quarantine," Thorpe says. "Then it takes at least another year bulking it up so you have enough material so you can actually graft. We only take three plants out of quarantine, so to go from three plants to have 10,000 plus available, takes you between 10 and 15 months of rapid multiplication."

That is just the initial phase he says.

"People who are really keen (on a new variety) will plant say half a hectare. They have to learn how to grow it, learn how to make the wine and then see if there is a market. All that takes another five years and then if they start to get some traction,

they might start planting more. I have always said to start getting some real commercial demand, it is at least 10 years.”

Given all that, Thorpe says he isn't sure there is the market demand for increasing the portfolio of new varieties in the immediate future. Advertisements placed last year asked for wineries and growers to let them know if there was any particular new variety they were interested in.

“The message was, we are looking to bring in another round of imports, so if there is something you think should be in there, give us a call. We didn't get a single phone call.”

Does that mean the appetite for trying something different is not there? He says probably not, given there are still a large number of varieties within the collection that haven't yet been picked up by the industry.

“When we started this programme we said if one in 10 of what we import gets commercial, we are probably doing pretty well.

“Sauvignon Blanc is a great example of that. It sat in the national collection in Te Kauwhata for years. Nobody wanted it. They planted it in Auckland and that didn't work. It was seen as a useless variety until it landed in Marlborough. So the key message here is that it sat around in the industry for 30 years before it found its place. The same could be the case for some of the new varieties in our collection. Which is why the industry needs people like the Bells in Gisborne who have planted a whole lot of new imports. Some they will probably pull out, others they might plant more. But there is only one way to find out. You have to try it.”

And if the name is hard to pronounce then you have to ensure the marketing is followed up by education. Otherwise New Zealanders will continue to drink their way through five or six varieties during their lifetime, rather than experimenting with the many hundred of others that are out there.

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PICS:

Brancott Vineyard:

Sauvignon Blanc languished in the wilderness for 30 years before it arrived in Marlborough. Now it is New Zealand's greatest export. Photo Brancott Estate

Bottle Shots:

Will the names of these new varieties continue to put consumers off in the future?