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Syrah in Marlborough

Tessa Nicholson

Syrah is very much an alternative red variety for this region. But small though the plantings may be, the ensuing wines are more than capable of standing on their own.

Hawke’s Bay has always dominated the Syrah stakes in New Zealand. As one of the reds the region is renowned for, it is a major component of their wine industry.

In Marlborough there are only 10 hectares of Syrah planted. But as the saying goes, it’s not the size that matters. In the past few months it has been Marlborough Syrahs taking out two of the country’s major titles. First Giesen won the Syrah Trophy at the Easter Show and then Fromm’s was judged the best Syrah in the country by Cuisine.

Master of Wine Perspective with Emma Jenkins

So accustomed have we become to the fanfare around New Zealand syrah it is easy to forget there is still only a paltry 300-odd hectares planted throughout the country. But such is the excitement surrounding its potential that it commands a disproportionately large amount of producer, critic and increasingly, consumer attention.

Syrah has a long and illustrious history as one of France's noble varieties. Its birthplace was the Rhône Valley, where to this day it reaches the apex of its expression in the Northern Rhône appellations of Hermitage, Côte Rôtie, Cornas, Crozes-Hermitage and Saint-Joseph. Syrah also partners Grenache and Mourvèdre in Southern Rhône reds, adding backbone, spice and finesse and is widely planted throughout the Languedoc-Roussillon where again it is seen mostly in blends.

Syrah is grown widely and successfully throughout the world, with substantial plantings found in Italy, Spain, the US (most notably California and Washington State), Chile, Argentina and South Africa as well as smaller plantings in many more countries ranging from Greece to Thailand. Closer to home, Australian syrah (shiraz) has a lengthy and impressive history. First planted in the early 1800s, it is widespread

across all winegrowing regions with styles varying from light and sweet (e.g. Riverina) to impressively concentrated (e.g. Barossa and McLaren Vale). Ancient vines and clones abound and recent years have seen cooler regions and more elegant styles being explored.

A vigorous, mid-ripening variety, syrah tends to be medium-bodied with gentler tannins and more mid-palate weight than cabernet, rich in black-and-blueberries with licorice, anise, olives, herbs, leather plus its hallmark black/white pepper notes (depending on climate). Very warm climates give jammier fruit plus mint and chocolate. In New Zealand, where it is mostly found in Hawke's Bay and Waiheke (though a smattering of plantings are found elsewhere from north to south), syrah tends to ripen in the more settled month of April and has a generally more forgiving ripening window than cabernet which has helped cement its popularity. The best wines are elegant and structured with clear varietal expression and seem destined for a bright future indeed.

Viticulture in Marlborough

The vigour and size of the bunches is the most notable viticultural aspect of Syrah, according to William Hoare from Fromm. Bunch sizes and weights can be extreme, which means careful management in the field is required.

“When you compare a Syrah bunch with say a Pinot bunch there are some noticeable differences,” he said. “A Pinot bunch would be say 90-110 grams, whereas a Syrah bunch would be 140-250 grams. I have seen bunches which are 400 grams.

“We have one bunch per shoot, and we remove the shoulders to get the bunch weights down to 120-140 grams. Because we are close planted (4700 vines per hectare) we aim for 10-12 shoots per plant. So we might be cropping 1.2-1.4 kg a vine, which for us works out at 5.5-6.0 tonnes per hectare. If we did no crop thinning that could easily be double. This past season we would have cut probably more than double that to the ground.”

With vines that are 20 years old, William says the workload is probably about double that used to manage Pinot, and the balance they have found naturally occurring in the Pinot blocks isn't occurring in the Syrah.

“What we have found at Fromm is the Pinot vines that are 20 years old have found a really nice balance. We do a bit of crop thinning, cut the shoulders off and they sit

somewhere around that 1.2-1.3 kg a vine. Whereas with Syrah, even in the old vines, you have to keep doing the work and adjusting the crops to try and find a balance.” Timing of that work is also important.

You have to do things like crop thinning and leaf plucking at the right time with Syrah, as it makes a massive difference in the quality of the fruit.”

While Fromm has undertaken some spur pruning trials to try and keep crop levels down, William says he is tending to lean more towards cane pruning.

“Spur pruning does give lower crops and it tends to budburst early, so you have a longer growing season which is great. But because we are organic, we seem to have more disease pressure from spur pruned vines, as the older wood is more prone to carry over diseases from season to season. There also seems to be much more second set higher up in the canopy which can cause issues with powdery mildew later in the season.”

The growing season

With Pinot here in Marlborough, we work on flowering to picking being 90 days. Syrah can be up to 120 or more.”

That offers a lot of advantages though he says, especially in terms of alcohol content.

“Everywhere I have worked in the world it has always been a battle to get Pinot or Chardonnay off when you have physiological ripeness and don’t have too high alcohol. You have to battle hanging it out there to ripen and then suddenly you have too much alcohol. Whereas with Syrah in Marlborough, it gets to 13.5% alcohol at the end of the season when it is starting to cool down anyway. You won’t find the brix level rising dramatically each day; instead the grapes just sit there and you get concentration of flavour without over-ripeness or jamminess.”

Winemaking

In Fromm’s case all the Syrah is handpicked and fermented on its natural yeast. There is no need to add much to it, William says, because the pH doesn’t seem to move much.

There is no whole bunch fermentation, given with the cool climate here, there is no desire to have stems. It is a variety that is really easy to work with he says.

“People tend to think of Pinot as not being very tannic. But it actually is, so you have to be very gentle with it. Whereas with Syrah, you can be much less gentle. You can

be much more relaxed about how much you pump the wine over or plunge the tanks, as Syrah won't become the big tannic monster that Pinot would."

Adding a level of complexity to the wine, Fromm co-ferments the Syrah with a small amount of Viognier, for good reasons.

"Cool climate Syrah can be a bit of a donut wine, it's all fruit and tannin at the end and it can be a bit hollow through the middle. The Viognier has almost the same cycle as Chardonnay, so it flowers early and by the time we co-ferment it with the Syrah, it is probably about 28 brix. So instead of being like normal Viognier, really fruity, it is concentrated and almost oily. That's what fills the mid palate."

Aged in barrel for anything from 14-18 months (depending on the season), Fromm is keen not to overpower the wine with oak.

"We are using some 600 litre barrels now. There is less surface area of wood, so you end up getting less of that charred oaky sort of flavour."

The recent accolades for this variety aren't surprising to William. He says wine writers and sommeliers have often been blown away by the variety here in Marlborough.

"That's what excites me about Syrah in Marlborough. The variety has been here for a long time with Cloudy Bay, Vavasour and Wairau River all having initial plantings. But with the growth of Sauvignon Blanc it all got pulled out in the early 90s. Even though Syrah wasn't trendy at the time, Hätsch and I both knew we could make great Syrah from the Fromm Vineyard site as he had been making it since 1996. So in 1999 we made a conscious decision to replace some blocks with Syrah. It was crazy at the time, because Syrah wasn't 'cool' and was a very hard sell. It seems we were right, though, as we are now getting a lot of great reviews for this wine and we cannot make enough to keep up with demand.

"The great thing about Marlborough Syrah is that people don't have any set ideas in their heads about what it should be like, but when they try it they love it. I always describe it as a 'double-concentrated Pinot'. It is an amazing wine that ticks all the boxes."