

# Gold Medal Vineyard in the Making

Nick Hoskins



*What can a vineyard achieve in just one year? If the vineyard in question is Te Awanga*

*Estate & Winery Limited in Hawke's Bay, then the answer is, "plenty".*

As Riversun's viticulturist, I'm frequently asked to visit clients' vineyards, particularly during the early stages of planting and development. On a recent visit to Te Awanga Estate & Winery Limited in Hawke's Bay, I was delighted to encounter a young vineyard in absolutely peak condition – quality materials, sturdy vines, and phenomenal growth. Under the direction of Dr. Greg Beacham and vineyard manager Denis Green, Te Awanga is still a work in progress, but the attention to detail is already apparent in every aspect of the development. Achievements like this deserve to be celebrated; they can also provide a useful case study to help other growers in their efforts. Dr. Beacham is the first to admit that his role as managing director at Te Awanga is a new one. Besides running his medical practice, the physician also owns a specialty car restoration business in Havelock North, and it was through that channel that he met the German investor behind Te Awanga Estate & Winery. "He visited the area while one of his cars was being built," he explains. "It's a case of one small business attracting more investment to the region." The investment is sizable – a multimillion dollar development

comprising a 25-hectare vineyard, 400-tonne capacity winery and a luxury restaurant with panoramic views. "My principal in Germany wanted someone in this area he could trust," continues Dr. Beacham. "We've worked with the best in the business to ensure this development is successful." In addition to Riversun, which supplied all the grafted vines, Te Awanga Estate & Winery has gathered together what it considers the top team in the country to manage the project, including noted viticultural consultant Dr. David Jordan, architect John Blair, and winemaker John Belsham, who is providing technical advice on the winery (which will begin construction in 2005). The vineyard itself is under the capable care of Denis Green. Starting at age 15, Mr. Green ran his parents' vineyard before spending nine and a half years at Te Mata Estate, followed by another four and a half years as the main hand at Delegates' Hawke's Bay operation. Self-described perfectionists, Dr. Beacham and Mr. Green clearly enjoy their work and what they've achieved to date. In 2002, all they had to start out with was their investor's request for a block of land near the sea and with some elevation. Te Awanga was the area of choice – along with a requirement for a relatively frost-free area. According to Dr. Beacham, it was "a stroke of luck" that enabled the purchase of a former deer farm and its "million-dollar view" of Cape Kidnappers and the sea. In addition, their brief was to prepare a showcase vineyard to the highest standard. The vineyard

will be managed organically, an approach pushed by Dr. Beacham. "Organic wine is sought-after in Europe," he adds. "It may not garner much of a price premium yet, but over time it will increase. Our main aim is to produce clean, high-quality fruit that is not contaminated, and organic gives us a means of doing that." Very early on, Dr. Beacham and his principal consulted with Dr. David Jordan for advice on vine variety and vineyard set up. Of the 21 hectares planted so far, there are blocks of Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, Chardonnay, Syrah and Merlot. The remainder of planting, which will take place later this year when vines become available, will be in Cabernet Franc and Viognier. Once the site had been selected, the entire property was surveyed, and then a programme of contouring and shaping the land began – including filling in a small valley and making a hillside symmetrical. Heavy machinery with rippers and leveling bars covered the whole site to even things up, and the ergonomics of row layout were carefully considered to prevent tractor damage at a later date. Dr. Beacham indicates that he plans to irrigate all headlands and alleyways throughout the vineyard to keep them green year round and promote a tight turf. Planting of a high-density grass through the alleyways began this autumn. Considerable research also went into the local soils and their drainage properties. The shingle soils at the front of the vineyard drain well. The remaining soils, which are waipukarau and okawa loam, had pan which had to be ripped to a depth of one metre with a D 8 bulldozer. The property was subsoil drained to catch a rising water table in a wet winter. "In fact, 2003 was a wet winter, so it helped us identify wet areas and drain them into the main system," continues Dr. Beacham. "There are several sumps into the shingle as well." Throughout the soil preparation stage, soils were sampled and laboratory tested, after which the appropriate fertilisers were applied. Although there was some evidence

of grass grubs, Dr. Beacham indicates that after the soil was ripped, the sea birds took care of the pests. A wet winter delayed planting until July 2003, with the last plants in the ground in August. In this same two-month period, posts and trellising were installed, along with the computer-controlled trickle irrigation system. Initially, all vines were machine planted. Several months later, when it became clear that a small block of vines was not thriving to the same degree as its neighbours, we found that some of the plants had been planted with insufficient space for proper root growth. Mr. Green immediately called the contractor who replanted the problem area by hand, and establishment proceeded without further problems.

In all, 52,899 vines were planted. Rows are 2.2 metres apart, vines 1.8 metres apart, with 4 plants per bay. The plantings are designed to complement the position of the restaurant, although the main emphasis has been north to south placement of rows where possible. Because symmetry is an important facet of the overall design, the remaining rows are all planted on an east/west axis – including the block in front of where the restaurant will be built, enabling diners to look down the rows all the way to Cape Kidnappers. Quality is apparent in every aspect of the development. Machine rounded posts were selected for their superior strength, a choice that proved its worth during the installation: only 10 intermediates out of 15,000 were damaged when driven in, and one strainer out of 1300 broke. The trellising system is standard VSP (vertical shoot position) with a 900 mm fruiting wire. The vines have been trained as a single leader up a string attached to a wire at the top of the post. In addition, Mr. Green chose 900 mm Grow Guard vine covers expressly because they promote early growth. Irrigation is controlled by measuring soil moisture percentages at five different levels from the surface down to a depth of one metre. Fertigation is carried out as necessary, based on soil and plant sample results.



Te Awanga Estate & Winery Ltd. enjoys a "million-dollar view" of Cape Kidnappers and the sea

"I was expecting good initial growth, partly because the taller vine covers act as little glass houses, trapping in all the warmth," adds Mr. Green. "When our pruners begin work in June, we'll have plenty of covers for sale." Growth has, in fact, been spectacular – by mid-January 2004, vines had reached 2 metres. Growth was pinched in mid-February, but when I last visited Te Awanga, in late April, the vines were still green and growing – a feat that appears even more phenomenal when you consider that irrigation stopped four months earlier and the autumn has been unusually dry. Given the site's proximity to the sea, the potential for damage to the vines from salt burn is a concern; but that, too, has already been addressed. "We knew it could be a problem, but we didn't expect the strongest February storms from the sea in 20 years," says Dr. Beacham. "The experience enabled us to map a potential area which could be damaged in the future." A two-pronged approach has been taken. Mr. Green uses NU FILM 17 every 14 days throughout the leaf-growing season on the entire vineyard to promote the runoff of salt spray. In addition, overhead sprinklers have been installed on the front blocks to dilute heavier spray sent in during storm periods. The sprinklers are activated by

a weather station set to monitor density and speed of wind. As with many of the approaches taken in this vineyard, the sprinklers serve an additional purpose, in that they can be used for frost protection, should the need arise. As with any organic regime, weed control requires extra vigilance. After an initial cleanup with Roundup, order has been maintained with a combination of the Pellenc weeding machine and a carefully researched organic herbicide programme. Dr. Beacham plans to soon add a third weapon to this arsenal – a diesel burner (currently in prototype) designed to desiccate weeds using hot water vapour. This too has a dual function, in that the machine can also be used for frost protection. From the start, Mr. Green planned to crop the vines in their second year, although he stresses that this debut crop will be managed very carefully. "We only want to take what the vines can carry," he adds. As the photos accompanying this article indicate, the growth achieved in just one year has been enviable. But when you examine the care that has gone into the planning and development of Te Awanga Estate & Winery, the results simply prove what can be done with the right approach. Asked to sum up his perspective on the vineyard so far, Mr. Green says, "I'm absolutely rapt that we'll be cropping next year. I'm really looking forward to picking that first bunch of ripe fruit and seeing what it's all about."



Spectacular growth – vines planted in July 2003 reached 2 metres in height by mid-January 2004

## Timeline at Te Awanga Estate & Winery Limited

- 2002** Site search and initial planning
- 2003** Site acquisition, with 25 hectares allocated to vineyard  
February – land preparation begins  
July to August – planting, trellising, and irrigation completed
- 2004** Vines exceed two metres' growth by mid-January
- 2005** Plan to take first crop  
Construction to begin on winery and restaurant

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