

## Three sixty, with Geoff Thorpe Ambitious and achievable

What is our collective vision for the New Zealand wine industry in 2030, and what research is required to help us realise that vision? That was the topic explored at an industry forum held in Blenheim earlier this month, convened and chaired by the research arm of New Zealand Winegrowers.

I was privileged enough to be invited to join the group of 30 leading winemakers, viticulturists, growers and marketers tasked with answering those questions.

To get the ball rolling, we started the day with some SWOT analysis, identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats currently facing New Zealand wine. Unsurprisingly, that warm-up exercise kept many delegates mired in the here and now – exactly the opposite of what’s required when you’re attempting to define the way you want an industry to look well into the future.

On more than one occasion, I heard attendees say that it was impossible to make long-term forecasts in the present business environment, and that it was probably better to focus on what is known, and plan accordingly.

For me, setting a vision does not require forecasting *per se*; rather, it’s “aspirational.” Yes, it is vitally important to factor in predicted long-term trends to ensure your vision has a good chance of being realised. But a vision also needs to be inspiring, ambitious, audacious even, if it is going to pass muster.

No great vision can be realised by one person alone – you need to capture the hearts, imagination and passion of all around you. In the case of the wine industry, that includes suppliers, growers, winemakers, marketers, researchers, funders and – probably most important – wine consumers!

So what should that vision look like? While NZ Winegrowers grapples with that question at several levels (the meeting in Marlborough was designed to help the research committee assess funding priorities for future research projects), I have a clear vision of my own – not only for our industry (Riversun included), but for New Zealand agribusiness at large: “By 2030, New Zealand wine (and meat, dairy, fibre, forestry, fishing) will be seen by global consumers as THE highest-quality, most sought-after products in the world.”

By 2030, “highest quality” wine will incorporate much more than just flavour, mouth feel, aroma and appearance. It will also have to be totally safe (think nil artificial chemical residues), and it must be produced in a truly sustainable manner (think zero carbon footprint,



minimal or zero use of pesticides and petrochemical-based fertilisers).

So what global trends do I think will drive this extended definition of quality?

Back in the 1970s, climate change was widely predicted to start affecting us by 2000 – in fact, it arrived decades earlier. By 2030, it’s likely to be “top of mind” for consumer purchasing decisions. Consciousness of air, water and soil pollution, steadily increasing cancer rates across the industrialised world, and an awareness of how chemically driven food production has become – these issues are already pushing the move toward organic foods, farmers’ markets and home gardening. Again, these trends were all predicted more than 40 years ago and are only expected to increase over the next 20 years.

The global population has now hit 7 billion (I remember making a speech on population growth in the 70s, when the population was only 3 billion) and continues to grow unchecked, putting relentless pressure on land, minerals, food and water supplies.

The long-predicted “peak oil” is now here – indeed, some say it arrived several years ago – and the cost of all petrochemical-derived products will rise rapidly over the next 20 years.

That’s enough sobering predictions for now. My point is, these trends are not new, and they were all clearly signalled at least 40 years ago. Well-researched long-term forecasts are exactly that. Exact timing is harder to predict, which is why preparedness is critical.

So, back to that vision for New Zealand wine in 2030. If we can supply wine of outstanding quality that also speaks to all of those consumer concerns, familiar topics of debate are likely to fall by the wayside. We can say goodbye to our current discussions surrounding the pros and cons of bulk wine, exchange rate challenges, the power of the supermarkets, lack of

scale and profitability. Instead, high-end consumers the world over will be beating a path to our doors.

As a vision, this is aspirational, but is it realistic? I am absolutely convinced it is, based on the fact New Zealand is uniquely placed to tick all those boxes. We know we can match (and even surpass) the very best the wine world can offer. We also have some of the cleanest air and water on this planet and our soils are not degraded by centuries of cultivation. We are a highly innovative and adaptable people, not easily intimidated by change.

If we focus our limited but world-class research and development horsepower on the necessary technologies to help us all deliver to these new quality parameters, we will earn ourselves a unique and enviable position in the minds of global wine consumers.

Ambitious and audacious? Yes! Aspirational? Absolutely. Achievable? Damn straight – as long as we as an industry (and an agribusiness nation) commit ourselves to meeting the challenge.

New Zealand is such a tiny, precious paradise that I don't see any other way of going forward than by making each sector of agriculture an ultra-premium producer.

Research can help us own this territory. When Riversun set its vision of producing the best-quality grafted grapevines in the world – and being able to prove it – we achieved that goal by investing heavily in research. With expert help from the late Dr Rod Bonfiglioli (our technical director) and Nick Hoskins (our chief viticulturist), we tackled each step, soon discovering that they led inexorably to launching an unparalleled importation programme – again, entirely self-funded. I mention this not to crow, but simply to underscore what a clear vision combined with research can achieve not in two decades, but less than one.