



Making their mark

How much of a personal fingerprint do winemakers make on the wine they produce? Beverley Blanning MW considers whether it's the character of the land or of the maker that really influences what's in your glass



SO OFTEN WE hear that 'great wine is made in the vineyard'. But great wine is also made in the winery – often by a single individual. And the effect of that person on the wine can be palpable.

Considering all the decisions made in a winery – from the date of harvest through to fermentation, maturation and bottling – it goes without saying that the winemaker has tremendous influence on the style and quality of a wine. Winemakers decide whether to add yeasts or enzymes to their must, at what temperature to ferment and in what type of vessel; should they use steel or concrete, new or old wood, large or small vats? Should they leave their red wine on its skins to macerate after fermentation? Should they barrel age, blend, filter, clarify? The list of choices is endless. The result is a wine that is, hopefully, distinctive, and maybe even identifiable as coming from a certain winery.

In the winter of 2004 I visited Michèle Aubéry-Laurent at Domaine Gramenon, an estate in the southern Rhône that she and her husband Philippe had bought some 25 years earlier. Following his premature death in a hunting accident in 1999, she took over the domaine. She described making wine as 'capturing a moment of life in a bottle'. For her, that 'moment of life' was more than simply a season's fruit. She told me: 'Some time after my husband died, I opened a bottle and I couldn't drink it, because it was him in the bottle.'

For some winemakers, the idea that their work is identifiably theirs is positive. Alsace winemaker, Olivier Humbrecht MW of Domaine Zind-Humbrecht reasons, 'If I try wines from other growers, I like to see the personality of the winemaker. It's like art, music or food. You expect to eat in a certain style in a certain restaurant, and it's normal that you recognise the imprint of the winemaker.' Others, though, consider anonymity more appropriate. New Zealand winegrower James Millton says, 'I don't want people to taste my wine and think it's mine. I don't think I should have a controlling influence.' In Burgundy, Grégory Patriat, winemaker for Jean-Claude Boisset, shares this view: 'If the winemaker appears in any of the wines, it's wrong. We don't want any signature in Burgundy,' he argues. For him, grape quality is paramount, almost to the

Domaine Leroy [his former employer] you can't imagine the mistakes we made in the winery. You can be lazy and bad if you have very good grapes.'

'Inevitable' imprint

Whether or not these practitioners like to admit it, it's likely that their influence will be seen in their wines anyway. Australian winemaker Stephen Pannell feels that the influence of the winemaker is unavoidable, because people generally have cellar palates or regional palates, and are inevitably in love with their own wines: 'Tasting and evaluating your own wines is a bit like that old saying, love is blind... all your friends can see that it is not going to work out but you can't see or won't listen. To remain objective is difficult,' he says.

Burgundy expert Jasper Morris MW also suggests that seeing the winemaker's imprint is 'inevitable' – but, he says, it is only a problem if it dominates the wine. He points out that the winemaker's influence is more obvious in a region like Burgundy as it's mainly small scale, with a single person responsible for the wine. 'In Bordeaux,' he contrasts, 'it's less easy to see the influence of an individual.' Furthermore, the grape variety will affect the

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Olivier Humbrecht MW



Winemakers whose wines reflect their personalities



Randall Graham Bonny Doon Vineyard, California (pictured left) Inventive, unusual

Frank Cornelissen Sicily
Divisive personality, divisive wines

Chester Osborn d'Arenberg, McLaren Vale
(below left) Big, bold, flamboyant

Paul Pontallier Château Margaux, Bordeaux
The perfectionist

Paul Draper Ridge Vineyards, California
Intellectual, thought-provoking, staying power



'I don't want people to taste my wine and think it's mine. I don't think I should have a controlling influence' James Millton

extent to which a winemaker's touch is visible. New Zealand Pinot Noir specialist Larry McKenna of Escarpment believes winemaker influence is more noticeable in Pinot than other reds: 'It is the most transparent red variety. Whatever the winemaker does is easily seen and tasted,' he says.

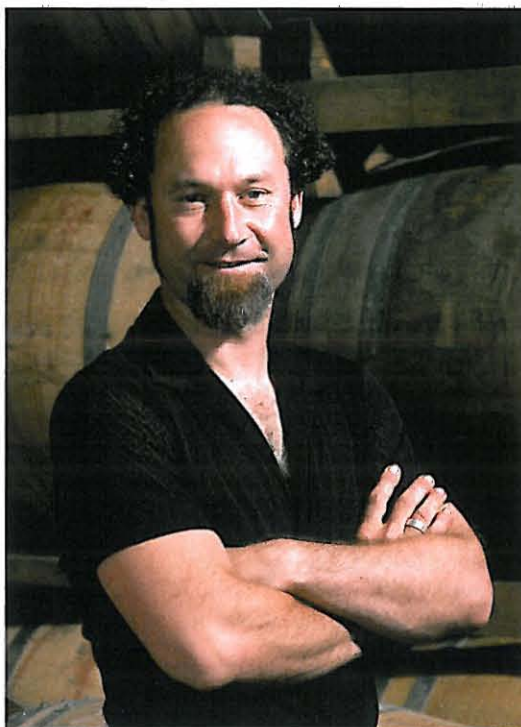
Trying to identify where and how a person marks a wine most is not straightforward. How can one separate the influence of the winemaker from the effect of the site? A recent experiment in New Zealand (see overleaf) attempted to do precisely that. The Riesling Challenge took grapes from a single site, picked at the same time, and distributed them to 12 winemakers around the country to produce a wine in any style they wished. The wines were remarkably diverse, ranging from dry and steely to light-bodied, floral and sweet. Paul Bourgeois of Spy Valley, for example, made a bone-dry wine, with expressive, crisp, chalky fruit. By contrast, Duncan Forsyth of Mount Edward produced an off-dry wine with floral aromas and a fine-textured, silky palate.

The idea was the brainchild of Neil Charles Jones of Mud House Wines. 'My own conclusion from this,' he writes, 'is that the influence of terroir on wine style is generally overstated.' He continues, 'Great grapes make great wine, no question, but wine style is hugely influenced by the winemaker and his decision-making – and often by the market.'

Local knowledge

Interestingly, it was a local winemaker, Pegasus Bay's Matt Donaldson, whose wine was judged to be the best. Donaldson said, 'I think we had an advantage in knowing that site and that vineyard.' He chose to concentrate the sugars in the grapes by freezing them prior to fermentation, then stopped the ferment to leave residual sugar in the wine. Some might argue that this sort of manipulation goes against the ideal of pure terroir expression. However, Donaldson makes the point that whatever your view, there will always be more than one opinion on how best to interpret a site: 'Our idea of terroir expression is going to be different from someone else's; everyone has his own idea of how to express the vineyard in the best way.'

Riesling is a variety that offers both exceptional diversity of site expression, and lends itself to many different styles of production – particularly in terms of sweetness. I wonder if the wide differences in style seen in New Zealand would have been likely in a more traditional region. Humbrecht feels there would probably be less stylistic variation in a region like Alsace: 'We are influenced by long traditions, so perhaps we have more of a common idea of what Riesling should be. A winemaker from Alsace will see the Riesling grape totally differently from one



Above: Pegasus Bay winemaker Matt Donaldson's Riesling was judged best of the dozen made by twelve different winemakers, using the same parcel of Waipara Valley grapes



'The influence of terroir on wine style is generally overstated. Great grapes make great wine, but style is hugely influenced by the winemaker' Neil Charles Jones



This suggests that what happens in the winery is as much a product of local culture as it is local growing conditions. Ted Lemon, owner of Littorai in California, asserts that local culture and human intent are inseparable from terroir: 'All terroir involves a cultural dimension,' he claims, 'There are places in the world that have the inherent ability to produce exceptional wines, but it can't happen unless the winemaker has a comprehension of that idea. If you look at Romanée-Conti, that whole history came about because of human intent. There has been a human devotion applied to that parcel, on an almost unparalleled level.'

Special relationship

In Burgundy there is general agreement that site is responsible for the innumerable expressions of Pinot Noir. Yet even here, to any serious Burgundy lover, the producer is at least as important as the site. Despite Pinot Noir's remarkable ability to conjure itself into so many varied guises, do, in fact, the winemaker's interpretation and skill count more? I ask Morris for his view. 'However much you believe in terroir, it's evident that the hand of the



Above: the signature of Patrick Materman, of Pernod Ricard in Marlborough, marks out his wine from the other 11 in the Riesling Challenge (see overleaf)


are young – almost as much as the terroir,’ he says. He recalls a vertical tasting of Clos des Epeneaux, a premier cru in Pommard where the wines were divided into flights based on who was winemaker at the time. ‘You got a sense of one winemaker who was allowing the vineyard to have its own way and someone else who was trying to impose winemaking on the vineyard,’ he remembers. ‘You see it in overextraction [of tannins] and oak.’ But, he says, his experience over time in Burgundy is that the winemaker’s influence diminishes as wines age. ‘After about 10 years, the character of the vineyard comes out and wines from the same site made by different producers taste more alike.’

The most fascinating aspect of all is not whether a wine has more or less tannin extraction, or whether it was aged in a particular type of oak, but the undeniable fact that a winemaker can somehow imbue a wine with his or her personality. Just as dogs resemble their owners, there is often an intangible, yet definite, relationship between a winemaker and his wines. Morris says: ‘There is a temptation to look at a handful of key decisions [in the winery], but it’s the thousands of tiny things that end up making the style, and many of those are done every day, subconsciously. When I taste the wine of someone I know well I can absolutely see their temperament in the wine.’ Are these not the wines that truly speak to us? Those that tell of their origins not only from the soil, but also from the people who create them. ➤



Beverley Blanning MW is a freelance wine writer and author, and an experienced

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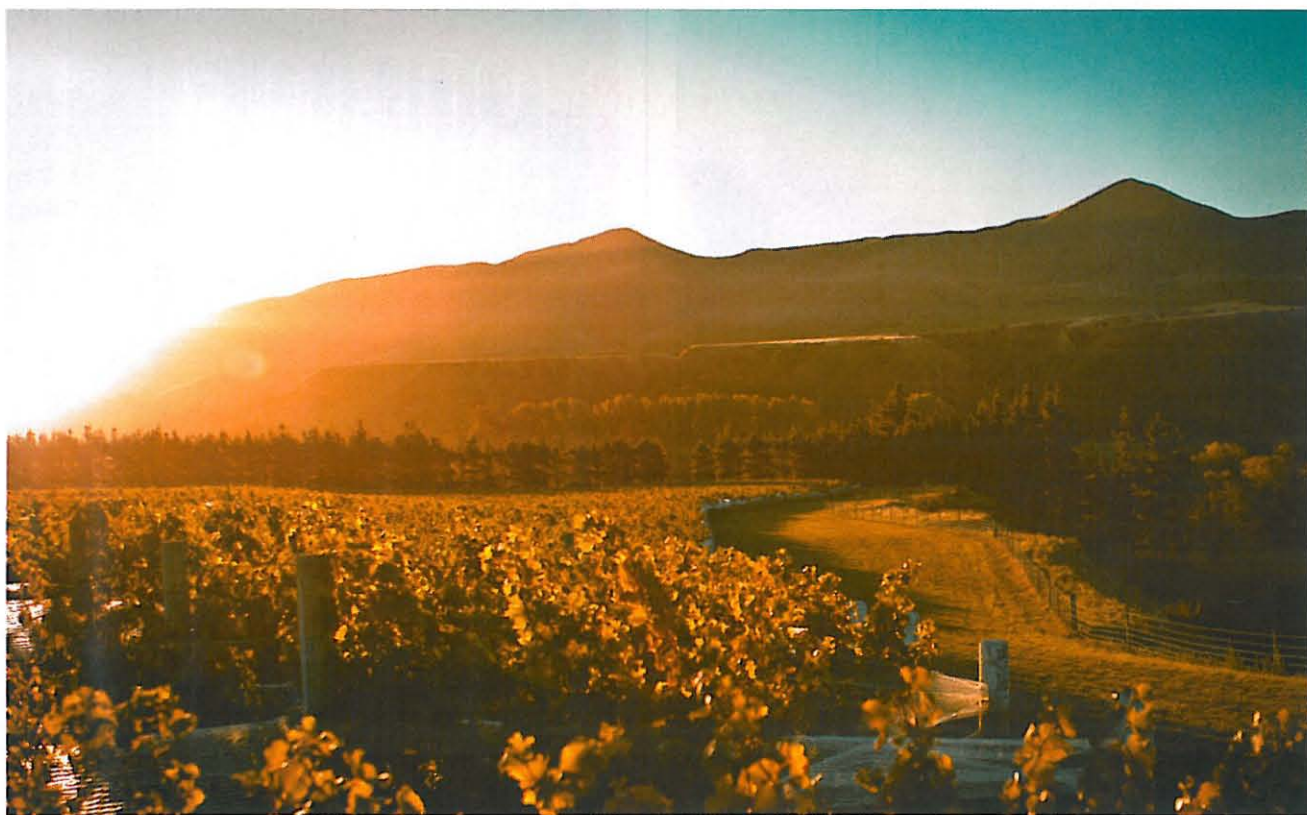
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Above: Mud House Wines' single-block Riesling vineyard in the Waipara Valley, from which all the grapes for the Riesling Challenge were sourced

The Riesling Challenge

Mud House Wines owner Neil Charles Jones got to thinking that, for all the talk of terroir, it is always the winemaker who takes the credit. He tried to isolate the influence of the winemaker by giving 12 individuals the opportunity to put their own stamp on grapes grown in the same vineyard. Sixty tonnes of Riesling grapes from a single block in the Mud House vineyard in the Waipara Valley were hand picked over a two-day period in April 2010 and sent to the winemakers to treat in any way they chose.

In December the wines were tasted blind and ranked by the 12 winemakers. Matt Donaldson, of Pegasus Bay, produced the highest-scoring wine. It was also the sweetest, with 63 grams per litre of residual sugar. It has a fresh perfume of white flowers and a lightweight, medium-sweet palate, balanced by linear acidity. Donaldson said, 'The fruit was in perfect condition but picked a little earlier than we do for our Pegasus Bay Riesling, so we thought we'd have a little fun and froze the bunches before pressing, concentrating the sugars. Fermentation was clean and cool and stopped according to taste to give a luscious, classic style.'

The wines were shown for the first time in the UK in January, at the annual New Zealand

tasting for the wine trade. The differences in the wines were striking; styles ranged from bone dry, firm and steely to luscious and floral. At the UK tasting (not blind), votes were taken to find the favourite. Donaldson won again, narrowly beating Marlborough's John Forrest. Forrest's Riesling was more full-bodied, with 12% alcohol (compared to Donaldson's 10%abv) and distinct minerality. Other winemakers found different expressions: Simon Waghorn (Astrolabe) made a medium-sweet style at 9.5%abv with light, ripe apple, powdery fruit and no trace of minerality, while Paul Bourgeois (Spy Valley) made a bone dry, chalky style at 12.5%abv, with crystal clean fruit and steely length.

The participating winemakers were:
Paul Bourgeois Spy Valley, Marlborough

Mike Brown Golden Hills, Nelson
Matt Dicey Mount Difficulty, Central Otago
Matt Donaldson Pegasus Bay, Waipara
John Forrest Forrest, Marlborough
Duncan Forsyth Mount Edward, Central Otago
Patrick Materman Pernod Ricard, Marlborough
Simon McGeorge Waipara Hills, Waipara
Larry McKenna Escarpment, Martinborough
Ant McKenzie Te Awa, Hawkes Bay
Jules Taylor Jules Taylor, Marlborough
Simon Waghorn Astrolabe, Marlborough

The wines are available from UK merchant Tanners as a mixed case of 12 for £119.99 or £9.99 a bottle, except for the Paul Bourgeois Riesling, which has sold out. Bibendum sells the Paul Bourgeois wine for £12.80 a bottle

For full details of UK stockists, see p92

