

# ~BEST OF~ the Bay



## MICHAEL COOPER

A NEW logo was unveiled recently by Hawke's Bay Winegrowers, depicting the fast-running rivers - notably the Tutaekuri, Ngarururo and Tukituki - which flow from the mountains to the sea. Lying on the east coast of the central North Island, Hawke's Bay is New Zealand's second-largest wine region, home to 75 producers.

Marlborough, the dominant region, is known globally for its leap-out-of-the glass sauvignon blancs, first produced in 1979. Wine lovers are drawn to the Bay, says



Michael Henley, chair of Hawke's Bay Winegrowers, "because we offer them something different from the rest of NZ. We are able to show them where the NZ industry has come from, as we have some of the oldest wineries in the country, but we are also able to show them some of NZ's most exciting red wines".

Hawke's Bay has nearly 14 per cent of New Zealand's total area of bearing vineyards. Merlot (22 per cent), chardonnay (21 per cent) and sauvignon blanc (19 per cent) are the principal grape varieties, followed by pinot gris (9 per cent) and syrah (7 per cent). Its bordeaux-style reds are highly acclaimed, so it must surprise many to learn that pinot noir (which suits the region's relatively cool, upland areas, especially Central Hawke's Bay) is more extensively planted than cabernet sauvignon (now confined largely to the Gimblett Gravels and Havelock North).

A map circulated recently at a Hawke's Bay Hot Reds promotion identified 12 sub-regions, from Te Awanga and Esk River on the coast to the Crownthorpe Terraces and Mangatahi Terraces inland. Some argue that the existence of so many sub-regions does not help in the marketing arena.



With so much variety of wine styles and geography, it is sometimes difficult to identify exactly what the Hawke's Bay story is.



Gordon Russell, winemaker at Esk Valley, also chairs the Gimblett Gravels Winegrowers Association. Russell believes the Gimblett Gravels "story" (about stony, free-draining soils reducing vine vigour and high summer temperatures helping the grapes to achieve ripe, concentrated flavours), is easy to understand.

"The Hawke's Bay brand on the other hand is very diverse, in a lot of respects, maybe too diverse. We sometimes feel there is more currency in Gimblett Gravels than there is in Hawke's Bay as a brand... With so much variety of wine styles and geography, it is sometimes difficult to identify exactly what the Hawke's Bay story is."

The latest labels on Trinity Hill's upmarket range of \$NZ35 varietal wines all boldly identify their origin in the Gimblett Gravels, while there is no mention of Hawke's Bay on the front labels.

Two prominent sub-regions are the Gimblett Gravels and the Bridge Pa Triangle, adjacent to each other in what was once known as the Hastings Dry Belt. Alwyn Corban, co-founder of the Ngatarawa winery, in the Bridge Pa Triangle, notes that the two districts have very similar

climates and free-draining soils that require irrigation.

While the 800ha of the Gimblett Gravels are almost fully planted in vines, the Bridge Pa Triangle, which Corban believes yields "more aromatic, less tannic" reds, has 2700ha of vineyards, orchards and grazing land.

The Bridge Pa Festival in January is a good opportunity to taste the wines. Eight producers attended this year - Abbey Cellars, Alpha Domus, Ash Ridge, Ngatarawa, Paritua, Triangle Cellars, Salvare and Sileni. Chris Wilcock, of Ash Ridge, points out that the top trophies at the regional Hawke's Bay Wine Awards 2014 were all awarded to wines from the Bridge Pa Triangle.

Big company investment is pouring into Hawke's Bay. Villa Maria will build a new winery at Te Awa designed to reduce the transport time for grapes, a crucial factor in difficult vintages. Villa Maria has 400ha of vineyards within 10km of the Te Awa site near Hastings.

Inland, the adjacent Matapiro and Crownthorpe districts form "probably the second biggest winegrowing area in Hawke's Bay", says winemaker Emma

Lowe, of Monowai Estate, "but we've joked about it being its best-kept secret". Here, the cool, high altitude terraces and flats are best suited to early ripening varieties.

Delegat's, owner of the Oyster Bay brand, has 350ha of vineyards at Crownthorpe, mostly planted in merlot and chardonnay. The company recently paid \$NZ29.3 million for another 838ha of farmland at Crownthorpe, with the potential to yield a further 500,000 cases of wine.

"How to grow the Hawke's Bay wine industry - just add water," suggested a recent article in Wine Hawke's Bay magazine. The Ruataniwha Dam, a proposed \$NZ600 million water storage project in Central Hawke's Bay, championed by the regional council, is likely to go ahead, although many farmers are refusing to sign up for the water, saying it will be too costly.

"There's 25,000ha of irrigable land in Central Hawke's Bay," says Xan Harding, deputy chair of Hawke's Bay Winegrowers. "That's five times the size of the Hawke's Bay wine industry. Much of it is light soils perfect for quality grape growing." 🍷

*Above:* Elephant Hill, Te Awanga.

*Opposite page:* Elephant Hill barrel cellar and wine library.