

ACROSS THE DITCH WITH MISHA WILKINSON



Glamour queens, fashionistas, trendsetters, take note ... Pinot Noir is in vogue and who would have thought New Zealand would be a leader in the fashion stakes? More than 500 devotees from 14 countries converged on the nation's capital in February to enjoy 'fashion week' Pinot-style and celebrate glamour, exclusivity and luxury. Pinot Noir 2010 was the fourth time this glamour event has been held in Wellington with similar attendance numbers to the previous show in 2007 proving that there's no waning in Pinot passion.

Aside from the formal catwalk sessions where some 20,000 glasses of Pinot Noir were paraded, 107 New Zealand Pinot Noir producers also presented a showcase of new and vintage 'must haves'. The entire show, including the cocktail parties, long lunches and exhibitor tastings along with the Mayor's Lunch and Gala Dinner, involved more than 850 people and 55,000 glasses of wine over the course of this four-day triennial extravaganza—and that doesn't include the afternoon of the Grand Pinot Public Tasting.

So is Pinot Noir just a fad that's sweeping the upper echelons of society, or do its

roots go down a long way? Pinot has produced some of the world's most celebrated wines wearing its Burgundy hat, but from the New World it's a much more recent phenomenon with NZ being the latest fashion sensation.

The word from New Zealand Winegrowers is that the future is bright for Pinot Noir. It is the second most exported variety, albeit that's only 5.4% of total export volumes for the year ending December 2009 (compared to Sauvignon Blanc at 82%), however those seven million litres exported last year are expected to soar to 14 million litres by 2013 with the US tipped to be the number one export destination within two years. Are these assumptions based on an increasing Pinot popularity, the novelty of 'New Zealand' or just wishful thinking?

Although the US wine industry had a tough time last year, in the 52 weeks to 12 December 2009 the market grew 2.6% by value and 1.2% by volume according to Nielsen's off-premise sales data. The biggest US imports—Italy, France and Australia—did poorly with volumes decreasing but in stark contrast Argentina and NZ were the growth leaders and in terms of imports now rank at number five and number six

respectively with double digit growth.

Despite growth in lower price points of the US market, in the category of US\$20 and above, sales were weak as consumers have been trading down in terms of wine purchases. But the anomaly is NZ wines generally have price points that are double that of the category average, and in spite of the trend to trade down, consumers are recognising they're getting value with NZ wines even at a premium price. And even better news is that the data shows that of the top 10 varietals in the US, the second fastest growing varietals are Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc at just two points behind the leader which is Riesling at 7.5% growth.

Leslie Sbrocco, a speaker at Pinot Noir 2010, an award-winning author, wine consultant and television host who hails from the US, believes that the spotlight on Pinot Noir in the US is because fashion went '*Sideways*' due to that movie's effect, which caused an amazing level of interest in Pinot Noir and is still being felt all these years later. "It raised awareness of Pinot Noir and made it sexy," she said. She believes that for those who didn't know about the grape, it made them want to try it. "As I always say about Pinot, you have to kiss a lot of frogs to get to the Prince, but once you've tasted an amazing Pinot, you're hooked," she said. But for how long will the aftershocks of the Hollywood phenomenon resonate? Until Pinot Noir moves to mainstream culture or until it's upstaged by the next cult movie that makes Tempranillo trendy or Gamay glamorous?

Sbrocco thinks NZ has gained a disproportionately high recognition as a result of Sauvignon Blanc, given the amount of wine actually consumed, which has been aided by the alluring images of NZ. When asked if NZ should just continue to push the positive NZ image to grow exports, she recommends just to, "make the best Pinot possible, period. If it's bad Pinot Noir no one will buy it twice regardless of how much they might love New Zealand's image".

Sbrocco sees the best opportunity in the US at the \$20 price point and above where she believes NZ can deliver a



quality/price ratio. “They want to drink quality at an affordable price. NZ delivers more than California and even Oregon at this price point—and NZ can also play at the top end of the market and beyond—it’s not an either/or proposition,” she said.

Pinot Noir 2010 keynote speaker Kevin Roberts applauded NZ and said it has a lot to celebrate in terms of making Pinot Noir, however he warned: “the industry’s reputation is no less fragile than the Pinot Noir grape itself.” Roberts is the CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, known worldwide as ‘The Lovemarks Company’. He is scared by the definition of wine that he sees on the Wine Australia website as “a fast moving consumer good”. He says if that’s really what wine is, then how does NZ Pinot Noir, or any NZ wine, attract premiums in a hyper-competitive world.

Roberts explained firstly that great brands need to be transformed into ‘lovemarks’ which are built on love and respect. “Brands build loyalty for a reason—lovemarks inspire loyalty *beyond* reason,” he said. Secondly, he believes that since the industry is comprised of small vineyards without the ability to generate huge advertising campaigns, NZ needs to develop a global trade brand like it has for tourism. He has a vision of a campaign that focuses on NZ innovation, encompasses the pure and green messages—and he sees wine as a big part of this effort, along with the creative arts like film, music and fashion. This global trade brand initiative would need to be government funded with additional support from the industry and individual players. Roberts says this ‘Made in New Zealand’ campaign is crucial and thinks that without this sort of big push, NZ will struggle to get its voice heard in an increasingly competitive market in the US and UK.

“New Zealand needs to secure its market perception as a premium producer, and being at the real edge of



Simon Tam speaking at Pinot Noir 2010 in New Zealand. Photos courtesy of Pinot Noir 2010.

the world we can do this like no other,” Roberts said. He reminds one of the comment Miles makes in *Sideways* that Pinot “can only grow in these really specific, tucked-away corners of the world”. Roberts believes NZ’s position on the globe is its greatest story. “We’re not some little out of the way place, man, we’re the edge of the world, the greatest place in any system from which to innovate and change the ways of the centre,” he said.

His idea for a largely viral campaign would be focused in the UK, East and West Coast of the USA and China, and would leverage the one million New Zealanders who live outside the country. Roberts believes “the government should be all over it like a rash”—so hopefully someone can mention it to Prime Minister John Key ASAP!

The third piece of advice from Roberts was to think from the shelf back and imagine you are a bottle of wine on a shelf—remembering of course that 60% of women buy wine and drink 77% of it. “It’s the consumer in the aisle who matters. You have to put yourself in *her* heart,” Roberts said. His final piece of advice was a reminder that we are in the participation economy where the challenge is to ignite screens with emotions, ideas and stories that people are desperate to share. He



suggests tweeting, and to consider creating mass participation platforms and Pinot events that immortalise the moment. Hopefully a small tick can go next to this last suggestion with this most recent Pinot show!

One of the best credentialed people in the NZ wine industry is Steve Smith MW. A former chairman of the Pinot Noir event, Smith is a viticulturist by training but these days runs Craggy Range and campaigns strongly for NZ wine all around the world. In terms of there being strong US demand for Pinot Noir, he agrees with Sbrocco, however, he says it’s not necessarily demand for *New Zealand* Pinot Noir. “Americans love New Zealand—but they don’t know anything about it,” Smith said. He says the issue is that the distributors and other US gatekeepers say there’s no demand for NZ Pinot Noir and won’t list it because they’re followers of fashion and not leaders.

Smith says, “Kevin is right”, in that it will take a huge effort to tell the NZ story to American consumers and then translate that to sales for Pinot Noir. He sees more potential in the UK because all the British press already love Pinot Noir

THE PERFECT FASHION ACCOUTREMENT

Maybe New Zealanders should abandon their approach of finding Pinot Noir markets on a country by country basis and think more about gender targeting. Could Pinot Noir perhaps be the perfect fashion accessory for women? Leslie Sbrocco's first book, *Wine for Women*, provides some practical advice on how to target women and she's the first one to urge that women should be an important factor in Pinot sales in the US. "We purchase the majority of wine here," Sbrocco says. "I find more and more women who are discovering Pinot and falling under its spell—as we all are in the wine business!"

So does that mean Pinot producers should be perfecting their packaging designs to make labels even more attractive? Sbrocco says no, the focus should be to get Pinot Noir mentioned in national women's publications instead of just wine-focused ones. "You should focus events and materials on the beauty of Pinot matched with food," she says. "It amazes me that more brands don't do this. Isn't Pinot just about the world's most flexible food wine? Yes!"

Indeed Sbrocco was the only speaker at one of the serious panel evaluations at Pinot Noir 2010 who suggested food matches for the wines she was evaluating. While she may get the occasional disparaging glance from serious-minded male panellists when she launches into an animated description of what food she'd like to pair with the latest Pinot Noir that has just taken her fancy, she finds rating Pinot Noir with numbers to be an onerous task. "In all my years of drinking wine I've found more than any other wine that Pinot is about the entire experience," she says.

But what of the East? In Asia it was fashionable to be a Bordeaux bigot but now with increasingly more female buyers, are there opportunities for more Pinot princesses? Pinot Noir could well be a girl's best friend. After all, she's predominantly described in feminine terms—with the odd specimen requiring a muscular or cigar box descriptor. Pinots are seen as elegant, refined, sensuous, enticing and enchanting. And given Pinot Noir's position on the status ladder, it may well be described as a thinking woman's pleasure. There was just one occasion when the beguiling imagery and the romance of Pinot Noir was shattered by a comment James Halliday made at the previous Pinot conference when he referred to her as "a difficult little bitch". Where's the romance, James? Well, I guess he is an Australian!

and are very favourable towards NZ, and says the on-premise opportunity is very promising. In fact Matthew Jukes, one of the UK's best-known wine critics and another headliner at Pinot Noir 2010, has just made the pronouncement that NZ is making more good value Pinot Noir than any other country.

Back to Smith's ideas about where NZ should focus to build export sales. His recommendations are:

- Be the best producer of (varietally-labelled) Pinot Noir—"Pinot is always going to be fashionable—and the US versions are too high in alcohol."
- Own the category of aromatic white varieties which includes Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling etc. "We can own that space forever—New Zealand is already fashionable for aromatics."
- Position NZ as the New World's home for rich and elegant red wines—"Elegance is always fashionable. It's a much smaller part of the story but still a part of it—and I'm talking more than Syrah here."

Smith also agrees that we need to tell the story about place and thinks the sustainability story should be taken up a notch for NZ with messages of 'purest air' and 'freshest soil' as those messages will resonate in the US and give them some information to back up an already favourable impression. In fact he's already doing some work in that area with a group of premium NZ wine producers who are trying to make inroads into the US market.

Since we already know Pinot Noir is "still current news and still in fashion" with our closest neighbour

to the west, (according to Nick Stock who also attended the Pinot show), what other markets should NZ look to for Pinot Noir exports? "Greater China! There has been a focus on traditional markets for New Zealand exports but it's not too late to start thinking about Asia," says Simon Tam, columnist, wine judge, commentator and consultant. Tam noted that it had taken four Pinot Noir events before someone from the Greater China region was invited to participate. He's amazed by this and thinks NZ needs to, "think seriously about coming to Greater China", because Pinot Noir is increasingly popular and there are wonderful opportunities, and the few brands he sees spending time in the market are yielding results. "Participation is the key," he said.

Tam talks about the growth in the region—in both size and sophistication. With an increasingly mature market, the focus on wine acquisition for boasting rights is yielding to the more savvy wine buyers who are denouncing those wines who *just* have a Robert Parker score to wines they actually enjoy. And the wines enjoyed are those food-friendly, supple and elegant wines that Tam thinks NZ does so well.

The advice Tam gives to NZ Pinot Noir winemakers is to be proud and realise one's value. He feels some winemakers have been downtrodden by the battering in the domestic market and cost-cutting practices of the UK. "Don't allow the stingy domestic market to put you in a box—a box that dictates your price. Leave that headspace behind and come to Greater China and be proud of your wines—Asia is not a money pinching place," he said.

So it seems that everyone is talking Pinot Noir. It's not a fad—it's definitely a serious fashion statement. So if Pinot Noir is in fashion, does that mean the big Aussie red is sitting in the closet next to the platform shoes and tie-dyed shirts? Undoubtedly the future looks bright for NZ, or perhaps I'm seeing it through cherry-hued, ruby-red and rose-coloured glasses? While we're all rejoicing in a bath of Pinot Noir, remember that fashions don't last forever. See you at the Albariño Conference in 2015.

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