



## NEW ZEALAND SYRAH: SHINING A NEW LIGHT

Syrah may represent only a tiny proportion of New Zealand wine, but a small band of dedicated growers are getting increasingly excellent results with the variety, says **Bruce Schoenfeld**—and not only in Hawke's Bay

**T**he shining—that's what I recall of my first immersion into New Zealand Syrah in 2006. It was late one summer afternoon. Neil McCallum's Lovat Vineyard in Martinborough was ablaze in blindingly bright light, like in the science-fiction films just before the flying saucer lands.

Eventually I realized that reflective foil had been spread beneath the vines to augment the potency of the short-season sun. The object was to ripen grapes that, in the country's climate, were unlikely to mature without it. The technique worked,

mostly. McCallum's Dry River Syrahs shared a persistent weediness at the core of pleasingly tart red fruit. They were very commendable and drinkable but—in the scheme of things—not memorably special.

And that, I assumed, was that.

But about that same time, up the southeastern coast of New Zealand's North Island, a lifeless patch of rocky soil that had been underwater until the 1860s was being reimaged as one of the better sites to grow Syrah in the New World. So parched for water that grass wouldn't grow, these 1,800-odd acres (730+

ha) were christened—branded, really—the Gimblett Gravels (for a road that bisects the area) by a group of aspirational Hawke's Bay wine producers in 2001.

Nearly 20 years before, Dr Alan Limmer of Stonecroft had obtained Syrah plantings from New Zealand's last pre-phylloxera block at a government research station and buried them amid the pebbles. This was one row of the hundreds that the Gimblett Gravels vineyards would contain, but it has proved an influential one. These days, 25 producers are making Syrah off Gimblett Gravels soil.

I didn't notice any of them for a while. There were so many fascinating Syrahs coming from all over the world. I drank peppery Syrahs from the Rocks, south of the Washington border in northeastern Oregon. I charted the progress of the emerging appellations in the Southern Rhône, and the linear Syrah from windy sites on California's Central Coast. I drank cool-climate Shiraz from Australia's Barossa Valley and, later, very different examples from the nearby Adelaide Hills.

New Zealand? Having defined itself with Sauvignon Blanc, it was offering a counterpoint in Central Otago Pinots, which were finally ripening consistently in the warming climate.

Above: Craggy Range on Hawke's Bay's Gimblett Gravels, where 24 other producers have been drawn since it was first planted by Alan Limmer of Stonecroft in the 1980s.

Syrah had been planted in the country in the 1830s, but it remained an afterthought. Only about a thousand acres (400ha) are cultivated in the entire nation, less than one percent of its total vinous output as late as last year, ranking it ninth among grape varieties—and those figures, low as they are, represent a doubling since my 2005 visit. By most measures, Syrah production in New Zealand is an afterthought, bordering on a hobby.

But all it takes is a bottle, right? For those of us scouring the world for interesting wines, viticultural regions are like novelists, not baseball or cricket batsmen. Averages are immaterial. Wide availability, or the lack of it, is irrelevant. What we're after is a single example that takes your breath away—just one *Huckleberry Finn* or *Anna Karenina* or *High Fidelity* of a wine. Just one, and there may as well be 30. Because one wine illustrates the possible. It confirms the existence of the chosen pieces of land, scattered unevenly throughout the continents, capable of growing grapes that make something memorable to drink. Once that has been established, if only through a single bottling during a miraculous vintage, the concept is no longer theoretical. From there, the rest is merely execution.

One day, I had a Craggy Range Le Sol Syrah that startled me, so I went back to New Zealand.

**No compromise, no politics**

A string quartet is playing Mozart's Divertimento in F major in a clearing behind Craggy Range's manicured lawn on a Friday evening full of potential. It's early this year, the heart of the antipodean summer. Steve Smith—Master of Wine and the mastermind of the estate who recently retired from it after guiding it to worldwide renown—wanders the grounds, a glass in hand.

Over its first few vintages beginning in 2001, Craggy Range became the first New Zealand Syrah that most wine drinkers outside New Zealand ever tasted. Certainly it was the first they thought they might want to taste again. The wines showed excessive polish to me, until someone handed me a glass at a dinner. It must have been the 2009. I didn't realize it was a Craggy Range. It seemed too rich for New Zealand, carrying too much momentum—a rushing river of deep, dark Syrah that would have brought me to California or even Australia.

Over the previous decade, Smith had been traveling everywhere to show off his wine. If there was an upscale consumer wine event in the United States or the UK or Europe, it was a good bet that he was there. "Half the time, I had no idea where he was," his daughter Georgia told me when I saw her in Hawke's Bay. "I'd wake up and say, 'Where's Dad?' And my mom would say, 'Oh, Japan.'"

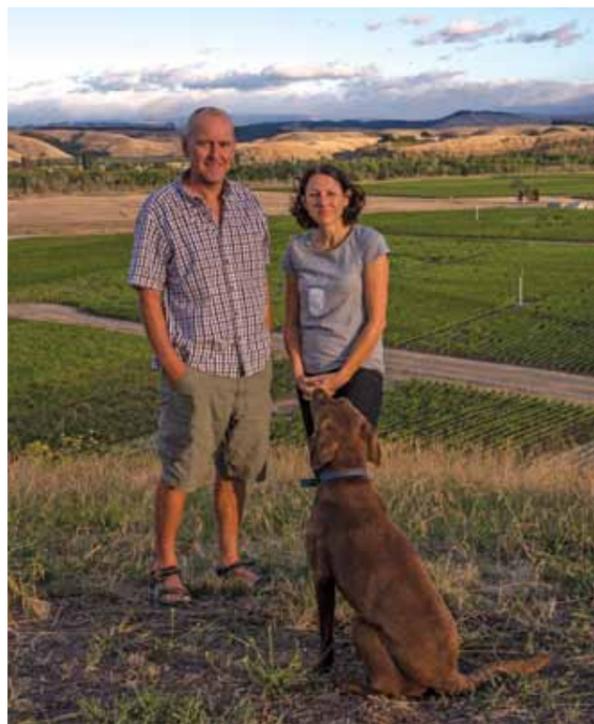
Smith was showing off his brand, including the Le Sol Syrah that debuted in *Wine Spectator* magazine with a score of 89 points for the 2002 and ran through the 90s from there. But he was also an ambassador for a specific place. Like California Cabernet and Napa Valley, New Zealand Syrah had hitched its star to the Gimblett Gravels, though that variety constitutes only one fifth of the total plantings there. "It's the only appellation in the world where the border is totally determined by soil type," Smith explains now in a murmur, so as not to compete with the Mozart. "There's no compromise. No politics."

I'd seen the Gravels earlier in the day and been astonished. I'd been expecting some version of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, more rocks than soil. But what I found hardly looked notable. It was a flat area of gravel covered by a bit of topsoil and some rudimentary grass. I was surprised, too, to see irrigation at work on plot after plot. I realize that it was the height of summer and that rain had been sparse. But what's the point of growing grapes in a singular place if the aspects of the place that make it singular are mitigated by water?

The point, Esk Valley senior winemaker Gordon Russell explained, is pure economic survival. Irrigation isn't used there to increase crop size, or as a hedge against a calamitously poor yield. It is used so farming might be possible. "There's no water retention at all in the soil," he said. "None. The vines would die."

What he said carried weight with me because I'd just tasted his Reserve Syrah. I'm a purist, but I'm no fool. Whatever method was used to make that wine (an open concrete tank dating from the 1930s, sunk into the ground without temperature control, it turned out), I was in favor.

Esk Valley produces some 50,000 cases annually. Its bottles are the featured attraction at the Air New Zealand lounges around the country. But nearly half that output comes from Marlborough; as with many New Zealand wineries, Sauvignon Blanc subsidizes the interesting stuff. There are 3,000 cases of Syrah but only 500 of the Reserve. At that volume, you won't see Russell pouring from behind a table at Pebble Beach anytime



soon. "Fine wines in New Zealand generally tend to just get drunk in New Zealand," he said. "The world isn't willing to pay what we ask for these wines."

It's a shame. When I tasted a lineup of Esk Valley's Reserve Syrahs, I liked them better than any New Zealand Syrahs I'd had. From its debut vintage in 2002, the alcohol levels have declined from 14.9% to around 14.0%, which is right where Russell wants them. "We've made mistakes," he says. "There's been too much oak in some of the wines, too much alcohol in some of the wines." But the latest vintages—especially the 2010, 2013, and 2014—show a special quality.

The 2013 has a coolness and a lift to it that reminds me of Barolo. Its flavor profile is undoubtedly Syrah, and from the texture I would have guessed Old World, yet there's no hint of the gaminess that characterizes the Rhône. It seemed to me a new vernacular for the variety, one beholden neither to the ripe, New World model nor to the smoke and meat of Côte-Rôtie and Hermitage that has served as the lodestar for Syrah producers for so long. Eben Sadie is doing something similar

Photography courtesy of (top) Stonecroft; (bottom) Esk Valley



Photography courtesy of (top) Sacred Hill; (bottom) Trinity Hill

Opposite: (top) Stonecroft's Dermot McCollum and Andria Monin; (bottom) Esk Valley's Gordon Russell. Above: (top) Sacred Hill Deerstalkers; (bottom) Trinity Hill soil.



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**A great wine needs to be fueled by ambition. It won't happen by accident. I don't mean a great experience, a carafe of something lovely in the park, but a wine with intrinsic greatness. That push most often comes from winemakers who know great wines and have them in their sights**

in South Africa's Swartland, but those wines seem antique, messages in a bottle from another time. These Esk Valley Reserves are modern wines, clean and balanced. They point the way forward, not back.

I felt the same about the best of the Sacred Hill Syrahs. Its top Syrah cuvée has the evocative name of Deerstalkers. It turns out that the local Deerstalkers Club formerly met where those grapes are now grown. "That's a bit of heritage," boasts winemaker Tony Bish, who helped found the brand in 1986, left to pursue other winemaking interests, then returned when the economics had improved and he could make a living there. "Also, venison is a meat of choice to go with the Hawke's Bay style of Syrah. So Deerstalker was born."

Deerstalker is hand-picked, fermented with wild yeast in small vats, aged in one-third new oak. Irrigation is used to "encourage deep rooting and reduce the sensitivity of the vines to applied water," Bish says, which sounds like he waters now so that at some future time he may not need to. The Gravels are a defining factor in the wine, but I was pleased to hear that Bish believes he is a defining factor, too. "There's an old adage that great wines are made in the vineyard," he said. "Really? They're not. The grapes come from the vineyard, but what we do with them once we get them matters."

A truly great wine, Bish and I agree, needs to be fueled by ambition. It won't happen by accident. I don't mean a great experience, a carafe of something lovely and pink in the park on a sunny afternoon, but a wine with intrinsic greatness. That push most often comes from winemakers who know great wines and have them in their sights. "There are a lot of people in the vineyard who have a passion for their job, but do they drink wine like winemakers do?" Bish asks. "Do they have the same deep love of the world of wine that winemakers do? Do they live and breathe it? Most of those I know do not."

The majority of Sacred Hill's holdings are on ancestral land of the Mason family. David Mason's parents went on a tourist trip to the Rhône Valley in the 1980s. A viticulturist was also on the trip and spent two weeks putting a bug in their ears. When they returned home, they planted vines. Bish was a friend of David's and an aspiring winemaker who signed on to help. "Syrah was a bit of a punt," he says. "The vines were crazy: arms and legs everywhere, like teenagers." In 2002, the Masons had the opportunity to buy the piece of the Gravels with the Deerstalkers clubhouse. That changed everything. "Damn, these Syrahs are good!" Bish says now.

They are. And they've become better recently as Bish and Mason have come to understand their site. The most recent wines are wonderfully fresh, with violet or wild cherry coming off the nose and a crunchiness to the fruit. "It's a distinctive style," Bish says. He notes that the Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot coming off the Gravels is also of high quality but

ultimately derivative. “They’re hard to tell apart in a lineup from a Bordeaux,” he says. “But with Syrah, you can only get this here.” He emphasizes the last word, nearly running his car off the side of the road as he does. “Nowhere else in the world.”

### Above Gimblett Gravels

I understood the Gimblett Gravels. The Esk Valley and Sacred Hill Syrahs had validated my trip, and I understood there were others from Elephant Hill and Trinity Hill at a similar level. But then I tasted another wine and had a subversive thought. What if the most interesting Syrah in Hawke’s Bay is coming not from the Gravels at all but from the hillside above it?

Warren Gibson makes Gimblett Gravels Syrah for Trinity Hill. Then he comes home and, in conjunction with his winemaker wife Lorraine Leheny, he makes Syrah from the steep slopes overlooking the Gravels and the land beyond for his family property, called Bilancia.

In 1997, Gibson and Leheny arrived in Hawke’s Bay from Margaret River. Gibson came to work at Trinity, but that same year they also started Bilancia, pronounced—in the Italian fashion—*bee-LAN-cha*. They planted Chardonnay and Merlot. A year later, they added Syrah. “Syrah was relatively unusual in that there were few people making it,” Leheny says.

Two decades on, their La Collina Syrah tastes like nothing else in the region. One vintage often doesn’t even taste like another. The 2008 that I tried was pinpoint, subtle, aromatic, evolving. It had 14.5% ABV and wore it like a summer dress. That year marked the turning point, Leheny says, from Syrahs that were Rhône-derivative to those that weren’t derived from anything at all.

The 2009, a warmer season, showed iron and blood. The only thing I could think of that I’d tasted like it are the Ruggabellus wines from a windswept corner of Australia’s Eden Valley, grown in a vineyard also formed by the shifting of tectonic plates. The 2010 La Collina, widely praised, seemed comparatively simple. The 2013 was delicious but inky and showed less of the site. But then came the 2014, cranberry and blackberry in the nose, and a dynamic finish that fades into the distance with clanging cymbals and full-throated shouting like a Rolling Stones song. Before I left Leheny, I handed her my credit card and asked her to send me as much of it as she could.

The transpacific process has ended up costing me more than the remuneration I’ll receive from this story, but I’m not complaining. The discovery is remuneration enough.

And that’s Hawke’s Bay Syrah. I have a sense that the next decade or so will be something of a golden age for it. The Gimblett Gravels vines, most of which were planted in the late 1990s or directly after, are approaching middle age. So are Bilancia’s. All three leading men—Russell, Bish and Gibson—are in their 50s, with a career’s worth of knowledge gained but time left for their most profound work. There’s a market for these wines, nationally and internationally. They’re produced in small enough quantities to be coveted, but at the equivalent of US\$100, more or less, they’re still affordable for the enthusiast. And I’ll share Bish’s enthusiasm: Damn, they’re good.

### Beyond Hawke’s Bay

There’s one more thing, a somewhat inconvenient truth. After all that, it turned out that the best Syrah I had in New Zealand, the best Syrah I believe I will ever have from a New Zealand producer, did not come from Hawke’s Bay at all. It came from Martinborough and a winery I hadn’t previously known.

I didn’t even visit that region. I must confess. I have no idea what the vineyard looks like. Instead, I sat down with a one-man band of a producer—he grows the grapes, makes the wine, painstakingly sends it off to his mailing-list customers, agrees to an interview or two, does his best not to be noticed at all—in an empty Wellington restaurant during a Pinot Noir conference.

This was apt, for Hiroyuki Kusuda is nothing if not Burgundian, which I mean in the most respectful sense. His wines have evolved as a natural outgrowth of where they’re made. They have the pinpoint clarity of the best Pinot Noir, yet they aren’t imitation anything. And like the very top Burgundies, they are woefully unobtainable. It is unclear to me how I will ever taste a Kusuda Syrah again, unless I fly Japan Air Lines first class to London, Paris, or Frankfurt, where the 2009 is poured liberally for travelers who won’t know the difference between that and Craggy Range. Except that they will by the time the flight ends.

Kusuda’s story is simple. He studied law in Japan, worked in European sales for Fujitsu, drank a lot of wine. (His brother had translated Robert Parker’s *Bordeaux* book into Japanese, so



that’s the level of interest we’re talking about.) He worked at the Japanese consulate in Sydney and drank more wine. He decided to learn how to make it. He studied in Geisenheim and went to Martinborough to work with Kai Schubert. He moved there permanently in May of 2001. He was 36.

This was a Pinot Noir region then, but Kusuda had a passion for wine of all kinds. Just around the corner sat McCallum’s Lovat Vineyard, with the reflective foil, where this story began. “I never talked to him, of course,” Kusuda says. “He was like God.” But he knew McCallum was working there, he knew the wines, he’d tasted the Syrah, he understood that Syrah was possible. He started making it in 2002, his first vintage, alongside the Pinot Noir.

“I was surprised it turned out so well,” he says. Little did he know.

In 2003, in an ill-fated experiment, he co-fermented his Syrah with Cabernet Sauvignon as a field blend. Then he lost the lease on his vineyard. “The owner passed away,” he says, “and the son didn’t like me. You can imagine, in a small town in New Zealand, maybe I was the first Asian he’d ever known.”

In 2004, he bought grapes and made only Pinot. In 2005, the harvest was a disaster—torrential rains. He made no wine at all. He was out of money by then, so he put out the call to Japan. It was an early attempt at crowd-sourcing, and this was his plea: “If you invest in me, you may lose your money. In fact, there is a very high percentage chance that you will. So if you do, you can’t say anything to me because I told you so. Now. If you’re still stupid enough to believe in me and want to send some money, I will accept it gratefully.” So, of course, he heard from “40 or 50” benefactors and raised enough to keep on going. We should all have such friends.

As of that point, through the 2005 harvest, he’d made Syrah exactly once. But that year, the critic (and Master of Wine) Bob Campbell tasted his 2002. In his subsequent list of Top 10 Syrahs

Opposite page: Warren Gibson and Lorraine Leheny treading grapes at Bilancia. This page: Hiroyuki Kusuda with a bottle of his highly rated Martinborough Syrah.

in New Zealand, Campbell ranked it as number one, the best in the entire country. “Nobody knew about me,” Kusuda says now. “I had made 1,000 bottles of Syrah in my life.”

In 2006, the opportunity came up to buy a subdivided vineyard in Waerenga. There was Pinot Noir, but also 20 acres (8ha) of one of the country’s oldest Syrah blocks. Even after Campbell’s review, Kusuda wasn’t necessarily looking for Syrah. He’d come to New Zealand to prove himself as a winemaker of Pinot Noir. “Nobody was talking about Syrah in 2005,” he says. “But I thought I smelled something special in that vineyard. I thought it could make a special wine.”

In 2006, he made a Syrah from that vineyard. “I harvested too late,” he says. “I extracted too much.” In 2007, frost hit and Kusuda lost 80 percent of his crop, all but 700 bottles. But one of them made its way to Campbell, and again he anointed it the finest Syrah in all New Zealand. So now he had twice made the country’s best Syrah according to its most esteemed critic—and made the sum total of fewer than 500 cases of Syrah in his entire life. And, really, there hasn’t been much more of it since. “Everybody’s asking me to make more wine,” he says. “I get emails saying, ‘Please!’ I say, ‘No, no, no.’ I have no staff!”

He makes at most 300 cases a year. Half goes directly to Japan. Maybe 20 percent—60 cases—goes to England. Australia gets a little less. The remaining bottles stay at home except for a few cases Kusuda sends to friends and colleagues in Germany.

You’re wondering what the wines taste like. How can I explain, beyond invoking Caravaggio and the way his subjects are somehow lit from within? I had three vintages, the 2010, 2012, and 2013. They tasted like Pinot Noir would taste if it were Syrah. The wine wasn’t what I’d call feminine, like a gorgeously ethereal Burgundy can seem. It had the tensile strength of an Olympic decathlete and an indescribable purity. It had a wonderful savory quality that made it serious and ambitious, but it didn’t seem architected. The fruit was perfectly ripe but not overly ripe. There were moments when I was tasting, especially the 2013, when I forgot about the fruit entirely.

All three vintages were still closed—mostly unyielding except for a whiff of gorgeous perfume here and a laser-beam of flavor there. They seem to be, in their construction, almost perfect, but I wouldn’t know for sure unless I had the chance to sit with a bottle over the course of a meal. And who knows when that will ever happen.

A week later, as the quartet played in the clearing at Craggy Range, I had a Le Sol Syrah from magnum that seemed unobvious and obvious in comparison. But that’s unfair. There are no other Syrahs like the Kusuda, neither in New Zealand nor anywhere else. The Craggy Range had led me to the Esk Valley and the Sacred Hill, and those brought me up the slope to the Bilancia. Those, and others like them from Hawke’s Bay, are the New Zealand Syrahs we’ll be drinking in the coming decades. They’ll have a place among all the other manifestations of the grape around the world.

But still. I’ve been home for weeks now, and I can’t get the Kusudas out of my mind.

The concept that some of the most compelling wines I’ve had in years are old-vine Syrahs from Martinborough, New Zealand, as interpreted by a former Fujitsu executive who fancies himself a Pinot producer, is not theoretical. I tasted them. I know what can be done there. The rest is mere execution. ■



Photography courtesy of Bilancia

Photography by James Broadway