

MATRAVINA

Winter 2009

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Photo: Dave Thomas, Gisborne Herald

Managing director Geoff Thorpe compares Sauvignon Blanc MS (on left) with Sauvignon Blanc M1, an import that is better able to withstand disease pressures because of the bunch architecture.

Back to basics

New clones for classic varieties

Moderate yields, high health, increased disease tolerance, and improved flavour profiles: this year, the list of contract requirements between wine companies and growers will be longer than ever – and strictly enforced.

Growers face some tough challenges, and that has prompted many in the industry to revisit the varietal and clonal mix in their vineyards.

Most of New Zealand's current plantings comprise clonal selections made in the 1960s and 1970s – back in the days of wine shortages and a demand for higher yields. Today, however,

winegrowers are spending an estimated \$1000 a hectare to manipulate crop yields, and looking for new planting material with the potential to reduce vineyard inputs and costs.

When Riversun set about importing new varieties and clones, such concerns were also at the top of the list, which is why the company entered into licensing arrangements with a number of registered vine agencies overseas. ENTAV-INRA®, based in Montpellier, offered newer clones for classic wine varieties including Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir,

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Three sixty

by Geoff Thorpe

Managing Director

As I write this, the New Zealand vine and wine industry stands at a cold, dark crossroad. We have a surplus of nurseries and vineyards, growers' contracts are being renegotiated, and we are all searching for guidance as the "Savalanche" continues to roar, despite Marlborough's valiant efforts to contain it.

It all reminds me of the situation the New Zealand kiwifruit industry found itself in back in the late 1980s – an industry in which I cut my horticultural teeth. We'd do well to think on that history lesson now, because the far-sighted kiwifruit growers who were courageous enough to "grasp the nettle" and stick it out have since done very well indeed – today, the industry is twice the size it was when the storm of "oversupply" struck.

I know our wine industry will weather the storm now upon us. New Zealand wine remains "an experience like no other – pure discovery." Our wines are youthful, vigorous and intense

– very much like our people. We are unique and our wines have come to dominate a special niche in the global scene.

I take my hat off to all those who heeded New Zealand Winegrowers' call last December to limit industry yields to 2008 tonnages – the willingness to make collective decisions is an essential ingredient of our long-term success. Hopefully, cool heads will also prevail and heed Philip Gregan's recent call for a quick end to the current scourge of bulk wine exports. We have always known we can never compete at the bulk end of the wine market: we're too small and our costs of production are far too high. Nonetheless, many have suddenly found themselves operating in this sector – some by choice, others out of short-term financial need.

I am confident that the industry will ride this through. A number of Riversun clients have already recognised the current situation for the "temperature readjustment" it is. They're taking the opportunity to analyse what they have in the ground and plan for improvements. They're adjusting their varietal mix,

and planting the superior clones that winemakers want.

Now is the time for those of us committed to the future of the industry to step up to the plate. Yes, there is a real need to consolidate, cut away the excess, and rationalise operations – like many of you, Riversun has had to make some very tough decisions in recent months. We have now resized our business model to better align it with industry volume requirements.

Ten years ago, when we committed to our vine certification and importation programme, many of our competitors told us we were crazy. But our investment was designed to help "future proof" both Riversun and the New Zealand wine industry. It is heartening to see the rewards from that investment start to flow.

My greatest sadness is that our dear friend and outstanding colleague Dr Rod Bonfiglioli is no longer here to see the industry reap the rewards of his huge contribution to the importation programme – but he left us knowing his legacy would outlast us all. Rest in Peace, my Friend.

Back to basics

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Pinot Gris and Chardonnay – some of which carry distinct improvements when compared with earlier selections.

"It takes at least 15 years for a selection to become a registered ENTAV-INRA® clone," says Geoff Thorpe, "which means that clones imported in the early 1990s were actually selected back in the '70s when the order of the day was high yields."

For the past three years, Riversun has been monitoring the performance of its imports at the company's source block, collecting viticultural data. The good news is, many of the new clones are coming up trumps.

"In Gisborne this year, early vintage conditions were conducive of Botrytis and sour rot, giving us a chance to observe how the new clones performed under challenging circumstances," adds Geoff. "They show different bunch architecture than their predecessors: smaller and looser bunches with smaller berries, which not only offer more disease tolerance but more intense flavours."

The smaller, looser bunches ensure the fruit stays clean, and so far there has been little need to thin fruit to ensure moderate yields. Certain star performers have emerged, attracting a great deal of attention from the viticultural consultants who visited the

block during vintage earlier this year. (Their evaluations can now be viewed on our website. Look for "Harvest Data and Comments.")

"Just about every quality parameter we hoped for the industry has come to fruition with these new clones," says Geoff. "While three years is a relatively short timeframe in terms of clonal assessment, we have seen remarkable consistency from year to year."



A mighty kauri falls

Roderick Bonfiglioli

1 July 1953 – 14 May 2009

As many of you know, Riversun Technical Director Dr Rod Bonfiglioli passed away in May this year.

We mourn the loss of our great friend and colleague, and have posted a tribute to the very full life and times of "Dr Rod" on our website. To read more about the man and his incredible contribution to both the Australian and New Zealand wine industries, go to www.riversun.co.nz and look in the Library section for: "In Memoriam: Roderick Gordon Bonfiglioli."

Also on our website, you will find many of Dr Rod's articles focusing on grapevine viruses, trunk diseases and other vine health topics.



Rod Bonfiglioli and Alfie: Not every little dog has a grapevine virus named after him, but the "Alfie Virus" (a strain of GLRaV-2 identified by Rod) is now registered on international databases.

Real deal Albariño

New Zealand winegrowers on Riversun's waiting list for Albariño vines can rest assured they'll be planting the "real deal."

Meanwhile, Australian winemakers are still reeling after the shock announcement that the vast majority (if not all) of Albariño plantings in that country are in fact not Albariño at all, but Savagnin Blanc.

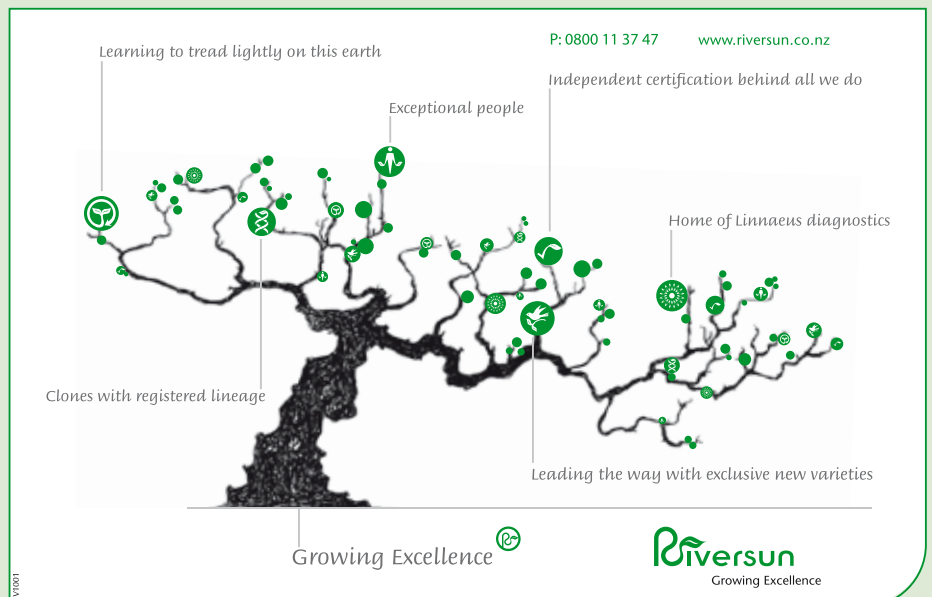
Riversun client manager Rochelle Brown says all the Albariño imports have been thoroughly screened through DNA analysis at the world's leading vine selection agency ENTAV-INRA® in France. (Our website offers more information on this topic.)

"In recent weeks, we have been flooded with calls from clients on our waiting list for Albariño, who have expressed their concerns about the situation in Australia," says Rochelle. "I am delighted to announce that Riversun customers will be getting the real deal."

Paperless news

Want to keep up to date with new developments at Riversun? Add www.riversun.co.nz to your web browser's "Favourites" section and check in regularly.

This will be our last "hard copy" issue of Matravina, as we shift to web-based communications along with a fresh new look (see below) that will debut at the Romeo Bragato Conference in August. Later this year, we'll be giving our website a "makeover" as well, but you'll still be able to access all our news, including viticultural and harvest data, plus much, much more.



In the vineyard

with Nick Hoskins
Riversun viticulturist



Yield estimation – In the current climate, wine companies and vineyard owners are demanding accurate yield estimates. As vineyard managers, we need to articulate whatever procedure is in place and ensure that the owner and winemaker understand it, since a number of critical decisions hinge on the yield estimate. Estimates involve judgment and opinion, but they should gain accuracy as the season progresses. Yield estimates require constant updating, right up to (and in fact during) harvest, to ensure we have the data and the means to improve our estimates in the next season.

Counting vines or bays – You need to count as many vines or bays as are required for accuracy. If historically your yield estimates have been inaccurate (as mine have in some blocks), then you need to count a larger sample or adjust the sample selection of vines to reflect variability within the vineyard. Some growers count bays, others count individual vines: the latter method ensures that samples can be spread over a wider area.

The manual for yield forecasting in Sauvignon Blanc (produced by the Marlborough Focus Vineyard Committee and available at www.nzwine.com/focus) recommends sampling single vines trunk to trunk rather than trying to identify which vine is producing the shoot. The manual also recommends a sample size of around 40: roughly four passes through the block counting five vines on the left side and five on the right. The sample can be increased if vine vigour is uneven and perhaps decreased for smaller regular blocks. Vines should be marked and recorded so that subsequent counts and measurements are carried out on the same vines.

An accurate vine count per block is necessary for the calculations.

Bunch weights – While bunch numbers change from year to year, they are predetermined in the previous spring. Bunch weights, however, are anything but stable and are influenced by the weather at flowering. A few days of cold weather can make a significant impact. Bunch weights are also influenced by the amount of water available. Growers typically try to measure bunch weights at veraison and again at harvest to work out a relationship between the two measurements. This is not as easy as it sounds and requires experience and data from previous vintages to gain any sort of accuracy.

Historical data are required because the relationship between veraison and harvest bunch weights can vary markedly between varieties, sites and clones.

If this is your first yield estimate, try using a low and a high factor (say 1.5 versus 2) when calculating the increase in bunch weights. This will give you a theoretical minimum and maximum:

- 70gm at veraison x 1.5 = 105gm at harvest, vs.
- 70gm at veraison x 2 = 140gm at harvest.
- At 20 bunches per vine, this could result in a difference of 1.75 tonnes per hectare.

How often to calculate – A target yield should be established with the wine company before pruning. It then becomes the vineyard manager's job to determine the best way of achieving it. That requires more number crunching.

Feel free to call Nick on 027 248 7724 if you have any questions on yield estimates or vine health.

How many buds should be retained, leaving enough options to accommodate a poor fruit set, yet still achieve the target yield?

1. After pruning, count buds on the wire plus replacement spurs retained per vine x 2 bunches per shoot x average bunch weight x number of vines.
2. After fruit set (when it is apparent how successful flowering has been), count the number of clusters or bunches (often referred to as inflorescences) per vine x average bunch weight x number of vines.
3. At veraison, count the number of bunches per vine x calculated bunch weight (weigh 50 bunches x the historical increase of 1.5 to 2) x number of vines. Some managers count at the start of veraison, and others begin at 50% or 80% – whatever stage is used, it needs to be the same each year.
4. Two weeks before harvest, weigh another 50 bunches, and recalculate the yield using that bunch weight.

Fruit thinning can be carried out at stages 2, 3 and 4, but remember to recount and calculate after thinning.

Harvest data – This is one of the most important measurements of all, yet it's often the one that gets missed. Just prior to harvest, cut and count all bunches from the sample vines into a bin. Weigh the bin and divide by the count to calculate the average bunch weight for the year. (At this point, it's also worth taking a random 100-berry sample to weigh and calculate an average berry weight.)

Now for a reality check. Compare your calculation to the total received at the winery. That will tell you whether your sampling method is effective or still needs some tweaking for the next season.