



# Fair Weather Blends

Boutique wineries beat the odds when they develop praise-worthy wines in fragile micro-climates by Neal Martin

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**SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL.** That adage has applied to wine since the Egyptians 5,000 years ago, for the vintner's watchful eye needs look upon a smaller brood of vines demanding constant attention, whilst a bespoke winery can be tailored towards eking every mote of quality from each and every berry. The goal? To fashion wine a cut above the rest; wine worth thinking and talking about. In New Zealand, for every vast facility pumping out Sauvignon Blanc for supermarket shelves, boutique wineries have proliferated from north 'til south, pushing the envelop of what this country can achieve with respect to its nascent, burgeoning wine culture.

In terms of artisan winemaking, nearly every winemaker will tell you that quality is made in the vineyard and not the winery. If the fruit aspires towards quality on the vine, human intervention can be kept to a minimum because nearly all the work has been done by Mother Nature.

Boutique wineries naturally err towards the brink where land is only just able to support vines. The more they suffer, the greater the potential quality. "The closer any region gets to being on the climatic borderline of being able to ripen any particular variety or collection of varieties, the more important the small variations in soil, meso-climate and aspect become, and the better chance you have of making potentially great wine," explained winemaker Steve Smith MW of Hawkes Bay's dynamic Craggy Range. This climactic brink is a voluntary dalliance with disaster, playing poker with the capricious, inclement weather, risking rain, hail, wind and lack of sunshine. With stakes so high, it necessitates a talented, devoted winemaker and fortunately, New Zealand has nurtured its fair share.

Artisan estates such as Craggy Range in Hawkes Bay, Destiny Bay on Waiheke Island and Seresin in Marlborough to name but three, seek to express the unique combination of specific microclimate and a small parcel of land, what the French

call terroir, and create wines with particular attributes, nuance and personality. Destiny Bay is the passion for proprietors Mike and Ann Spratt, who were inspired by the wines of Ridge Vineyard in their native California. They planted 6-hectares of vines within a natural, north-facing vertiginous amphitheatre in 2000 with high-density plantings that coerce their vines into fighting for moisture and soil nutrients and produce healthy, complex fruit. This natural amphitheatre not only offers protection for the elements but also slows the ripening of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot so that bunches' extended "hang time" on the vine allows complexity to evolve within berries.

Destiny Bay's winemaker Luc Desbonnets explained that they minimize the use of herbicides and pursue a program of sustainable viticulture. Seresin on the other hand, are evangelical practitioners of 'biodynamics' that use prescribed natural preparations such as nettle tea and horn manure, lunar and cosmological forces to enhance their vineyard and maintain equilibrium without recourse to manmade interventions. However,



Opposite page: Giants Winery, the inspirational home of Craggy Range; Above left: Seresin Vineyard's Raupo Creek; Above right: luscious view of Destiny Bay vineyard.

Steve Smith MW is skeptical about the practice although agrees that: "...growing grapes as naturally as possible in any environment will always make the best wines."

An artisan winemaker will naturally aim for low yields so that quality is not diluted into a large number of bunches or large grapes. At Destiny Bay they aim to crop between 2- and 2.5-tonnes/acre and laboriously pick by hand instead of utilizing cheaper, quicker machines that cannot discriminate between good and bad berries, notwithstanding the fact that their landscape is too vertiginous to give them any choice in the matter! Similarly Colin Ross, estate manager at Seresin, explained that picking by hand: "...allows us to treat every row as separate if required, pick in small batches, selecting the best portions from each row as they ripen."

Despite its diminutive size, Destiny Bay produces three labels: their flagship "Magna Praemia" inspired by Left Bank Bordeaux, the more approachable "Destinae" fashioned in a Right Bank style and "Mystae" whose style sits in between the two. To achieve such quality requires painstaking sorting in the vineyard and preferably a winery as close to the vineyard as possible to prevent spoilage in transit and at Destiny Bay, everything is done within 500m of the vines. Once safely inside, the wines undergo a kid-glove fermentation with pumping-over six times per day and maturation in top quality oak, entirely new for the Magna Praemia and 60% new for the other two labels. The small quantities (approximately 300 cases for their flagship label) means that practically the entire production is sold through their mailing list and top-end restaurants. They are well worth seeking out, the Magna Praemia evoking that oft-heard and dare I say, often misused phrase of "iron fist in a velvet glove", its cashmere texture alluring and irresistible, reminiscent of a great Cabernet-based Right Bank wine like Château Figeac.

Seresin are also expanding their portfolio with the recent addition of exquisite, beautifully balanced micro-cuvées of Pinot Noir with names such as "Rachel" and "Sun and Moon". "The small parcels of fruit can be fermented separately or bundled together with other portions," Seresin's winemaker Clive Dougall told me. "By keeping the small portions separate we get a more precise picture of the quality, personality and individuality of the different areas of our vineyards. At one site we noticed a significant difference in flavour of the fruit from one end of the rows to the other. Interestingly, the chemical analysis of those two fruit portions told a totally different story, it was identical. The resulting wines, made in exactly the same way had major differences in flavour, structure, and quality."

Craggy Range offer a dizzying array of labels, inspired by the Burgundian principle of identifying the vagaries of New Zealand's terroir. The flagship wines such as "Le Sol", "Sophia" and "The Quarry" have already attained iconic status and prices to match, but also offer a range of Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay at less expensive prices, each with their own distinct nuances one might not associate with such ubiquitous grape varieties. Logically, they should be blended together in order to achieve economies of scale, but that would go against their philosophy of expressing individual terroirs.

Craggy Range, Seresin and Destiny Bay are just three producers aspiring for greatness through an artisan approach, pushing the envelope of New Zealand's wine. It demands a vineyard located on the brink of being able to support a vine and it also demands human qualities: knowledge, practical experience, patience, attention to detail and a willingness to accept risk or failure, to translate the potential of the land into a sublime, complex wine that awakens, perhaps electrifies the senses.

# D Where Destiny Leads



new zealand

**Creating fine  
wines on a  
small piece of  
New Zealand  
paradise**

by Paul White

IMAGINE A MILLION DOLLAR VIEW ATOP A STEEP HILL, BAY BELOW, YACHTS HAILING FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD, seascapes for as far as the eye can see, and a wall of gleaming skyscrapers on the distant shore twenty miles away. That's what Michael and Ann Spratt saw a decade ago when they built a house on one of New Zealand's most desirable places to live, Waiheke Island.

Looking down from their slice of paradise, they eyed pastures covered in sheep and thought maybe they could plant a few grapes there as well. Longtime fans of nearby Stoneyridge's Bordeaux blends, they consulted a top vineyard specialist, David Jordan to see what might grow. He reckoned the site was unique even by Waiheke's high standards. Its slopes, as sheer as anything in Burgundy or Moselle, would provide the perfect bowl to capture enough sun to ripen the five classic red grapes of Bordeaux.

There is little point in making wine on prime real estate unless it aims to take on the world's best, so no expense has been spared towards that end. Left to grow on their own, Destiny Bay's vines could produce six or seven tons per acre, but intensive culling over the season reduces that to the one or two tons required to produce the concentration and structure demanded of great wine. Thereafter, ruthless hand selection at harvest eliminates any hard, unripe berries and over-ripe raisins ensuring only optimally ripened grapes inhabit the fermentation vats.

The resultant wines, as Michael says, are "an honest reflection of this place." After tasting all of Destiny Bay's three wine styles from 2005 up to 2008 I'm in complete agreement.

The powerhouse of the lot is Magna Praemia, which is three-quarters cabernet sauvignon, fleshed out by merlot and spiced with dashes of cabernet franc, malbec and petit verdot. The sum truly is greater than its parts. All four vintages carry a strong whiff of leaf tobacco, black currants, graphite and cedar, the classic 'pencil shavings' signature commonly associated with Pauillac from Bordeaux. I was particularly impressed with the wines' polished textures,



A view of Nikau palms at Destiny Bay.

fruit depth, focus and persistence. Like good modernist architecture, Magna Praemia's firm, but finely tuned, tannic structure is central to its aesthetic appeal. A decidedly masculine style, nevertheless, the wine shows a restrained muscularity more reminiscent of a gymnast than a heavyweight boxer.

In contrast, Mystae, with less cabernet sauvignon and more merlot, leans towards softer, richer, rounder textures and considerably more opulence. Aromatically it suggests the savory, earthy characters common to Bordeaux's Graves region. Counterpointing both wines, Destinae shows pronounced florals and red fruit characters, lighter, finer, silkier textures, and a linear elegance not unlike quality Margaux. As Mike says, "It's much harder to make a wine that whispers than a wine that shouts. With our wines you must listen carefully."

All three wines are marked by fresh acidity and highly polished tannins. Although it's early days, their balanced structure and fruit concentration suggests a future measured in decades, not years.

*Destiny Bay wines can be found on the wine lists of fine restaurants. USA: The Village Pub, San Francisco; Tru, Chicago; Michael Mina, The Bellagio, Las Vegas. New Zealand: Cape Kidnappers Lodge, Hawkes Bay; Huka Lodge, Taupo; Mollies, Auckland.*

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