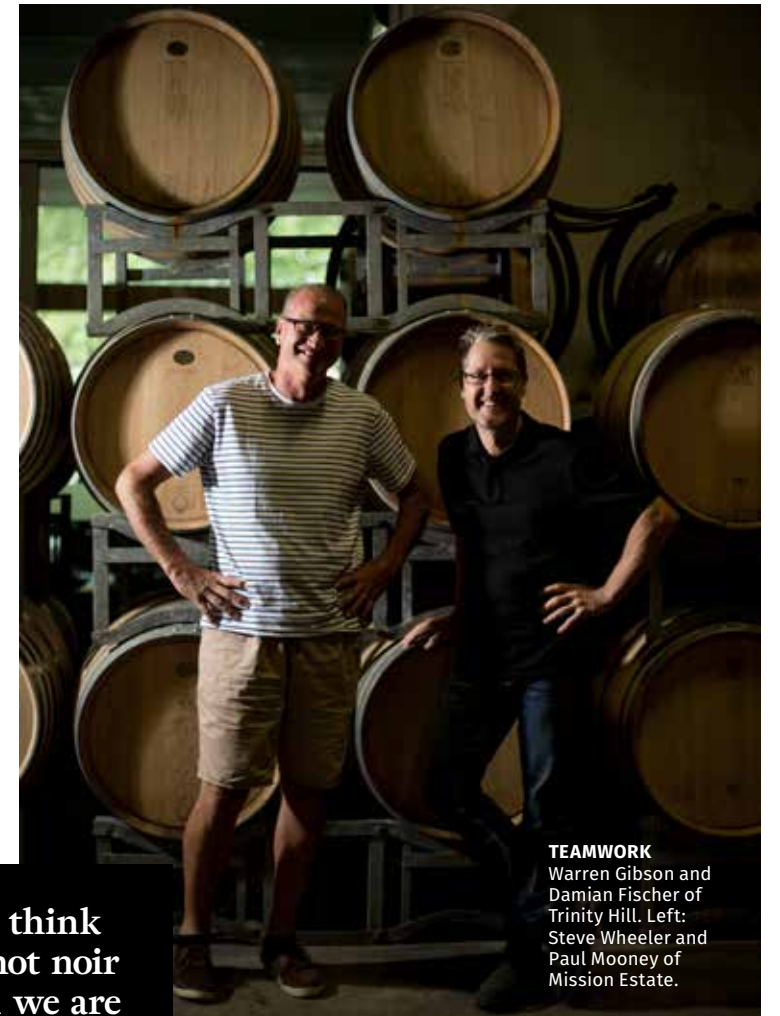


# SYRAH SWEET SPOT

New Zealand syrah has been a tough sell, overshadowed by the country's powerhouse varieties pinot noir and sauvignon blanc, but regions like Hawke's Bay believe they've hit the sweet spot.



"We think of pinot noir when we are making syrah, much more so than cabernet."



**TEAMWORK**  
Warren Gibson and Damian Fischer of Trinity Hill. Left: Steve Wheeler and Paul Mooney of Mission Estate.



**SYRAH STARS**  
Phil Brodie of Te Mata Estate. Right: Rod McDonald of Te Awanga Estate.





**PERFECT TRINITY**  
A vineyard at Te Awanga Estate.

**S**yrrah may be the third most-planted red grape variety in New Zealand but it sits a considerable way behind the frontrunner, pinot noir. The statistics for syrah at just 6% of national red grape plantings (435 hectares) and 7% (330 hectares) of plantings in Hawke's Bay support Trinity Hill Chief Winemaker Warren Gibson's rationale in describing syrah as an alternative variety. "For us," he says, "whilst we consider syrah to be a mainstream variety in Hawke's Bay, we still have to tell the world about it. We feel that it's probably the one grape variety as a varietal wine that has a truly definitive character." In addition to freshness and fragrance, producers are seeking to display the plethora of delicate floral, fruit and spice aromas able to be coaxed from this variety when grown in cooler climates.

Writing more than a decade earlier about syrah in New Zealand, well-known critic Geoff Kelly said, "It is also important to note fine syrah mimics pinot noir, in that when it is over-ripened or grown in climates too hot for it, the floral and magical components of its bouquet, and hence flavour, are simply burnt off, and lost".

In opening a recent tasting of Hawke's Bay syrah, Gibson echoed this sentiment. "We think of pinot noir when we are making syrah, much more so than cabernet. With syrah we have to be gentler, to think about aromatics and the light rather than the dark side of wine."

The wines in the tasting spanned 2006 to 2015, tasted from youngest to oldest, and it was easy to see the evolution towards a lighter, fresher style. That being said, there were a number of older examples that, while richer in style, possessed an impressive elegance, and here the 2006 Esk Valley Reserve Syrah deserves a mention. The oldest wine in the bracket, the Esk Valley showed a powerful concentration expertly managed within a restrained struc-

ture. The final wines from 2009 to 2006 were united in showing complexity and balance.

In thinking of Hawke's Bay and its Mediterranean-like summer, filled with endless blue skies and sunny days, it might seem incongruous to speak of cool climate syrah. With the benefit of time and experience however, producers now better understand how to manage both syrah and vintage variation. Clonal selection, canopy management, irrigation management and picking times have adapted over the years as stylistic preferences have been refined and that definitive Hawke's Bay character Gibson referred to is brought into sharp focus.

Rod McDonald of Te Awanga Estate speaks of a perfect trinity – balance, restraint and ripeness. "The trick," he says, "is to pick it when it is just right. In Hawke's Bay you have to push it viticulturally to get ripeness where you want it to be. Site selection and picking decisions are key – it is easy to leave it too late and pick it overripe. This was perhaps a problem in the past where ripeness was everything, but I think we have addressed it and we're smashing it now."

Although syrah had been in New Zealand for well over a century it wasn't until the 1980s that serendipity stepped in to change its trajectory. With all but a few syrah vines left in the country and little interest shown by producers, the Te Kauwhata viticulture research station in Waikato, where the vines were housed, made the decision to pull them up and dispose of them. Coincidentally, Dr Alan Limmer was working at Te Kauwhata and took material from each vine before they were destroyed. Limmer grew the original cuttings in his own vineyard at Stonecroft in Hawke's Bay in what is now known as the Gimblett Gravels, thus providing the genesis for today's plantings.

While Hawke's Bay may be the adopted home of syrah in New Zealand, the variety is planted in several other



**TRIM DOWN**  
Vine trimming at Te Mata Estate. Below: Craggy Range's Gimblett Gravels vineyards.



regions on the North and the South islands, notably Waiheke Island in the North Island's Auckland region and in the South Island's Marlborough and even as far south as Central Otago.

The maritime climate of Waiheke Island plays an important role in producing syrah of impressive concentration, according to Man O' War Vineyards Senior Winemaker, Duncan McTavish. He says the unique combination of exposure to the ocean winds and planting on some of the steepest sites within the vineyard allows them to produce a classically styled syrah.

For Anna Flowerday of Te Whare Ra Wines in Marlborough the decision to plant syrah in 2004 was a combination of love for the variety and site selection. She says that the middle of the Wairau Valley offers a slightly warmer site with good clay soils and, as a result, a growing season longer than some of the cooler subregions in the area. Ripening, she says, "isn't a problem, so balanced wines of good concentration and ripe, silky tannins are able to be produced."

The winemaker at Mt Difficulty, Matt Dicey describes the way he makes the Ghost Town Syrah as being very pinot-centric. He has been surprised by the lifted floral characters they have seen in fruit from Chinamans Terrace, a high-altitude vineyard in Central Otago's Bendigo subregion.

From the inaugural Syrah Symposium in Hawke's Bay in 2007 to the present day, wider engagement continues to be a challenge. While critics, sommeliers, buyers, influencers and cellar door visitors are united in their excitement and enjoyment of syrah from New Zealand, that enthusiasm is somewhat overshadowed by the success of the ever-popular sauvignon blanc and pinot noir – but is that really a bad thing? As Gibson says, "The preference is to work into the market of those consumers who gravitate towards this style, rather than expand too much." 🍷



## Standout NZ Syrah

### 2006 Esk Valley Reserve Syrah, Hawke's Bay

Still quite fresh and lifted on the nose with red and dried black fruit, leather and spice. A structure of quiet power, silky texture and very fine tannins, where savoury notes of development and peppery spice linger long after the final sip.

### 2007 Mission Estate Jewelstone Syrah, Hawke's Bay

A long and late harvest has provided black florals and fruit, herbal leaf notes, liquorice and subtle mushroom. Good mid-palate weight and fine tea-like tannins give an attractive lightness to a powerful structure.

### 2009 Te Mata Estate Bullnose Syrah, Hawke's Bay

From a very warm vintage, the skill of the winemaker is evidenced here in managing generosity of flavour with restraint. Fragrant herbal notes of lavender and thyme bring a freshness to savoury mushroom and Marmite flavours, red fruit and white pepper. Carefully structured with good intensity, grippy tannins and great persistence of flavour.

### 2010 Craggy Range Le Sol Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay

Red and blue fruits, smoky barbecued meat and leather are joined on the palate by sweet and pungent spice, liquorice and dark chocolate. Intensely flavoured with silky texture and a powerful structure.

### 2010 Trinity Hill Homage, Hawke's Bay

A supple and graceful wine. Zingy acidity and deftly managed oak provide an elegant foundation from which layers of florals, red fruit, rosehip tea and green leaves gather over a persistent burst of pungent spice.

### 2010 Vidal Legacy Gimblett Gravels Syrah, Hawke's Bay

Intense flavour and silky texture are perfectly matched by delicious mushroom and leather, savoury olive and meat notes, dark black fruits and tart red berries with aromatic peppery spice.

### 2014 Paritua Syrah, Hawke's Bay

From a warm vintage this is a wine of restrained generosity showing a palate of black olive, sweet red cherry, plum and spice with good mid-palate weight and luxuriously textured tannins.

### 2015 Man O' War Dreadnought Syrah, Waiheke Island

Great concentration in aromas and flavours as black fruit lead the way, followed by ripe red fruit and a good dose of nose-wrinkling black pepper. Pepper notes persist to the very end, nicely contained within an elegant structure of fine tannins, integrated oak and fresh acidity.

### 2015 Smith & Sheth CRU Omahu Syrah, Hawke's Bay

Finely textured, black-tea tannins and racy acidity exude elegance and sophistication as an abundance of freshly cracked black pepper and buckets of juicy black summer fruits dance across the palate.

### 2015 Te Awanga Quarter Acre Syrah, Hawke's Bay

A gossamer-like structure of finely etched tannins and fresh acidity create an enticing lightness to the palate, on which sit fragrant red florals and soft red fruits wound around a core of pepper and spice.

### 2016 Mt Difficulty Ghost Town Syrah, Central Otago

Aromas of violets, red rose, liquorice, cracked pepper and black cherry tumble out of the glass. Supple and silky, lifted and spicy, this wine is a delight to discover and an absolute pleasure to drink.

### 2016 Te Whare Ra SV 5182 Syrah, Marlborough

Vibrant in colour, velvet in texture and crammed full of flavour. Lithe and graceful tannins support freshly cracked black pepper, ripe succulent black and red fruits, spicy clove and delicious cured meats.