



Crop modelling to grape growing

Grant Whelan, a Bachelor of Agricultural Science graduate from Lincoln University, was well on his way to completing a doctorate in crop modelling when grain gave way to grape. Three quarters of the way through his degree he decided to take a paper in Lincoln's Post Graduate Diploma in Viticulture and Oenology for growing and making wine. Finding the subject totally enthralling, he shelved the PhD and completed the diploma instead.

He had worked as a soil scientist in Gisborne, between his university degrees, where a colleague made an awesome home brewed drop but the thought of ever making wine himself had never crossed Grant's mind.

He befriended Graeme Steans, a wine science tutor who also owned a small Pinot Noir vineyard in the Kaituna Valley on Banks Peninsula. As Grant would not be able to complete the typically one-year diploma course until the following year, Graeme suggested that he work in the vineyard to get some hands on experience. So Grant and Helen, whom he had met during his days at university and married soon after returning from Gisborne, spent that summer tending to the vines. Then when the grapes were ripe for harvest they were able to pick them and make their first ever wine, leasing facilities at nearby French Farm. That wine, the Kaituna Valley Pinot Noir 1993, went on to win the trophy for the Champion Pinot Noir at the Royal Easter Wine Show in 1995.

Grant credits the success of the wine partly to the age and the location of the vines. One of Canterbury's earliest Pinot Noir vineyards, the slow-growing, non-irrigated, frost free site was planted in 1977. He also sees viticulture management as the key to top quality wines. Intensive canopy management (shoot and cluster thinning, lateral removal, extensive leaf plucking) maximises the exposure and quality of the fruit. Helen, who gained a PhD in plant pathology, said although they had no experience, they simply translated the principles learnt from their agriculture studies, to viticulture.

Grant completed his diploma and took a job as part time winemaker for nearby Rossendale Wines, supplemented by tutoring work at Lincoln. They set up a propagation vineyard in Ashburton and continued to manage the Kaituna Valley Vineyard until they were eventually able to buy it in 1997. But in the meantime the pursuit of perfection led them to Marlborough where along with Helen's parents they purchased land in the then relatively undeveloped Awatere Valley. Planting Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, their



punt paid off as the first three vintages of Awatere Pinot Noir (1999, 2000 and 2001) each won a Champion Pinot Noir wine show trophy.

In 2001 they established the Summerhill Vineyard at Tai Tapu in Canterbury and planted it with Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris grapes. The first fruit was picked in 2004 and the Pinot Gris has already won gold. It is here they will site their winery, on a gentle spur with excellent views to the Southern Alps, Lake Ellesmere, Mount Bradley and the Port Hills. Until it is completed in 2006, they will continue to lease facilities.

Kaituna Valley Vineyard has also expanded, with the original acre of vines now two hectares in size. A joint venture has also been set up with a neighbour which will bring grape vine plantings in the valley up to about 12 hectares in total. Not only were the vineyards expanding as baby Joshua, pictured above with Grant and Helen, joined the family in 2003.

January is the month the otherwise sleepy Kaituna Valley comes to life with holiday makers flocking to the cherry orchard opposite the vineyard to 'pick your own'. But there is no holiday for the Whelans as the vines continue to grow and chores include leaf plucking, trimming, removal of lateral growth, removal of clusters and shoulders on the bunches of grapes as well as spraying and mowing. Everything has to be perfect before the nets start going on at the end of January.

Only when the daily chores are done and Joshua has been put to bed, can Grant and Helen think about relaxing with a glass of one their hand crafted, award winning wines. ■