



PAVILION



# Young Wine Writer of the Year 2009

**Nicola Cornelius**

## **From Backpacking Cellar-hands to Flying Winemakers: The Sunny Side of Globalisation**

**This is the first in a series of articles on Globalisation and Wine.**

In March of this year, I boarded the plane at Heathrow for my stint as a cellar-hand in Marlborough's Awatere Valley. I was relishing the prospect. For a few months, I was swapping the melting pot of the city for the simple life: tough work, fresh air and big skies. But culturally, I was expecting to take a step back in time, rubbing shoulders with local country folk. Jaw-droppingly beautiful, yes, but also I'd been told, rather less kindly, the Awatere was New Zealand's Deliverance country.

They were right about the vast stunning landscape. But about the people they couldn't have been more wrong. My fellow cellar-hands, seated round the giant table of the boardroom at the state of the art Yealands Estate, were a mix of nationalities, hailing from Italy, Hungary, the US, the UK, Portugal, Chile, Germany, Brazil, as well as a handful of Awatere and Blenheim locals. For some it was their umpteenth vintage; for others, like Liam from Newcastle doing a vintage as an entrée into the wine trade after his English Literature degree ... it was their first.

Barbara Roseira, a young winemaker from the Douro, was drawn to Yealands by its green credentials: the world's first certified carbon-zero, sustainable winery, capable of processing 7,500 tonnes of fruit in ten days. She also wanted to see for herself the super-clean New Zealand winemaking.

I can picture Barbara chatting to Salvo, a Sicilian viticulturalist. Neither speaking the others language, yet in their blended *Mediterranean* arguing over the best ways to rack the wine off its lees, or break the cap on the Pinot. Then there was the young cellar-hand from the Mosel booming on a daily basis "in Germany we do it like this". Rob, kiwi born and fresh from his oenology diploma, but formerly of Glamorgan University's Department of Psychology, imposing a scientist's rigour on the whole process. The winery was a hub for sharing ideas from across the continents; testament to this 21<sup>st</sup> century winery's embracing approach.

This internationalism in the winery isn't limited to the vintage workers. The globetrotting backpacker educating him- or her- self with a range of experience is not destined to remain a cellar-hand forever. Yealands's own head winemaker, Tamra Washington, learnt her trade all over the world: in Napa, the Hunter Valley, Margaret River and most recently as head winemaker for the Calatrasi Group, overseeing their wineries in Sicily, Puglia and Tunisia. Over in the neighbouring Wairau valley, head winemaker at Isabel Estate is Chilean Patricia Miranda, who previously worked in Yakima, Napa, Sancerre and the Mosel. The modern winemaker's experience is international.

The quest of all these bright young winemakers is to make the best wine they possibly can, drawing on their very different backgrounds. This cross-fertilisation of ideas enriches the global wine community.

These experiences are much more a manifestation of the globalisation of wine than the aspect so often (and so easily) decried: the "conquistador" multi-nationals controlling vast estates making homogenous wine, making life hard for the small artisan producer.

At every level, a positive effect of globalisation is that wines are now undoubtedly cleaner. The wine-glugging consumer has come to expect a basic quality level. No-one mourns the passing of the days of dirty wine, Brett and mouthfuls of oak.

There's a danger in thinking that all the clean, bought-in oenology is at the expense of individuality and regionality. The detractors see a one-way flow of information, with the flying wine shaman bestowing his formula throughout the world, producing a wine that reflects its maker's notions of a marketable commodity rather than the wine's terroir.

Often the relationship between outside winemakers and local producers is one of mutual education. I put this to Kiwi flying winemaker Matt Thomson, the International Wine Challenge's 2008 White Winemaker of the Year. I wanted to understand the dynamic he has with the producers with whom he works. He says, of course it depends on the producer. Some just want instructions to make technically superior wine. But with many it's a conversation, a development of ideas drawing on two different bodies of winemaking wisdom.

A few autumns ago, Matt was working with a local winemaker in Abruzzo. The indigenous Montepulciano grapes have a tendency to produce ungenerous wines with coarse, unripe tannins. The grapes shrivel early on the vine and therefore shut down before they achieve physiological maturity. The sugars in the grape pulp are ripe but the tannin-producing skins and pips remain green. Working together they realised the answer was to take the fermenting juice off the grape skins early. As the grape sugar converts to alcohol during fermentation, the colour extraction occurs much more quickly than the tannin extraction. By removing the skins early at around 10% alcohol, the desired colour is achieved without over-extraction of coarse tannins. The result is a wine that gives generously on the palate.

The knowledge Matt acquires working in Europe he takes back to his native New Zealand. In the 2009 vintage in Marlborough, the pinot noir began very uncharacteristically to shrivel on the vine. This meant the grapes had to be harvested early. Again, the danger was unripe tannins. As Matt said, "you'd never expect to draw on experience working with Montepulciano in Italy to work with Pinot in New Zealand".

This two-way flow of knowledge and expertise extends to technology. The clean standards, the use of carbon dioxide and the practice of canopy management may originate in the southern hemisphere, but wineries in the new world ship over top quality Italian and German-made pneumatic presses and delicate pumps.

And what of the small producer? Have they all been driven to bankruptcy? Far from it. There's a plethora of innovative small producers, eager to retain character and diversity in their wines. They survive because they've had to adapt and be savvy about the world market.

At the end of my two-month stint, I returned with a somewhat heavy heart to a leaden-skied London. A short while later, I found myself walking the backstreets of Vauxhall on the hunt for a post-Liberty Wines tasting pint with Philippe LeJeune. Philippe is owner of Château de Chambert in Cahors. At 150 acres, it's a pretty modest holding.

While contemplating the delights of glamorous Vauxhall (on this occasion, an oriental wedding photo shoot in the drizzling rain), we talked about his estate. Geographically remote, deep in the country of the black wines, how is it that he is not driven to bankruptcy by the globalisation machine?

In part, it's simply because his wines are damn good. But I have a sense it's also because he is global savvy. I asked him how his wines found their way to London. He explained how The Independent's wine writer, Anthony Rose, had visited the estate last year and enthused about the wines. Anthony had been introduced to Philippe by Stéphane Derenoncourt, Philippe's friend and winemaking consultant. Derenoncourt, having started out hitchhiking to Fronsac in 1982, is now another of the world's flying winemakers with engagements not just in France but in Turkey, China, Syria, India and the Lebanon. Terroir-conscious Derenoncourt helps Château de Chambert make an exciting and gentle-mannered Malbec of Cahors, and his association shines a light on a geographically isolated estate.

There are now more opportunities for smaller producers to take their wines abroad. This too is a feature of globalisation, like the trend for cellar-hands, with their sometimes comical wine Esperanto, to work in multiple wineries in different countries. And those who see increasing homogeneity of wines as the inevitable corollary of globalisation underestimate the corrective effect of market forces. A few years ago we were all bemoaning rising alcohol levels and over-use of oak chips. Now we see the market seeking lighter styles once more. Globalisation has undoubtedly had negative effects on some small producers. But these effects can be over-stated, and they need to be balanced by recognition of the positive effects, if not precisely of globalisation, then of the increasingly global experience of wine producers.

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