

HARMONY

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Daniel Honan takes a look at the stylistic emodiments of syrah from New Zealand.

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Author
Daniel Honan

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“Hermitage (syrah) bears well here, is free of mould and gives good wine”, wrote Bragato, in 1906.

New Zealand syrah tastes like heavy metal.

That is not to say that all New Zealand syrah tastes like heavy metal, because to say that would be just as careless as to say that all heavy metal sounds like *Metallica*. But, to be more specific, New Zealand syrah tastes like *Metallica*, circa 1999, when the band was accompanied by the *San Francisco Symphony Orchestra*, and the late Michael Kamen, who composed and conducted a series of classical arrangements to accompany a selection of *Metallica* songs, including, *Sad But True*, *The Call of Ktulu*, and *The Thing That Should Not Be*. By way of more immediate comparisons, it would be prudent to mention that New Zealand syrah has far more in common with the Northern Rhône syrah than it does with Australian shiraz. Master of Wine, Tim Atkin once wrote of New Zealand syrah that it is, “one of the world’s greatest undiscovered wine styles”. The point is... New Zealand syrah is epic. Born out of marginal, cool climate areas right up and down the land of the long white cloud, the style of syrah grown here is beguiling, intense and complex. On more than one occasion, during my travels throughout Aotearoa, I was sufficiently blown away by the heavy, rhythmic riffs and magnificently complex melodies that sound out from a glass of NZ syrah. As a style of wine, it might be epic, but it is also very niche.

It is thought that syrah first arrived in New Zealand via the country’s first Governor-General, James Busby (the same Scotsman responsible for bringing syrah/shiraz to Australia), who planted cuttings from his collection and established a vineyard at Waitangi, in the Bay of Islands. During the 1890’s, an Italian trained viticulturist by the name of Romeo Bragato toured some of New Zealand’s early pioneering winegrowers and concluded, from tastings of syrah, and pinot noir, that both were well suited to the country’s soils and climate.

Bragato was influential in the early days of New Zealand’s wine industry. In 1902, he was appointed the *Government Viticulturist* for the *New Zealand Department of Agriculture* and helped improve the vineyard and research station at *Te Kauwhata* in the north island. Here, researchers would experiment with phylloxera resistant vines, rootstocks and various varieties of *Vitis vinifera*, including, chardonnay, riesling, pinot noir and syrah, amongst others.

Then, in 1911, prohibition came to New Zealand with 56 % of the population voting to support it. And, even though it was never fully instigated, it was enough for the country to turn its back on grape growing and wine production.

Eighty years later, in 1982, Dr. Alan Limmer, breathed new life into the prospect of New Zealand syrah by saving a number of cuttings from the *Te Kauwhata* research station, which was due to be bulldozed, along with the station’s entire old vine collection. The TK 00080 clone (more commonly known as the TK Heritage, or Limmer clone) was rescued by Dr. Limmer and transported back to his newly established vineyard in Hawke’s Bay, called *Stoncroft*, on a site which up until then, had only ever been used as a rubbish dump and a racecar track.

“Syrah basically disappeared for nearly a century”, says Dr. Limmer. “I just took the opportunity to grab some cuttings before they disappeared altogether and planted them in my vineyard in the Gimblett Gravels, which turns out to be one of the best places for syrah, because it controls the vigour of the vine well and seems to be a wonderful genetic fit with the grape, in terms of terroir.”

It might be said that if it weren’t for Dr. Limmer’s powers of perception and expedience back in the 1980’s, New Zealand syrah might more easily be compared to the likes of the largely juvenile and one dimensional nu metal bands like, *Korn*, *Linkin Park*, and *Bacchus* forbid... *Limp Bizkit*.

Thankfully, most New Zealand syrah cannot be compared to nu metal, because New Zealand syrah is far more age-worthy, subtle, nuanced, powerful and melodious. The main problem is, there isn’t a lot of it about.

Despite the saving graces of Dr. Limmer, today, New Zealand syrah accounts for a mere 1 % of the total wine produced in New Zealand, and even less than that is exported (about 0.1 % according to *NZ Wine*). But don’t despair, because over the last decade, plantings of syrah have increased by 156 %, up to 300 ha in 2012 (*New Zealand Winegrowers’ Vineyard Register Report*, 2013).

“I think [New Zealand] syrah is set to take off,” says *Man O’ War* winemaker, Duncan McTavish.

Man O’ War, from Waiheke Island is located just east of Auckland and makes one of New Zealand’s most outstanding examples of syrah. Their ‘*Dreadnought*’ is a blend that comes from four separate vineyard sites on the island that, once opened, explodes like the opening riff of *Metallica*’s hulking classic from the ‘*Black*’ album, *Sad But True* and is just as complex as the rhythm guitars that rumble and groove throughout its verse and chorus.

“It’s been a slow burn, but there’s definitely genuine interest from people. The problem will be maintaining a high standard of quality”, says Duncan, “but in Waiheke at least, there’s a very finite planting area, so there is little danger of that quality being diluted by a mass production model”.

On the eastern side of the North Island, James Milton is excited for the future of syrah, especially in Gisborne, where he has been winegrowing for almost 30 years. According to James, Gisborne is a great place to grow great syrah, but, here, the problem will be maintaining a high standard without compromising on regional distinction.

"We're planting more syrah because we've been impressed so far, by what we've been able to grow here", explains James, "but, at the moment, there are so few plantings of syrah, and most of what has been put to bottle seems to have been cross-flow filtered to the point where it has become completely orphaned. Winegrowers," continues James, "will need to be vigilant and not be tempted to overcrop, which is easy to do with syrah and therefore dilute its potential to become another unique fine wine from New Zealand".

Millton's, 2013 *The Crucible Syrah*, not only sounds like it was named after a heavy metal band, it calls to mind the Metallica's opus, *The Call of Ktulu*, which closes out the heavy metal classic *Ride The Lightning*, from 1984. The wine possesses a distinctly deep black and blue colour. It's spicy, brambly, dark fruited perfume rises enchantingly from the glass and soaks the mouth in satin blackberries and pepper, leaving behind fine tannins that play long and loud, across a wide melodic spectrum.

"I think Hawke's Bay, and New Zealand syrah in general, looks more towards the Rhône" says Dermot McCollum, who purchased Stonecroft from Dr. Alan Limmer in 2010. "It tends to be more elegant with higher acids, loads of pepper and mixed spice, and there's still a lot of black fruit, without it being jammy like a typical Australian shiraz".

One of the reasons syrah bodes so well in New Zealand is the marginal climate of most of its winegrowing areas, especially in places like Hawke's Bay, Martinborough and Marlborough. For the most part, syrah is able to achieve sufficient flavour ripeness in parallel with its phenolic ripeness, which means the potential alcohol doesn't usually blow out beyond 14 %.

"Syrah has the ability to hang out there (in the vineyard) for a long time and is far more resistant and hardy, compared to many of the Bordeaux varieties that Hawke's Bay is, probably, more famous for", says John Peet, viticulturist at *Elephant Hill*. "And in a wet year, like 2012, syrah was responsible for some of our best wines that year".

Syrah's loose bunch formation helps with airflow, thereby reducing certain disease pressures, but it is also notoriously vigorous, which is why leaf plucking, shoot thinning and bunch dropping are very important to keep the vines' enthusiasm at bay.

"Syrah grows like a trifid, but we're able to control it fairly well due to the climate where we are," says Lorraine Leheny, who, along with her husband Warren Gibson (*Bilancia* wines), grows syrah on their hillside, terraced vineyard. The vineyard, called *La Collina*, sits upon the Gimblett Gravels of Hawke's Bay. "It's warm most of the time, so the fruit ripens steadily and if we do get rain it drains freely down the hill and the prevailing winds quickly dry the bunches out."

Further south, as temperatures become cooler and the diurnal range gets wider, trying to grow syrah becomes a little more challenging. However, with due diligence in the vineyard, it certainly is possible. In places like Wairarapa (at the bottom of the North Island) and Marlborough (close to the top of the South Island) syrah is usually the last grape to get picked, hanging out all season long and testing the mettle of even the most patient winegrower.

"Martinborough's syrah style is driven by its proximity to the climactic edge, it's always the last grape to get picked here", explains *Cambridge Road* winegrower, Lance Redgewell. "It just hangs out right 'till the end of vintage. In my experience, syrah grown here reflects vintage variation like a mirror with more pepper in the cooler years, tending towards black olive in the warmer seasons... very much like the Northern Rhône."

"In this cooler climate, not only is the wine more botanically perfumed, but the natural structures offer lower alcohol, lovely natural acidity and very fine tannin complexities", says Lance. Heading further south, sitting just above the 40th parallel, Marlborough is a place, sadly, not generally known for growing anything other than sauvignon blanc. Here, syrah has been quietly practicing its licks and scales, discovering distortion pedals, and really pushing the limits of what should and should not be.

"Surprisingly, for most people, I think we have the climate for syrah", says Anna Flowerday from *Te Whare Ra*, who has been making Marlborough syrah with her husband Jason since 2007. "We used to have cab sauv, cab franc and a bit of merlot planted, but we just thought they were always too green, so we pulled them out and planted syrah. Syrah from here is fragrant and has delicious fruit flavour with fine ripe tannins and great acid structure".

Just like Metallica's horrifyingly heavy, *Master of Puppets* classic, *The Thing That Should Not Be*, *Te Whare Ra Syrah* proves that Marlborough is as good at growing syrah as James Hetfield is at writing a classic metal song. Their 2012 Syrah is deep and heavy, as if it's been EQ'd by Bob Rock (Metallica's producer on the *Black* album) himself. An undertow of dark fruits, such as blackberries and blood plums, swell and pulse beneath a symphonic arrangement of black pepper and spice with traces of thyme and licorice, while a thrilling melody of blueberries, violets and brambles caterwaul and howl as your hand, subconsciously, begins to make a fist with horns!

Winemaker Hätsch Kalberer from *Fromm Winery* looks like he used to play in metal bands, but has actually been vinifying syrah in Marlborough since the early 1990s. He believes that syrah is extremely well suited to this region's marginal climate.

"The benchmark of all great varieties is made in marginal, not hot climates", explains Hätsch, "and Marlborough is definitely marginal. But, to grow properly in marginal climates, you also have to be selective with your sites, moderate your crop levels and be attentive in the vineyard so that you can maximise what a certain terroir can give you".

Hätsch even goes as far to say (with his tongue firmly in his cheek), "if we'd only been allowed to plant two varieties in Marlborough, then we'd have our pinot (noir) planted up at *Clayvin* and keep the syrah planted here (on the home block)... hypothetically, of course."

As far as comparisons go, between music and wine, it would be easy to compare a grand composition, such as Pachelbel's *Canon in D*, with a bottle of, say, *Gevrey-Chambertin*. The rhythmic build of major chords gently pulse and rise, as melody and counter melody is layered one on top of the other. Drinking and listening is joyful and uplifting, while both artifacts are at once elegant and complex.

On the other hand, it's been said by some in New Zealand that syrah is like double concentrated pinot noir. So, swap the lead instruments of violins and cellos with electric guitars and bass, add some heavy distortion, transpose the melody into a minor key, but keep the symphony. And there you have it, New Zealand syrah tastes like heavy metal. ▲

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Below
Elephant Hill vineyard

