

Bordeaux ... Meet Hawke's Bay

By Mark Sweet

Ten years ago, Steve Smith, CEO of Craggy Range Winery answered the question: "What changes do you see coming to Hawke's Bay in the future?" He declared: "Wine will change the face of Hawke's Bay forever!"

He explained: "... the emphasis is changing from traditional pastoral agriculture to high value niche products such as wine growing. With this brings a change in character and increases in related industries such as tourism and high quality restaurants in wonderful rural settings. This is important time for Hawke's Bay, a chance to make its name on the world stage as a producer of ... the best wines."

Steve Smith's prediction has matured as the past year has firmly established Hawke's Bay Bordeaux style red wines from the Gimblett Gravels Wine Growing District as among the best in the world.

Earlier recognition came from *Decanter* magazine's Steven Spurrier, who in November 2006 wrote: "For me, New Zealand, particularly Hawke's Bay, remains with Napa the natural home of the claret lover. There is perhaps a reserve, at least a lack of flamboyance, in the wines of Hawke's Bay."

And it should be remembered that Te Mata Estate's Coleraine was recognised as long ago as 1982 as comparable to the finest from Bordeaux.

Perhaps an aversion to competitions by co-owner John Buck, and the humility of wine maker Peter Cowley, have limited the publicity for this benchmark wine. But as Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate* stated in May 2008: "After completing two verticals of Coleraine, witnessing a couple of tasters undergo their Te Mata epiphany, I conjectured whether this is New Zealand's greatest wine?"

The run of acclaim for Gimblett Gravels began in October last year when Scenic Cellars in Taupo hosted a blind tasting of twelve 2005 red wines, six from Bordeaux and six from the Gimblett Gravels.

The tasting was headed by renowned Australian wine aficionado, James Haliday, and the equally respected Elin McCoy from the USA. Both were astounded when the results were revealed, prompting Haliday to remark: "This was no put up job. It's hard to argue with the results which cannot be swept under the carpet."

The order of merit was as follows:

Blake Family Vineyards "Redd Gravels" -- \$75
Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay, NZ

Ch Lafite-Rothschild -- \$1,950
Pauillac First Growth, Bordeaux, France

Sacred Hill “Helmsman” -- \$70
Gimblett Gravels, Hawke’s Bay, NZ

Mills Reef “Elspeth” -- \$40
Gimblett Gravels, Hawke’s Bay, NZ

Ch Mouton-Rothschild -- \$1,650
Pauillac First Growth, Bordeaux, France

Trinity Hill “The Gimblett” -- \$30
Gimblett Gravels, Hawke’s Bay, NZ

Craggy Range “Sophia” -- \$50
Gimblett Gravels, Hawke’s Bay, NZ

Ch Troplong-Mondot -- \$600
St Emilion Grand Cru Classe, Bordeaux, France

Ch Haut-Brion -- \$1,650
Pessac-Leognan First Growth, Bordeaux, France

Newton-Forrest “Cornerstone” -- \$40
Gimblett Gravels, Hawke’s Bay, New Zealand

Ch l’Eglise-Clinet – \$1,350
Pomerol (highly-rated), Bordeaux, France

Ch Cos d’Estournel -- \$400
St Estephe Second Growth, Bordeaux, France

Immediately obvious is the huge difference in price between the regions. The Bordeaux contribution averaged \$1,300 per bottle, whereas Gimblett Gravels was \$50 per bottle.

How much the price gap can be closed is obviously a consideration for those who have invested heavily in the 800 hectares of Gimblett Gravels. It is now among the most expensive agricultural land in Hawke’s Bay, selling at over \$100,000/hectare. Sales in 1987-89 were around \$7,000/hectare. Potential future earnings must be a vital ingredient in such inflated land value.

Comparing Bordeaux reds with Gimblett reds is a brilliant – and audacious – publicity and marketing strategy. Bordeaux is the Rolls Royce, the Rolex, the Ronaldo of red wines. There’s a Bordeaux First-Growth 100 Index listed in the same tone as a Stock Market Index.

The Bordeaux region of France produces 700 million bottles of wine from 116,000 hectares of vines, four times the grape plantings of New Zealand. The quality of Bordeaux wine, as in New Zealand, ranges from barely drinkable, cheap plonk, to the finest in the world. It is the five 'first growth' Chateaux that are at the pinnacle, and these are the wines Gimblett Gravels is emulating.

Chateaux Lafite-Rothschild, Chateaux Margaux, Chateau Latour, Chateaux Haut-Brion, and Chateaux Mouton Rothschild, are legendary names that pop up in Ian Fleming novels, and the biographies of the rich and famous, which is the closest most of us will ever get to them.

The permitted Bordeaux red grapes are Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc. Generally, the wines from the Medoc and left bank of the Gironde estuary are dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon. This is the style of Te Mata's Coleraine, which in 2005 was a blend of 45% Cabernet Sauvignon, 37% Merlot, 18% Cabernet Franc. The Right Bank top quality reds are dominated by Merlot, which is more the style emulated by Gimblett Gravels. Top of the Taupo Challenge, 2005 Blake Family Vineyard Redd Gravels is 40% Merlot, 35% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Cabernet Franc.

Whatever the blend, it is obvious that Bordeaux style red wines of the finest quality are being produced in Hawke's Bay in ever increasing quantity, and all those who live here are the beneficiaries of the passion and skill it takes to make such world class wines.

Ends