

THOUGHTS EXTRACTED FROM THE GREY MATTER.....AND A HAWKE'S BAY AND NORTH CANTERBURY CASE STUDY

Steve Smith MW

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I would like to start with some personal thoughts on Chardonnay.....to make good Chardonnay is easy, to make great Chardonnay takes something special. That's because Chardonnay show's the influence of culture..... people..... probably at a more heightened level than for any other wine style. The transparency of Chardonnay takes on so much winemaking influence that the wines often reflect the personality and character of the producer as much as or more than the place they come from. Having said that the truly great Chardonnay are where a place and a person are one, where the wines seem so naturally from this place and this person.....harmony and personality of place and people.....the true meaning of terroir.

It's now more than 35 years since I experienced the magic of making Chardonnay, when Kym Milne was making the beautifully rich wines of what was the Villa Maria Reserve Barrique Ferment Chardonnay.....from the clay soils of Patutahi in Gisborne....from big vines packed with peachy grapes.....machine picked.....fermented in toasty barriques with inoculated yeast and little if any malolactic....sulphured right after ferment and lees stirred.....these were deliciously rich dramatic wines...and still are..... I had a 1989 Barrique Ferment Chardonnay at Christmas.....now that is the joy of Christmas. I am a viti guy that fell into being a sort of winemaker, not because I spent anytime in the cellar where I am a liability, but because I wanted to experience the whole thing...from vine to cellar to bottle to glass. I have been lucky to have planted a lot of Chardonnay vineyards from Ihumatao in Auckland, through the flats and hills of Gisborne, all across the nuance of the Heretaunga Plains to Martinborough and Marlborough to the limestone hills of North Canterbury and the stony calcium rich soils of the Lowburn Valley. In many of these places I have been able to put my own stamp on these wines, not by being a force of nature, although some may challenge that, but by trying to understand the place and how we get our expression of that place, and us as people, in the wines we make.

In doing this I have been able to see in the last decade especially, in the finest wines, the nuance of soil, climate and culture shine in perfect harmony. How has this happened?

This might be a surprise but I think it has got as much to do with business economics as it has a bunch of rock star winemakers. Once we realised that we could make some special wines, that people were willing to pay more for, we were able to invest more in making those wines. In the vineyard we got rid of the high vigour vineyard sites and those awful big bunched Californian clones and focused on our favourite Mendoza, Clone 95, and 548 on more influential soils. We lowered yields, we fine tuned our viticulture especially around shoot vigour, fruit exposure and managing stress, we hand picked more and ensured botrytis, so often the criminal, was locked away. The vines are older, and even the cared for young ones, can deliver extraordinary grapes if given a chance. In the winery the investment in whole bunch pressing, delivering a kaleidoscope of juice solids to a melange of barrels, the care required for healthy indigenous yeast and malo ferments and a long time in barrel without sulphur, often bottling unfinned and unfiltered. These investments are more often in human capital not folding. There has not been one big thing, it is simply we have grown up and we

realise within the lands of this marine locked jewel of the South Pacific are some very special places that some very special people know only too well.

The great joy out of what I do now is that we are making Chardonnay in 3 different regions and 6 different sub-regions of New Zealand, from the Gimblett Gravels to Lowburn to Waikari. From 1500 GDD to 950 GDD. I see Chardonnay in all it's different guises. I'm lucky.

On to two special places for me.

The Heretaunga Plains and surrounding sheltered river terraces and rolling hills are home to some of New Zealand's most highly reputable Chardonnay. These Chardonnay vineyards are diverse, with vineyards stretching from the beaches of Te Awanga and Haumoana through the beautiful alluvial silt soils of the Heretaunga Plains, to the rocks of the Gimblett Gravels, to the red metal soils of Bridge Pa and the higher altitude river terraces with similar soils in Mangatahi, Crownthorpe and the inland Tutaekuri, to the hills of Central Hawke's Bay. A kaleidoscope of temperature gradients, from the high growing degree days but milder temperatures near the coast, to the heat of the Gimblett Gravels, to the night time cooler inland river terraces, Chardonnay in Hawke's Bay enjoys vineyards that stretch from 1200 to almost 1600 GDD, maximum daytime temperatures that would vary by as much as 6 or 7 degrees on any given day with a similar nighttime range. I liken the temperature diversity in Hawke's Bay to be similar but different to what you might find in Sonoma, from Occidental on the coast to the Russian River valley in the heart of Sonoma. Everyone makes Chardonnay in Hawke's Bay, from the cheap and cheerful of Bishy's Fat and Sassy, through a whole swag of wines under \$50 that represent incredible deliciousness and quality, to the glamour pusses of Tiratore (still too cheap Jean Warren), Trinity 125, Villa's Keltern, Craggy's LBC and Church Road Tom.

What I love about fine Hawke's Bay Chardonnay is its aromatic reserve and complexity, delicious ripeness, packed full of ripe lemon, peach, yellow nectarine, some cashew nut and oats, and an everlasting texture of either rocks, gravel, pith or zest. Matchstick flint in moderation works in this framework. They combine delicious ripeness with a sense of energy, not necessarily acid, a rare natural combination. I also love it that great Hawke's Bay Chardonnay grapes love lashings of delicious French oak, no surprises there, yet in the best wines you can't really see it.

I have chosen one of my personal favourites from our suite of Hawke's Bay Chardonnays, the 2021 Smith&Sheth Heretaunga Chardonnay with Warren Gibson getting his hands dirty in the cellar and helping me craft our wines. It is our village wine, capturing three classic sub-regions of the Gimblett Gravels, Bridge Pa and Mangatahi. 21 was a warm El Nino that became a soft La Nina year, with harvest being very compact between the 26th of February and the 9th of March. To me this speaks of Hawke's Bay and the impact of quite a remarkable vineyard. It is lashed with new oak but I challenge you to find it oaky. It is savoury on the finish, imploring you to go back for more. It has a twist to it.

To sit alongside the Heretaunga is the 2022 Pyramid Valley North Canterbury Chardonnay, Huw Kinch as winemaker, me annoying him. The North Canterbury wine region is probably the countries most intriguing and it has taken me a while to figure it out. It shares more in common with Martinborough than its Te Wai Pounamu cousins mainly because it really is a climate that is on the edge and tough for vines. Both regions, more than any other, sort of open themselves up to the southern ocean and the raging cold southerly fronts that often race up the island after a few days of blustery nor-westers. These fronts have an uncanny knack of coming through at flowering. The springs are dramatic, frosty, windy, sunny and

rainy, cool with the odd fleeting hint of the heat of summer. The vines definitely hunker down, meaning lower shoot vigour, smaller bunches and naturally quite open canopies, there is nowhere near the vineyard lushness that you see in Chardonnay from everywhere else in the country. While the region is quite close to the ocean, it is also really in the foothills of the Southern Alps, remember the alpine resort of Hamner Springs is only a 45 minute drive away. In the morning you can see and feel the alps, there is an edge to the morning air and always seemingly a drift from the mountains. Like Martinborough, it is sheltered from the sea breezes of summer although every afternoon in the summer you feel the ocean influence as the cool Pacific tries to push air through the valleys into Waipara, and even further into Waikari. This edgy climate to me is the most influential that nature brings, it has a bristling energy to it and I think you see it in the wines. Off course within the region you also see the dramatic impact of the genuine limestone/clay soils of Waikari, the nervey limestone soils of Omihi, and the calcium infused soils of the Waipara slopes. However to me the climate is the dominant factor.

The wine I have chosen to show you is somewhat of a standalone. It has all the characters that I talk about above but is made from a vineyard where the vines sit around 40 years old, badly affected by eutypa, sprawling, and with ridiculously low yields. However let's not get too carried away about those things, the real impact as I mentioned on these wines is the bristling energy of the climate. While there are some subtle variations from how the Smith & Sheth Heretaunga wine was made, the winemaking philosophies are very close...properly ripe grapes, hand picked, whole bunch pressed, high solids in the ferment, pretty much wild ferment and pretty much full malo, a long time in barrel without sulphur, 15-18 months total elevage. The fine tuning between the two wines is a combination of the human personalities and making sure that what we do is right for the individual wine and the brand it sits under.

The fine tuning for the Smith & Sheth Heretaunga was parts of the juice were lightly settled before going to barrel with NTU in the 200-400 level, other portions 700-1200, a small portion of inoculated ferments, 100% barrel fermentation with a decent whack of new oak, and the wine was crossflowed before bottling. That fine tuning for the Pyramid Valley wine includes 100% organic grapes, foot stomping and a bit of skin contact to release some potassium and get juice pH above 3; fermentation in older barrels and in concrete tulips from Nico Velo, and then the wine is aged in concrete for 6 months prior to bottling, and the wine was bottled essentially unfinned and unfiltered.

I don't believe that this combination of fine tunings has a significant impact on the expression of the wine, they are strokes of an artists brush that are applied to enhance the composition. The region has the greatest impact however there is one other significant factor that is playing apart.

The wines are made in two wineries that seem to have a very distinctive natural biome of yeast and bacteria within them. The Smith & Sheth wine is made at Trinity Hill where there seems to be a yeast and malo biome that produces wines with more tautness and complex aromatics than we see from other wineries. It is hard to pinpoint because Trinity use a lot of commercial yeasts in their red winemaking and for a number of their white wines, but have used wild fermentation widely for Chardonnay. It would be very interesting to do some DNA profiling. Pyramid Valley is somewhat easier to understand as to why it has its own unique biome, because there has never been a commercial yeast or malo bug introduced to this property that has been biodynamically farmed for over 20 years. And while grapes have come from across a number of appellations, they have all been sourced from naturally

farmed vineyards. There is a very distinctive and real impact of the biome at Pyramid Valley, we saw startling evidence of this in 2019 where two parcels of grapes from a biodynamic Sauvignon Blanc vineyard were split between a commercial Marlborough winery, and Pyramid Valley, and fermented wild. The difference was startling, it could have only been the yeast. I'm not sure I can accurately pinpoint the character, although we do convince ourselves we can see a savoury saltiness in all our wines.

With the tools that we have in place now I can see that the role of the biome of the vineyard and winery in the production of fine wine will become a major innovation in the future of the making of these wines. Treasuring and cultivating a biome within the vineyard and winery that simply does its job, and imparts a character that can only come from this place, is hugely significant as all of us find a means to create distinctiveness and character that is unique to our wines. Imagine for a moment that DNA profiling technology and AI was able to identify those yeasts and bacteria that are truly linked to the vineyard and winery, and biotechnology develops methods that identify what these bugs love and what makes them tick and thrive. Now we have something truly impressive, nature, science and technology working hand in hand. I don't believe this idea is from the moon, it could happen, all it takes is desire and talent to do great things.

I now want to mention something that is quite, or potentially, controversial. One approach that is common to both winemaking philosophies is the final elevage. We assemble the finished wine and rack to tank just prior to the following vintage, and then leave in tank on light lees for between 4 and 6 months prior to bottling. We do believe that this gives the wines a real chance to assemble then rest for another winter before bottling. We think they are better for it. There is also an opportunity to think creatively about whether the new vintage wine could provide a wine of higher quality and balance if used in a small under 15% component in the final blend. It can also work in reverse for the new vintage wine. This thinking can happen because the two wines are both in barrel or tank and not in bottle. Some will say that I am a winemaking heretic for thinking about this openly, and I am not going to declare one way or the other with either of these wines. However what I will say is that I would rather face the increasing challenge and drama from climatic influences at vintage using this approach, entirely legal and honest, than playing around with manipulating acid, pH, texture and mouthfeel using chemistry. It is a much more natural and authentic approach and to me represents a meaningful way of dealing with the challenges we will no doubt have from climate change.....for appellation wines. I do not believe anything other than a 100% representation of a single vineyard or block wine in any vintage is appropriate as these wines truly express a place in a moment in time. If you have to start playing around with them then it probably means they aren't good enough.

The reason I showed these two wines is because to me they show the breadth of expressions of Chardonnay that can come from one of the coolest spots, to one of the warmest spots, when made in a very similar manner. They are both properly ripe and they do not have to be contrived by picking early to retain acidity and freshness. They have it anyway, and that is our unique stamp. Ripe and energetic, complete, distinctive, almost like they can only come from this place. Well when you have a place like this, an island nation in the mid latitudes, influenced by both ocean and alps, with the stimulating impact of the high UV light, pleasant humidity, tempered heat and youthful soils.....the wines should be distinctive. There is no other place in the wine world like it.

The only question is.....can they be truly great?