

Pinot Noir has had its fair share of creative descriptions. But Steve Smith, director of wine at Craggy Range, a Hawkes Bay-based winery that makes only single vineyard wines, is probably the first person to call it a “cross-dresser”. “That’s the personality of New Zealand Pinot,” says the 49-year-old. “It has the lushness of the New World and the elegance and femininity of the Old World. It’s a refined form of Pinot Noir that is distinctive to us.”

For Smith, Pinot Noir is *the* red wine for New Zealand. In recent years, Kiwi Pinot has been making a name for itself, and across the borders, it seems to have stoked jealousy: the Royal Hobart International Wine Show and the Perth Wine Show have banned New Zealand’s wineries from taking part after seeing top accolades going to their neighbour’s Pinot in previous shows.

Kiwi Pinot’s charm is good news for Smith, who worries that “New Zealand will be known as a one-trick pony of Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough”. “There have been a lot of marketing campaigns by the industry that is focused on that white varietal. But that’s not what we are all about,” he stresses. When Smith talks about his favourite subject, he goes into spiels but maintains his articulation; a trait of a seasoned speaker—with clout to boot. In 1996, he was rated by *Decanter* as one of the 50 most influential people in the world of wine in the new millennium, and in 2005, was ranked in the Top 50 by *Wine & Spirits* magazine.

PROVING HIS WORTH

Matters of the vine, however, were not on his mind when he was considering his career options in high school. “I was a good science student and was very keen to be an architect,” he admits. “So it was a fluke that I got involved in the wine business.” After receiving a university scholarship to study agricultural science, he was attached to a research team to study phylloxera in New Zealand. In 1985, he earned another scholarship to study grapevine diseases in California’s Napa Valley. Working with Robert Mondavi and his research team, Smith was impressed with the icon’s endless energy. “It was in Napa Valley that I began to love viticulture and winemaking. I admired the care and attention to detail given to their

vines.” Despite being offered a “good job” in Napa, he decided to return to New Zealand. “I had a wife to come back to,” he quips.

He had no shortage of challenges awaiting him, though. When he joined Villa Maria Estate as a viticulturist, the winery was moving away from its profile of a bulk wine vintner to that of a premium producer. Meanwhile, his urge to hop into the playpen with his winemaking colleagues wasn’t met with enthusiasm. “I was driving them crazy because I wanted to get involved in tasting and blending. I was frustrated that they thought I could not discern the grapes’ flavours as well as them,” he says. “At that time, viticulturists were regarded by many in the trade as people who just ‘wore gum boots and drove tractors in the vineyards’.”

But Smith wasn’t going to back away. To prove that he could more than hold his own in the winemaking arena, he enrolled in the rigorous Masters of Wine program in 1996, and passed it—he spent only 18

The fancy farmer

That’s what Steve Smith, director of wine at Craggy Range winery, prefers to be known as. Lin Weiwen speaks to the man who is out to show everyone that New Zealand’s grape portfolio is more than just its Sauvignon Blanc.

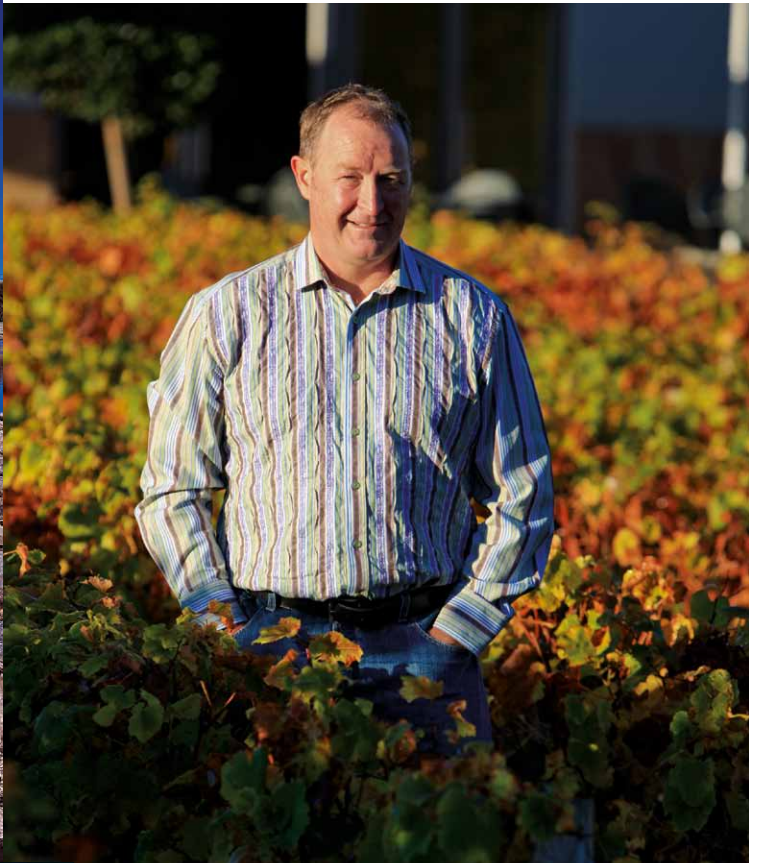
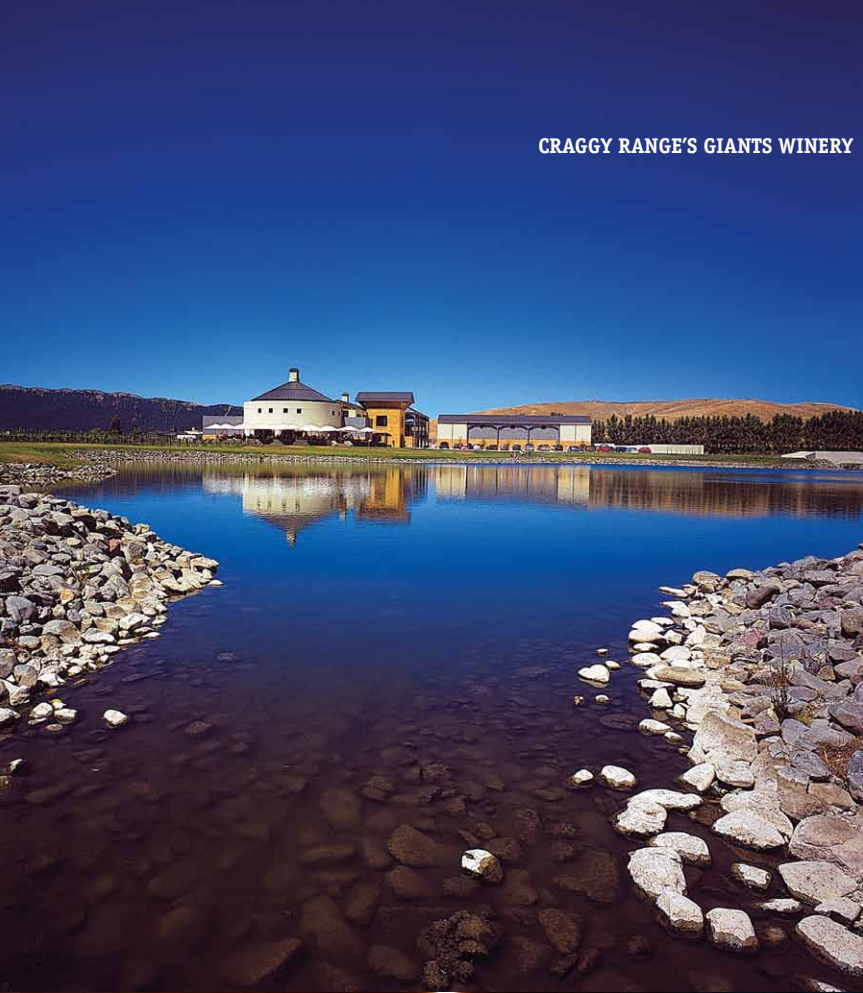
months studying for it. More significantly, he is the only viticulturist in the world to hold such an esteemed qualification. With credentials to boot, he took on international consultancy work outside Villa Maria, lending his expertise to wineries like Rustenberg Estate and Hamilton Russell Vineyards in South Africa. But don’t call him a winemaker; he prefers to be seen as a vigneron, or a “fancy farmer”.

SINGLE VINEYARDS ONLY

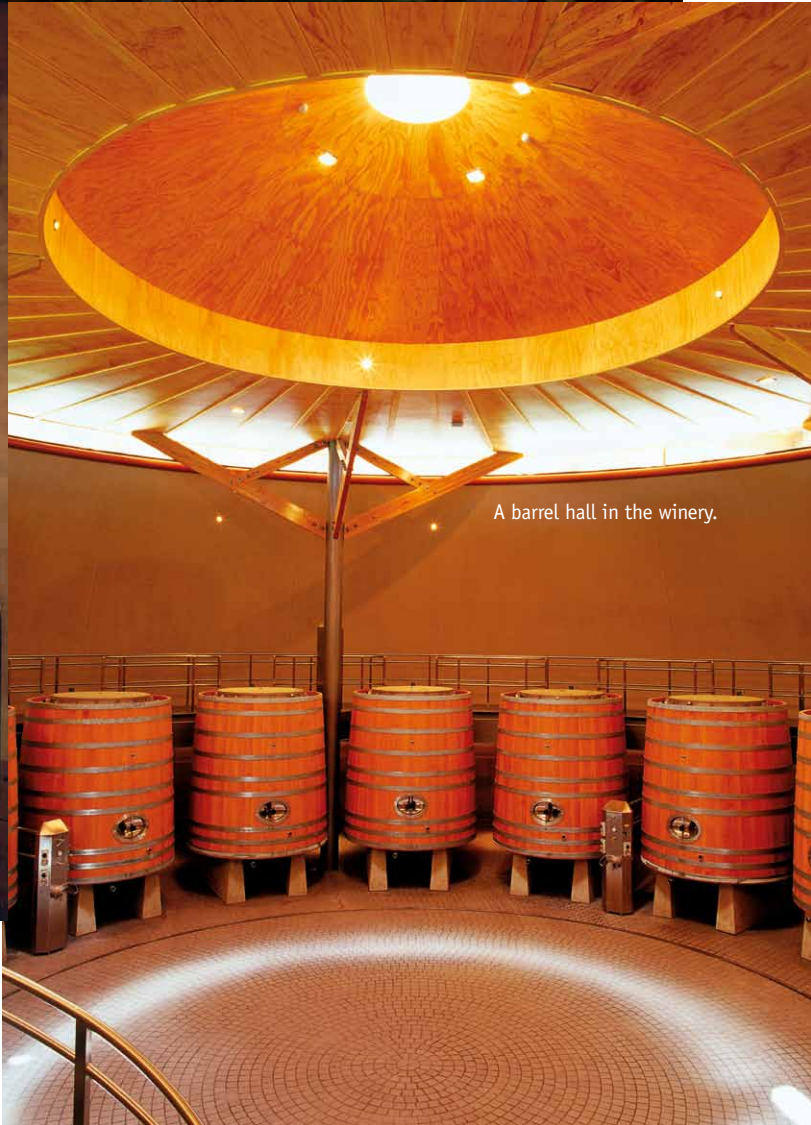
In 1997, Smith was approached by Terry Peabody, chief executive of Transpacific Industries, a multinational >



CRAGGY RANGE'S GIANTS WINERY



Craggy Range's portfolio of wines represents a collection of *terroir* from New Zealand's North and South Islands.



A barrel hall in the winery.

waste management company in Australia, to help buy him some land for viticulture in Hawkes Bay (Peabody, a billionaire, retired from Transpacific Industries last year). It was an encounter that gave birth to Craggy Range: while at Villa Maria, Smith had been toying with the idea of setting up a single vineyard business, and Peabody's subsequent offer to make him a shareholder in his wine project was irresistible. "Terry loved the idea of single vineyard offerings," says Smith, who left Villa Maria in 1998 to work at Craggy Range, where its imposing Giants Winery sits at the base of the jagged form of Te Mata Peak. "It was very clear from the start that we were on the same page."

"People like to know where the food they love to eat comes from. So it's the same for drinking wine," says Smith, on his focus on single vineyard expressions. "It allows them to trace the grape back to that piece of land or farm, and understand its *terroir*."

The first land Smith bought was the Gimblett Gravels, the warmest area in Hawkes Bay, allowing him to plant varietals like Merlot, Syrah, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon. "The Gimblett Gravels is away from the sea breeze, has low altitude and stony, mineral-rich soils, all of which combine to make the area between 3°C and 5°C warmer in summer than the parcels just a few kilometres away. That makes a big difference to the growth of our grapes."

Today, Craggy Range manages, throughout the North and South Islands, over 250 hectares of vineyards, such as the Kidnappers Vineyard located at Cape Kidnappers on Hawkes Bay's coastline, where the clay loam soils and cool breezes pamper the growth of Chardonnay; and the Avery site in Marlborough, where the herbaceous Avery Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc is produced. Putting his viticulture experience to use, Smith guns for "natural farming", where sustainable methods take precedence: for example, organic fertilisers are used, leaf blowers are employed to blow dirt off grapes, and oyster shells are placed on the vineyard floor to reflect light onto the vines.

The cream of the crop from Craggy Range's vineyards is the Prestige Collection: the elixirs, made in small volumes, are "examples that show the world that New Zealand can make great wines". One of its hits is the Le Sol 2009, French for 'The Soil', a luscious and ripe Syrah from the Gimblett Gravels, which scored 97 points from Bob Campbell, a renowned Kiwi wine reviewer.

Maintaining quality means having to say no to poor fruit. "We have declassified our Le Sol in some years, because we felt the vintage was not acceptable for our standards," he says. "As a serious wine

grape picks



LE SOL 2009 (GIMBLETT GRAVELS)

Grape variety: Syrah

Taste: Dark and intense in colour. Tastes of blueberry, liquorice, hints of thyme and pepper. A well structured wine with layers of ripe tannins. \$143.75

CHARDONNAY 2009 (GIMBLETT GRAVELS)

Grape variety: Chardonnay

Taste: Lemon, honey and light minerals. Unveils complex floral aromas and an acidic profile. \$48.75

PINOT NOIR 2009 (TE MUNA ROAD)

Grape variety: Pinot Noir

Taste: Velvety in texture with soft tannins and a mild acidity. Flavours of plum, flower and dark fruit come through, followed by a long finish. \$62.50.

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producer, you got to be able to make such decisions, even though your sales team may not agree."

MOVING AHEAD

Smith thinks the biggest mistake New Zealand's wine industry made in the past decade was to produce far too much Sauvignon Blanc too quickly: buoyed by the increasing international demand for the white ambrosia in the early 2000s, Kiwi vintners went on a planting boom. Since 2008, there has been an oversupply of Sauvignon Blanc, forcing some quality producers to slash their prices and see their bottles sit alongside cheap, bulk offerings in supermarkets.

He hopes Kiwi Pinot won't take the same path. "These days, New Zealand winemakers are not as ambitious as they were in terms of growth; they are more cautious." As for him, he is steadily increasing his presence in Asia, which he says is "still a pretty new market" but "will form about 30 percent of our sales in five years time". He believes Pinot Noir will be the ice breaker to get more people in the region to embrace New Zealand wines. "Its light to medium bodied character is just the red to enhance savoury Asian dishes."

"We need to get more chefs and sommeliers endorsing New Zealand wines," says Smith. "There are many Kiwi producers that deserve to stand on the world stage, and some of them belong to small wineries who can't afford to travel and talk to people. I'm lucky Craggy Range is big enough for me to do so and spread the word about New Zealand." e