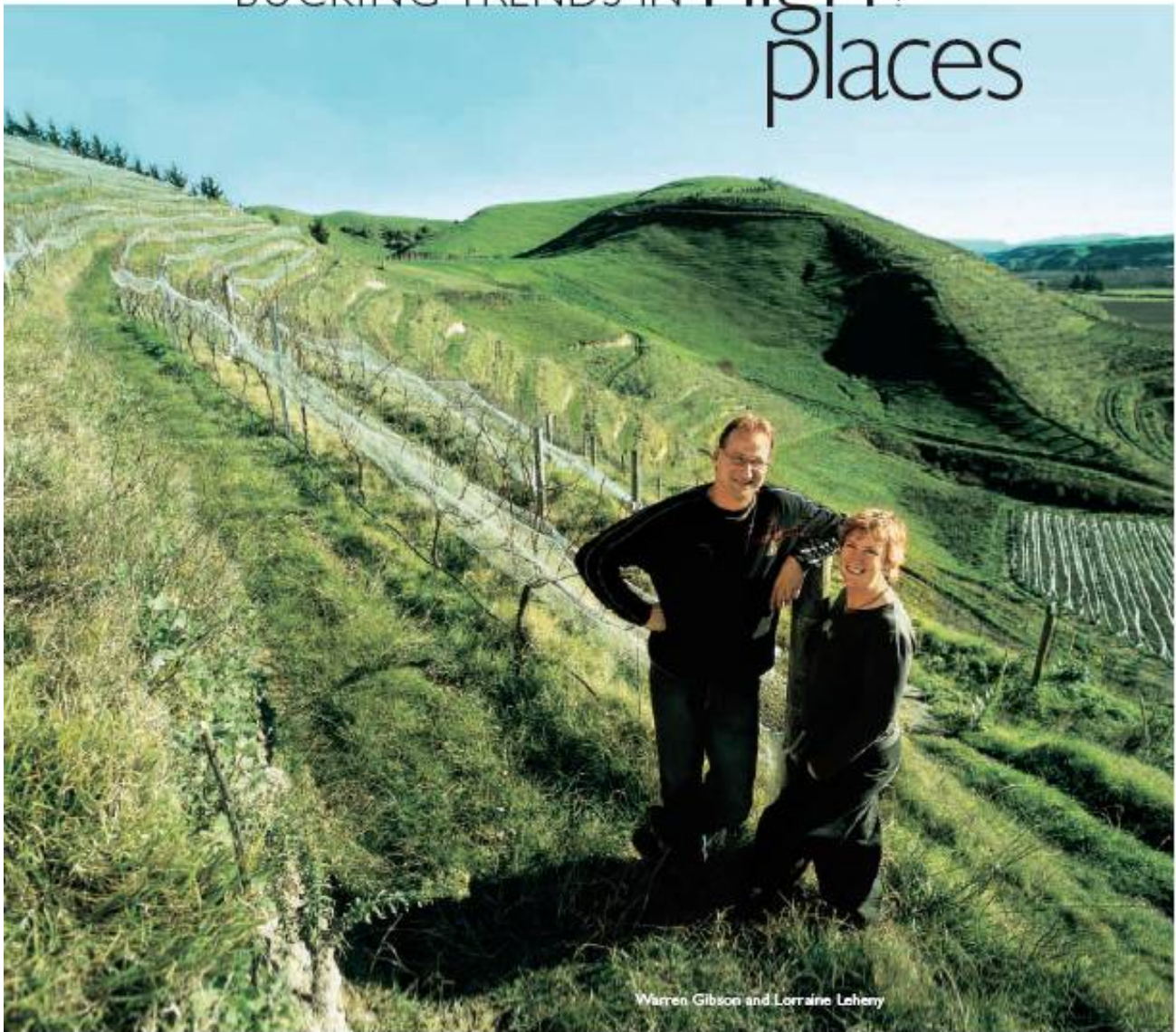


BUCKING TRENDS IN high
places



Warren Gibson and Lorraine Leheny

DAVID BURTON MEETS A WINEMAKING DUO WHOSE STEEP
TERRACES DEFY POPULAR OPINION ON HAWKE'S BAY SYRAH

“GIMBLETT HEIGHTS – say it often enough and it really will become an appellation,” jokes Lorraine Leheny as we puff our way up the muddy track beside her near-vertical vineyard. Ropes and crampons might not have been such a silly idea.

As our gumboots gently slide back downhill in unison, Lorraine invites me to note the high silica content in the clay. She also confirms that there's no problem with moisture retention in the vineyard soils.

Once we reach the summit, I see what she means about “Gimblett Heights”: the vineyards of Hawke's Bay's prestigious Gimblett Gravels district stretch out in panorama over the plains below, while down the steep north face of the hill is the extraordinary vineyard Lorraine owns with her partner, Warren Gibson.

When he's not making wine for John Hancock at nearby Trinity Hill Winery, Warren is busy turning out some of New Zealand's best Syrah under the pair's own label, Bilancia (Italian for balance or harmony).

Bilancia's flagship Syrah, La Collina (“the hill”), is made with fruit from the hectare of vines planted along steep terraces which run from the brow down to the base of the hill. A further hectare of Viognier is planted on flat gravelly land at the bottom, where a river once ran its course.

Warren and Lorraine plan one day to build a house on the summit. Had it been my hill, I'd have put a chapel there and called my wine Hermitage, but I suspect that name has already been taken.

Comparison with Rhône-Valley Syrah, however, is not far-fetched. Pouring a glass of La Collina, you can't help but notice the wine is so densely coloured

as to be almost black. Yet what you taste is not a blockbuster Barossa-style Shiraz, but a European-style wine of elegance and great complexity, with a unique spicy/licuorice flavour.

“Gimblett Heights” may not be quite as hot as the Rhône Valley, but to the assertion that Hawke's Bay is not warm enough to grow Syrah grapes, the pair reply that on the contrary, their hillside vineyard provides some of the very best conditions: positioned to face the sun, the grapes on the terraces ripen up to two weeks earlier than those down on the Gimblett Gravels.

As Lorraine says, even when less ripe, Syrah still has good flavour, and is much more forgiving than Cabernet Sauvignon in years when temperatures are cool.

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The vines cop the full force of the prevailing nor'westerly wind, but oddly enough, these winds work in Bilancia's favour, with a de-vigorating effect on the vines.

Winds are at their strongest during the flowering season, causing the fruit-set to be looser than normal, which then results in open bunches, so the air can freely circulate around them and prevent rot becoming too much of a problem after rains.

They also don't have to do much leaf plucking and, unlike other quality-driven winegrowers, Warren and Lorraine don't often have to remove excess grapes.

Again, there's no need: under harsh growing conditions such as these, the

yield is self-limiting. The average bunch size at harvest is about half what you'd find down on the Gimblett Gravels. Each vine yields only a kilo of grapes, enough for just one bottle of La Collina. No wonder it retails at \$80 – it needs to.

Significantly cheaper, however, are the wines made with contract-grown grapes, most notably Pinot Noir. Hand-picked, macerated before fermentation and aged partly in new oak, Bilancia Pinot Noir gets the full treatment and yet retails for just \$25.

There are just two things wrong with it, as Warren says: the words “Hawke's” and “Bay” on the label. Little matter that Hawke's Bay has a range of sub-climates and that Bilancia's contract grower has a Pinot vineyard 20 kilometres away to the

south, in a district where Chardonnay is harvested a month after that grown on the Gimblett Gravels vineyards; Warren and Lorraine are still faced with those who insist good Pinot can't be grown in Hawke's Bay.

“Too hot for Pinot Noir, too cold for Syrah – what can we grow here?” asks Warren. Well, the same old Hawke's Bay varieties, of course: Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. But right from the launch of the Bilancia label in 1997, Lorraine and Warren were looking for a point of difference.

They found it in Syrah, but also in Viognier, another Rhône-Valley variety that thrives in New Zealand on account of its low acidity. New Zealand doesn't

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have a problem achieving acidity in its white wines, and Bilancia's Viognier seems particularly happy where they've planted it – on a mix of soils, some patches more fertile than others. In a Cabernet or Merlot, these fertile spots would impart an unwanted vegetative character to the wine, but in a white such as Viognier, a mixture of very ripe and less ripe grapes adds character.

Warren ferments his Viognier in oak, but it's old oak and doesn't show in the finished wine, which is fresh, aromatic and estery. He doesn't allow malolactic fermentation, again to retain freshness and the natural acidity.

Interestingly, he follows the traditional Rhône-Valley practice of adding a little Viognier to his Syrah, for the sake of fixing the colour.

Perhaps Bilancia's best-known wine is Pinot Gris, which, in accordance with the Italian theme, is called Pinot Grigio. Made from contract grapes grown at Haumoana and south of Maraekakaho, Bilancia's Pinot Gris stands out from the crowd on account of its lovely full-bodied texture.

Warren follows the traditional Rhône-Valley practice of adding a little Viognier to his Syrah, for the sake of fixing the colour

Going for a ripe rather than a lean style, Warren leaves a touch of residual sugar. It's one of the few examples of New Zealand Pinot Gris given the full luxury treatment: the grapes are hand-picked and whole-bunch pressed, then fermented in part in old oak barrels, with some malolactic fermentation (the conversion of the crisp, apple malic acid to lactic acid which softens the wine).

Warren's interest in Pinot Gris was sparked in 1992 when, as a 25-year-old freshly graduated from Roseworthy, he found himself in Hungary as one of the flying winemakers for Master of Wine Kim Milne. Charged with making bulk quantities of good clean wine to an exact price point, Warren was fascinated by the small quantities of Pinot Gris grapes coming into the winery.

"I wasn't allowed to touch those, so I knew they must be good!"

Later he got to taste some of Hungary's best Tokay, and the memory stayed with him through subsequent years, working vintages in Puglia and, together with Lorraine, a fellow Roseworthy graduate, at Margaret River.

Warren was headhunted to work at Trinity Hill when it was set up in 1997. Both he and Lorraine were attracted by John Hancock's proposal that they form their own company and use his state-of-the-art winery to make wines under their own label part-time.

John Hancock was wise enough to realise that eventually Warren would tire of not getting enough credit on the Trinity Hill label, upon which, it must be said, the Hancock signature is writ large.

So Bilancia is John Hancock's way of keeping everybody happy and retaining Warren's winemaking services for the long term. ●