

The Marlborough Express

Age no barrier with fine wine

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Wonderful Waikawa: Catalina Sounds winemaker and keen boatie Nina Stocker says Marlborough is a perfect playground for anyone who loves the outdoors.

In the first of a five-part series on winemakers of different ages, Rachel Young talks to 20-something-year old Nina Stocker about how her family's hobby has become her passion.

The sauvignon blanc trophy at the Air New Zealand wine awards is one of the most highly sought after gongs in the New Zealand wine world.

So it's fair to say winemaker Nina Stocker created quite a sensation when she walked away with the trophy for her Catalina Sounds Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc 2009 in her first year working with the variety.

"It keeps the bosses happy," she says laughing.

Not that she doesn't recognise the significance of her win: "I was totally thrilled as it showed I was on the right track and that the judges appreciated the style."

The judges certainly did. They described it as a fantastic wine which showed a bravery to stretch the boundaries.

"The palate is alive yet not big and rich, flavoursome but not overbearing, finishing with a long rumble stony feel, dry and nervy," they wrote in their review.

New Zealand Winegrowers chief executive Philip Gregan is happy to clarify the significance of Ms Stocker's win. He says it is an incredible achievement for someone to win such a prestigious award in their first year working with the variety.

And, he adds, that Ms Stocker has the right traits to continue her success as a winemaker. "She's young, she's bright, incredibly enthusiastic and has a huge desire to learn and is open minded."

When Ms Stocker arrived in Marlborough at the end of 2008 she set about sourcing growers from the provinces' subregions to experiment with combining flavours.

"Sauvignon blanc is amazing at showing the soil and the area it's grown in," she says.

The tomato stalk flavours from the Awatere and the tropical fruit and citrus note flavours from the Wairau provide the winemaker with scope to make their personal style, she says.

She is aiming for a style that speaks of quality and complexity.

"My aim is to respect the region and what it does so well, while also exploring these other options and to bring out texture and longevity as well."

Winemaking, she says, is about intuition and doing what feels right rather than coming up with a prescription to follow each year.

It's not uncommon for wineries to keep grapes from the same subregion in batches through the early winemaking process, and blend them to the winemaker's preference. Ms Stocker took this to the extreme, keeping each vineyard's grapes as a separate batch, giving her greater scope for highlighting flavours and textures.

She also experimented with yeasts and techniques, such as fermenting batches at different temperatures and changing the pressure when pressing grapes.

In pursuit of texture, she's ordering some 5700-litre oak barrels, about double the size she has been using.

Ms Stocker is also an advocate of increasing "longevity" of sauvignon blanc beyond the generally accepted 18-month to two-year life span of the variety.

It's an issue with special significance for the Marlborough wine industry's future, at a time when oversupply of sauvignon blanc has seen some wineries reach harvest over the past two years with wine from the previous vintage still in the tanks.

Being a "newbie" Ms Stocker is keen to learn from those with more experience in exploring the concept, rather than be seen telling people how to do their business.

"I'm only at the very start, and there are lots of people focusing on quality and doing things like that to give the region longevity. It's pretty exciting to be involved at this time, even though it is challenging."

As a young child in Flueh, near the Swiss city of Basel, Ms Stocker wandered through vineyards and gardens picking flowers and leaves to smell.

In hindsight, her parents, John and Jo, say she was developing her sense of smell, but at the time they thought it was pretty odd.

Young Nina may have been destined to work with wine when you consider her parents helped in the vineyards around their village and her father had a penchant for fermentation. An immunologist, John always had concoctions of bread dough, wine, beer, yoghurt or vinegar doing their thing around the house, which didn't escape the eyes of a young Nina.

She was also exposed to wine on family holidays, helping in vineyards or holidaying in wine regions.

Ms Stocker was 7 when she and her family relocated to Melbourne, Australia, and the family involvement in winemaking increased.

Her parents worked in the city during the week and weekends were kept aside for the new family hobby; setting up Brave Goose Vineyard in Goulburn in the Tallarook ranges.

"My sister and I helped with every stage from planting the vines to tending the vineyard to eventually harvesting," Ms Stocker says.

Not that she was counting on a career in wine. Ms Stocker says she did not really realise it could be a fulltime job when she was considering her university options. However, her natural interests saw her choose relevant course options, and she completed a bachelor of science in microbiology and immunology as well as a bachelor of arts majoring in history at Monash University.

On the encouragement of family and friends, she worked a vintage at Wirra Wirra Vineyard in McLaren Vale, South Australia learning the "nuts and bolts" of winemaking.

The experience sparked her desire to take it further and led to a postgraduate diploma in oenology at the University of Adelaide.

On graduating she was eager to get more practical experience and seized an opportunity to work unpaid on a family-owned winery, Podere Ruggeri Corsini, in Piemonte, Italy.

"The more you know, the more you realise there's an unbelievable amount you don't know," she says.

Five months later she was back in Australia to take up a job as a cellar hand at Giant Steps winery in the Yarra Valley. Over the next three years, she worked her way up to assistant winemaker, and also managed to fit in a vintage in the northern Rhone Valley in France.

She was working a vintage in Portugal, planning to head to Tasmania to learn more about cool climate wines, when fortune came knocking. The then chief executive of Catalina Sounds followed up on an earlier meeting with Ms Stocker by inviting her to apply for a winemaking job in New Zealand. Catalina Sounds is a Marlborough-based winery owned by Endeavour Vineyards.

Ms Stocker had never crossed the Tasman, but had heard plenty about our wines. Within days, she was in Marlborough for a job interview.

Within weeks, she was back here working as a winemaker.

The role sees her making wines for Catalina Sounds and Endeavour's other labels, Crowded House and Nanny Goat Vineyard, which source fruit from around the South Island.

The job has presented professional opportunities much sooner than she would have dreamed.

"I have much more creative involvement than I would've had as an assistant winemaker somewhere else, and stylistic direction and decisions and an amazing amount of autonomy."

And the province provides just the kind of lifestyle she enjoys.

After Ms Stocker and her partner found a place to rent in Waikawa, one of the first things she did was buy an old boat to explore the Marlborough Sounds. A diving course came next, handy as it helps provide the seafood she loves to cook.

She also goes camping, tramping, fishing, boating or swimming whenever she can.

And while Ms Stocker hopes to stay in Marlborough for the foreseeable future, she still lends a hand in the family business as the "mobile-phone winemaker".

She's happy to give something back to her parents.

Their encouragement of her scientific curiosity also provided a foundation from which to launch an award-winning career.

Being allowed to stop to smell the flowers, and tripping over fermentation projects, it turns out, are just the kind of childhood experiences good winemakers are made of.

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