

## 2006 VINTAGE – GEM

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My second Vintage of Gem (and my first working solely on my wines), has certainly proven to be a real challenge and ultimately, a stunner.

A very mild winter (punctuated by the odd necessary frost) flowed calmly into an early warm spring. The wind stayed settled across our regions and vineyards, with bud burst and flowering occurring evenly and completely. Talk began very early in the season of a moderate, even crop (in Marlborough in particular), and that things were looking a little ahead of where they usually would be.

By the time Christmas had passed, the country was experiencing a warm and exceptionally dry summer. Fruit was ripening quickly and concerns that a repeat of the 98 vintage where white grapes generally over ripened, began to cross my mind. Contrasted against this was my excitement that the Merlot on the red metals of the Hawkes Bay and Pinot Noir on the Wainawa (Petrie) vineyard in Taratahi were looking fantastic. I knew then that the harvest was going to keep me on my toes.

By selecting vineyards from several regions of New Zealand, highlighting my favourite varietals grown in their best environment, I expected something of a staggered harvest. The chardonnay off the Judd Vineyard in Patutahi, Gisborne usually occurs at the end of the second week of March. Sauvignon blanc in the Rapaura district of the Wairau Valley in Marlborough (off our warm site), was expected in the second week of April and, the pinot gris a week or two later. The

Pinot Noir, I didn't expect to be ready till the middle of April and the merlot, till around the third week of April.

What happened early March changed my plans of a leisurely stroll down the country harvesting at will! Summer was proving to be one of the warmer and certainly driest on record in Marlborough with the sauvignon blanc and pinot gris rocketing towards maturity. The acid levels (the backbone of any fine wine and a crucial element in Marlboroughs' unique wine styles), though stayed high and balanced, allaying my earlier fear of a repeat of 1998 and the flabby chardonnays and sauvignons that resulted. The Wairarapa quietly sneaked a week or two ahead of itself and I was surprised to find the Merlot had as well.

Due to the dry weather, there was no disease pressure to speak of and, in my decade dealing with many of these vineyards, I had not seen the fruit and vines looking in better condition at this stage.

The Judd Chardonnay decided to buck the trend of the other three regions (that's Gizzy for you!) - flavour, tannin and sugar development slowed to a crawl. The second week of March drew close and I made the call to pick at the beginning of the third week. A good call as half an hour after we finished hand picking, the rain started and didn't stop till over 50 mls had fallen! Houdini would have been proud, and the grapes were looking great with perfect acid and sugar, and lots of concentration of flavour.

Picking of the pinot was planned with one eye on the vineyard and one on Cyclone Wati that was at the time, menacing the Northern Queensland coast. Anxiety grew as the 'now just a tropical depression' swung on to the east coast of the North Island, promising to clobber us with lots of water and humidity (i.e. botrytis paradise!!).

I spent the night before harvesting peering out into the darkness trying to imagine clear skies. The rain hung over head as we picked furiously all day, but with the promise of a lot more to come and the fruit not looking like it could take a big wash I didn't intend stopping. Luckily we got it off before any damage was done, and out of the way of the 150mls of rain that fell over the next three days!

I was beginning to age prematurely due to worry, but was very happy to have the chardonnay and pinot noir in the winery.

Two days after the pinot noir pick, and back in Marlborough (with the forecast a lot better) picking of the pinot gris got underway and, looked fantastic! It was in beautiful condition with excellent acid and pH. The resulting juice (after whole bunch pressing) showing great concentration and balance.

Only two days later and we were into the sauvignon blanc, again looking a treat with acid and sugar spot on and flavours at their peak. Already looking to be a classic Marlborough sauvignon blanc into the winery it went and the transformation into a wine began.

In Hawkes Bay, the merlot had weathered the storm that had hit after the pinot noir pick and, after a week of warm weather to dry it out, we harvested, crushed and de-stemmed into tank. At over 25 Brix and with great colour and very concentrated flavour I felt a huge relief that all the grapes were in the winery and happily fermenting (in barrel and tank). And all in just over two weeks!!!

So after a successful harvest, the resulting wines are well on their way to the bottle (see Gems to be unearthed). The sauvignon blanc and three quarters of the pinot gris are sitting on their lees in tank, while the last quarter of the pinot gris will sit in barrel for a couple of months to gain richness and weight through the mid and back palate. The pinot noir and merlot are maturing in barrel and will do so until the middle of 2007.