

# The Westie winemaker

Winemaker Corey Hall quit Matua Valley Wines last year to set up on his own but finds making wine is easier than selling it.  
By Daniel Pilkington



**FATHERHOOD CAN** do funny things to a man. For most it prompts a desire for stability. For Corey Hall, becoming a parent made him take the biggest risk of his life.

Six months after the birth of his daughter Pepper, the 33-year-old west Aucklander quit his secure, well-paid winemaking job at Matua Valley Wines, one of the country's largest wine producers, mortgaged his family's Bethell's Beach home to the hilt, and set off down the financially hazardous path of the boutique wine producer.

"When you get your child, it's a crossroads. Things change. You stop being so self-absorbed," he says.

"I didn't even realise before, because I thought I was so career focused, but it was sort of following, not leading. So when Pepper was born I thought, 'it's time to lead'."

It was a brave move. In the past 18 months, 30 new winemaking operations were established in New Zealand. During that same period, 19 fell over.

After 12 months of hard work and more than \$300,000 to set up, sales are starting to pick up for Hall's Studio Wine Company and he hopes to be turning a profit by Christmas. The company has released four wines under the Gem label: a sauvignon blanc and a chardonnay from 2005, and a pinot gris and a rosé from 2006.

They're expensive — retailing for between \$25 and \$35 — but worth it according to the influential Australian publication *Wine State*, which awarded the Gem chardonnay a four-and-a-half out of five rating in its November issue. The rating, Hall says, is equivalent to a gold medal in most wine shows.

But getting the quality right isn't the challenge. During his ten-year stint at west Auckland's Matua Valley winery, Hall excelled in the field of making wine without ever having to contemplate selling it. Stripped of the luxury of a sales team, he's managed to offload more than half of his current stock — somewhere between 300 and 400 cases of wine. Yet with 2,000 more cases waiting in tanks and barrels to be bottled over the next 12 months, there is still a mass of work to do. The key is clear communication in all facets of the business, he says.

"Finding your place in the market is about working out what channels

you need to operate in — but that can be a challenge. People are currently being bombarded with different wine brands, so it's important to get good relationships going."

Being professional and delivering on promises are also vital.

Born and raised in Taupaki in west Auckland, Hall completed a degree in chemistry at the University of Auckland, before taking up a cellarhand position at Matua Valley over the 1995 harvest period.

In the following few years he worked on overseas vintages in California and France. In 1999 Matua Valley loaned the aspiring winemaker more than \$20,000 to complete a postgraduate winemaking diploma at Adelaide's prestigious Roseworthy College in return for the promise of two years' service after graduation. On completing the course, Hall took up a winemaking role at Matua Valley and when senior winemaker Mark Robertson left in 2003, Hall was promoted. He oversaw Matua's entire production for the following two vintages — 2004 and 2005.

Yet just as his career was set to follow the stereotypical trajectory of a successful winemaker everything changed. The Hall's baby daughter, Pepper, arrived during the height of vintage. Bound by the responsibility of his senior role at Matua, Hall's involvement on the home front was considerably limited. "He had the day she was born off and then he had to go back to work," says Megan Hall. "Then he pretty much missed the first six months of her life."

Hall's personal dilemma was heightened by the merger of Australian wine giants Southcorp and Fosters. Fosters had previously bought Matua Valley from the Spence brothers in 2000. That takeover had a minor effect on the company's day-to-day operation whereas the Southcorp merger brought big opportunities. Yet as the pathway into the upper echelons of a corporate winemaking empire beckoned, Hall lost interest.

"With Megs returning to work, I realised that if I went further into the corporate world, we were just going to end up with a baby in daycare all of the time." What's the point in having a kid, he asks, if you never see her?

So in November 2005 the Halls took the plunge and started The Studio Wine Company. He plans to expand his range of four wines in the next year and recently made his first export sale — 15 cases to a Singapore retailer.