

PINOT & POETRY

Michael Glover's passion for his craft is intoxicating, his approach to pinots akin to a poet's approach to prose. "There are just two things that any winemaker needs," he tells me as he waves his hand toward verdant vines tumbling beneath cloudless blue skies and the scorching Nelson sun, serenaded by the cicadas. "Your land, and your soul."

Born in Canberra to Wellingtonian parents, Nelson is the climax to a journey that has come full-circle for the Aussie-cum-Kiwi ("I'll gladly support the All Blacks, but when it comes to the real game, cricket, it's Australia every time!"). Michael Glover is the winemaker at Mahana Estate, and his father made wine for the previous owner, when it was known as Woollaston: "I even planted one of the original vineyards 25 years ago." Glover Senior, who had a PhD in algebra and worked for the Ministry of Defence during the Cold War, moved his clan back to New Zealand rather than face the possibility "of getting nuked in a Canberra office". "Dad was passionate about wine," recalls Michael. "So he bought a vineyard in a Nelson."

It's a passion that was passed on, with Michael heading back to Australia to forge a career in the industry, working, most notably, for Bannockburn Vineyards. He also spent time in Europe, absorbing its philosophies. "In Burgundy, you go to these places where there is no separation between work and life, they have a connection with their vineyards," he says. "If they must work 10-hour days, they'll happily work 10 hours and take their bread and their cheese with them, but equally, if they can get away early, they will. I realised I could never do that in Australia having suffering so many droughts, the environment is too tough. New Zealand is like Europe in that respect, in that there is that oneness with the land, and it nourishes the soul."

Michael says winemakers live with a demon on one shoulder, and an angel on the other. The demon implores them to "chase the markets, chase the points, the shows and the scores, to use more oak and all the things related to traditional success"; but the angel tells them to do the right thing by your land, to never compromise: "It's difficult to translate properly, but the French call it *terroir*."

The winemaking process takes 9-10 months. "So it's literally like a birth," he insists. "There is a gestation period where things start slowly but it gets to the point where the act becomes more stressful and you must be prepared for when you finally begin picking." Harvest is a magical time when the labour comes to

fruition, then fermentation is when "these things come alive, are born". Wines in the barrels are akin to infants, and makers get to know them well. Some are more problematic than others, some need lots of attention, and some are simply just right. "Like any parent, there comes a point where you're no longer needed, you're out of the game. They go into the bottle and become adults, but you are still concerned about them, you want to know that they are okay, and are being treated well."

This, he laments, is something many journalists just don't get. "They ask me to send them wine so they can put it in a line with 40 other bottles and score it blindfolded, and I think 'why the hell would I want to do that?' I want them to say 'I love what you do, I want to enjoy a bottle of pinot with my wife as we eat a bit of a duck.' Would they be quite happy for me to make a decision about their character in a minute-and-a-half and then give it a number? I'll send someone some wine if they agree to open it, give it some time, some thought. Be merciful and understand it."

With vineyards stitched across the Moutere Hills, Mahana is known for doing things differently. The winery embraces organic viticulture and Michael has free reign to experiment. "As a winemaker, you are lucky to find yourself in a place where you can express yourself through your land," he says. "But it's tough, because there is so much tradition in the world of wine, and too many makers get stuck in that tradition, of deferring to the old world. You have to show respect, but New Zealand sells itself as this young, dynamic, energetic and wild country, and there is this opportunity to reflect that in the wine. But the reality is that the wine industry is very conservative."

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A more maverick approach may be more polarising, but that's just the way Michael likes it: "It doesn't matter so long as you have enough followers willing to join you. I want to draw a reaction from the drinker." The winemaker compares his work to an Alice in Wonderland scenario whereby "you're going through smaller and smaller doors, and with each step you move closer to perfection".

"There are no rules here," says Michael. "We have a range of wines called Poets and Writers that are full-on experiments." He believes a lot can be learnt from the nation's vibrant craft beer scene. "The craft beer market has captured the New Zealand dynamism," he says. "They have these colourful labels and they break with tradition. Each one is distinctive. I go to the local supermarket, and everything I have been talking about is there, in that one aisle, with craft beer on one side, and wine on the other. I tend to gravitate toward the beer, because there

is still some choice. I turn and look at these shelves of wine, which I call 'the wall of boredom', with their boring labels all trying to pretend they're Burgundy or Bordeaux with funny little gold medal stickers, some of which are fake, and all this elitist language that is just bullshit. I already know how they'll taste, mediocre at best. So, yeah, wine will always be my greatest joy, but there is a place for beer as well."

It's important for attitudes towards wine to shift, he says, to move away from its white-collar reputation. "The cool thing about Europe is that everyone drinks wine with lunch, even if you work on a construction site. Wine is part of humanity, enjoyed for thousands of years. Whatever wine you can afford, it's about enjoying life, and it shouldn't be out of reach for anyone."

- Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces