

Big boys back on top

Words by **Paul Taggart**

One of the delights of the WineNZ tastings is going to the venue with preconceptions, only to have them confirmed or, more often, completely turned on their head by what happens in the EIT tasting room.

As we now have several years of experience with the same team of professional, experienced tasters, who are beginning to come across different vintages of the same varieties, we are building up a database of how various varieties are tracking and how the industry is evolving and maturing.

A delight for me is to see smaller growers, and new wineries grab a five star rating, even pipping bigger producers to the Top Wine award on occasions.

This happened in our spring tasting when Waipara wineries Terrace Edge and Ataahua picked up the top awards for riesling and gewürztraminer respectively.

But it is equally great to see the big boys of the business willing to put their considerable reputations on the line and enter the tastings and show the upstarts how it should be done!

The tasting in this issue had two wonderful examples of the latter. The first was from Villa Maria, the most-awarded winery in the land. Not only are they willing to have a crack, they regularly smash all opposition out of the park. In the spring issue they produced the best merlot and for this issue they delivered the top sauvignon blanc.

Then there is Cloudy Bay. Their Te Koko was a five-star wine in the sauvignon blanc tasting and the winery also dominated the sparkling category producing the top two wines

This made Cloudy Bay the best performing brand of the tasting, even pipping the colossus that is Villa Maria, which had two five-star wines, along with Akarua.

So big can beat boutique, and I don't have any issue with that. If overseas companies are bringing skills and money to improve our industry, surely that can only be a good thing. It should help everyone lift their game.

And when they're prepared to enter local tastings – like this one – and strut their stuff alongside the locals it gives everyone a good feeling. When they collect five stars from our tough-marking judges, it shows they're not all branding and advertising – they really know what they're doing.



A study of concentration as Ant Mackenzie sniffs out the top sauvignon blanc.

Speaking of promotion – there can't be a better example of brand-building through a carefully choreographed media campaign involving a celebrity, than Invivo.

I've read about Graham Norton trampling the grapes and personally blending the wines in his Irish mansion and I've wondered if it might be a wee bit too cheesy. If we buy it, are we paying for good wine, or great marketing?

The truth is, in the tasting the Invivo rosé tasted by the WineNZ team was a five-star offering. It is part of a new wave - a premium product, grown from grapes especially for rosé, not just being a clever way to dispose

of surplus juice.

The Graham Norton involvement may give the brand some awareness and get it noticed on the supermarket shelf – but it is great to see it isn't all sizzle and no sausage.

And isn't that the joy of the wine business? In our last tasting it was the turn of two small, South Island, family-owned wineries to shine, but this time a major French company, better known for its super-expensive handbags and cognac, and a winery part-owned by one of the BBC's highest paid entertainers were among the top performers. I love it.