



SHOW TIME

The tie-up between television star Graham Norton and New Zealand wine producer Invivo has paid off in spades, as the wine made by the presenter and producer goes from strength to strength

IT'S A sultry mid-afternoon in central London, but you wouldn't know it, sitting in the cool, cathedral-like dining room of 67 Pall Mall. The members' club in St James's is at the top of *Wine List Confidential's* list of the best places to find fine and rare wines in the capital, but today we're trying something a little more accessible and affordable than a grand cru – a blended Sauvignon Blanc and a Pinot Noir rosé, both from New Zealand, made by an Irish celebrity A-listener.

"Wine plus celebrities equals press coverage" is a saying that will always stand the test of time. No one knows this better than Graham Norton, who in 2014 forged a partnership with New Zealand producer Invivo to create his own wines.

You'd be forgiven for being cynical about a drinks label with a celebrity name attached. Certainly, Tim Lightbourne and Rob Cameron, Invivo's co-founders and directors, get some interesting perks out of the deal. They have to rush off to watch

Norton record his chat show in White City later that evening. After the show, Norton will sit down with Lightbourne and Cameron "for the best part of a day" to work on his own blend.

His style of Sauvignon Blanc, Norton says, has "all the grassiness and zest you expect from a New World Sauvignon, but I like to think it has a bit of an Old World finish. Oh, and it's affordable."

New Zealand born Cameron worked in management consultancy for years in

London before returning back home to team up with Lightbourne, an old school friend who was then a marketing executive for an international corporation, and launch their own winery. The pair's first vintage under the Invivo brand was the 2008 a decade ago, which they said was made with "grapes, time, and two maxed-out credit cards".

Six years later, the pair decided to contact Norton. Rob Cameron, Invivo's head winemaker, says: "We were watching him on TV one day and noticed he's always got a glass of white wine in his hand." They sent him a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc to drink on the show, and the rest is history.

Lightbourne admits the trio launched their first wine, a Sauvignon Blanc, at "possibly the worst time" – during the global financial crisis, and right after what turned out to be New Zealand's largest-ever harvest of the white grape. They had to develop a thick skin and a

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sharp eye for a retail opportunity. "We wanted to come at it from a different point of view," Lightbourne says. "Too many winemakers don't know what the consumer actually wants to drink. We wanted to create a brand that had the buyer at the heart of the business."

This is where Norton comes in. As a national treasure in the UK, he has a lot of appeal. "Middle-aged women like him, young people like him. We don't want to target one specific audience, because our wines are for everyone."

Each year the Invivo team meets Norton to choose the blend and release a video from the session.

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(l-r) Tim Lightbourne, Graham Norton, Rob Cameron

is real, and he's got a good palate. It's always about what he wants to drink when he's sitting down to eat."

It may not be the Old World way, but Invivo's success is difficult to ignore. Last month the winery launched an initial public offering in a bid to expand the GN brand. The pair want to raise NZ\$6.5 million (£3.38m) through an IPO in New Zealand.

It follows the company's successful 2015 equity crowdfunding exercise that saw it raise NZ\$2m through the local online investing marketplace Snowball Effect. Crowdfunding,

Lightbourne says, is extremely lucrative for craft breweries, so why not wine? "We're following the BrewDog model."

MEDAL-WINNING WINE

The GN Sauvignon Blanc 2017 won a Gold medal in the Drinks Business Global Sauvignon Masters last year, and was also chosen to be served in Qantas Business Class. Since then, the team has expanded the Graham Norton range to include a rosé, Shiraz and Prosecco, which Australian retailer Woolworths already list, and which are about to be launched by beverage company Lion in New Zealand.

Since 2015, Invivo's sales have increased from NZ\$3.7m to a projected NZ\$13.9m



this financial year, achieving a 374% sales growth since its 2015 crowdfunding campaign. From 50,000 bottles in 2015, this year the team is expected to produce more than three million bottles.

Lightbourne and Cameron are optimistic about the future, but in the meantime, they still need to get Graham down to New Zealand to see the winery. "I'd love to visit and see the grapes on the vine," Norton says, "but I can't say when. We are very far away, I've got dogs, I work a lot, I'm old and I'm lazy!"

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