

## Kiwis take on Bordeaux firsts

20 Feb 2009 by Jancis Robinson

See my [tasting notes](#).

Yesterday in London a small New Zealand wine region pitted its wines against the very best that Bordeaux has to offer. In the event, the favourite wines of a group of eminent British tasters were all from Bordeaux, but everyone admitted that it was by no means blindingly obvious where each wine came from and I think we all learnt just how serious a challenger Gimblett Gravels in Hawkes Bay can be.

There had been a trial run of this David and Goliath exercise in New Zealand last October with Gimblett Gravels' best Bordeaux blends shown blind alongside a selection of top Bordeaux 2005s. The tasters were Australian wine writer James Halliday, American wine writer Elin McCoy and a range of New Zealand wine authorities. Back in October on Gimblett Gravels home ground, only Chx Mouton and Lafite 2005 made it into the group's top six wines and the favourite was **Blake Family Vineyards, Redd Gravels 2005 Hawkes Bay**.

At the top of New Zealand House in London yesterday the tasters included wine writers Oz Clarke, Jane MacQuitty, Neal Martin, Margaret Rand, Jonathan Ray, Michael Schuster and me and such eminent wine merchants as Alun Griffith MW of Berry Bros and Stephen Browett of Farr Vintners. The Gimblett Gravels Winegrowers Association served us each 12 glasses of deep red. All we knew was that the red Bordeaux had been chosen and supplied by Alun Griffith and the Gimblett Gravels wines had been chosen by James Halliday. None of us knew that the Bordeaux wines would be quite as exalted as they were (Mouton, Lafite, Haut-Brion, Cos, Angélus and VCC) and would probably have been surprised to know in advance that this tiny region of 800 ha would dream of taking on the greatest Cabernet/ Merlot blends in the world.

I think it's fair to say that most of us expected it to be quite easy to tell the New Zealand wines from the Bordeaux. After all, in that very setting I had tasted scores of deeply unimpressive New Zealand Cabernets and Merlots over the years, typically pale, tart, weedy, and often sweetened up to make them palatable. In fact none of the wines we tasted yesterday were remotely like that. They were all very deep coloured, fully ripe, with no hint of herbaceousness and bone dry – just like good red Bordeaux, in fact. We all furrowed our brows as we tried to discern the provenance of each wine and work out our preferences. Even arch Bordeaux-ophile Stephen Browett admitted that it was a demanding exercise.

In the event, I did work out which were the Bordeaux and which the Kiwis, with the sole exception described below. But it was not that easy – which is the real lesson I learnt yesterday. Gimblett Gravels, an 800- ha patch of particularly well- drained soil in the warm Hawkes Bay region on the east coast of the North Island, is clearly setting its cap at the most serious, dry, concentrated, minerally, long- lived style of Bordeaux blend possible. Michael Schuster reported on a similar exercise comparing Coonawarra Cabernets and red Bordeaux in which the Australian wines were blindingly obvious. Bordeaux blends from California and Italy also have their own, non- Bordelais style. Of all successful Cabernet- growing regions, perhaps Margaret River also has Bordeaux- like characteristics – although it could be interesting to compare Washington reds with the Bordeaux prototypes.

The most significant fact perhaps is that the average retail price of the Gimblett Gravels wines ranges from £14.50 to £25, while the red Bordeaux we tasted cost hundreds of pounds a bottle (prices too volatile to quote). At the moment, these top Gimblett Gravels wines are produced only in hundreds of cases rather than the tens of thousands of cases made by Bordeaux first growths, for example. But according to Rod Easthope of Craggy Range who presented the tasting, Gimblett Gravels producers could step up production if they thought the demand was there. These wines are made not so much from specific vineyards but from fruit that has been treated to first class treatment.

They similarly blend the Bordeaux grape varieties, buy smart French oak (between 25 and 90% new) and treat the wines to top class élevage. The only major difference apart from location is the age of vines. The first vines went in around 25 years ago but many of them have since been replaced when recognised as the wrong clones, so it will be fascinating to see what happens to wine quality as the vines age. Gimblett Gravels itself was only named and celebrated in 2001 when I was last there. It is not, incidentally, a recognised geographical entity as New Zealand does not yet have a series of geographical denominations, so for the moment is registered as a trademark, but this is expected to change.

My favourite Gimblett Gravels wine was the one made in greatest quantity and at the lowest price, **Trinity Hill, The Gimblett 2006 Hawkes Bay** whose price was quoted as £14.50 (although I can't find a stockist via [wineseacher.com](#)). This is apparently a blend of 57% Merlot, 17% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Petit Verdot, 6% Cabernet Franc and 5% Malbec – although both Oz and I independently thought when tasting blind we could smell a hint of Trinity Hill's famous Syrah in the blend. I must say that I have been particularly impressed by Merlot from Gimblett Gravels. When tasting a range of Craggy Range bottlings in New Zealand earlier this month, I much preferred their Merlot- dominated **Sophia** to their Cabernet- dominated **The Quarry** (which last was included in yesterday's tasting and which I found the least obviously New Zealand of the Gimblett wines). The Merlot- dominated Haut- Brion managed to convince me that perhaps it was the very impressive Sophia.

Clearly [Gimblett Gravels](#) is a name to be reckoned with.

See my [tasting notes](#).