

# WAR AND PLACE

A Nelson winemaker on a mission shares his unique manifesto with JOHN SAKER.

## LET'S ROLL THE TAPE...

"At the supermarket I go to near Nelson, on one side of the aisle there's craft beer. There I see colour, dynamism, youth, questions being asked, energy and innovation.

"On the other side, by comparison, there's death and conservatism. That's the wine side. As a wine-producing country, we sell ourselves to the world as being youthful and dynamic, a frontier area. Instead of being proudly new world, we're trying to be old world, something we're not.

"I totally believe the wine gods have given sauvignon blanc to New Zealand. No one can doubt the synergy the variety has with this place. But we have this freedom we're not using. There should be all sorts of different expressions, intriguing wines. I don't want a Loire Valley producer to come to New Zealand and say, 'These guys are trying to copy us and doing a bad job of it.' I want him to come and be excited and jealous of the tastes and textures we're getting, and to say, 'I wonder if Mum and Dad will let me do that?'"

Never let it be said Michael Glover doesn't put himself out there. His verbal riffs make for riveting listening. He speaks of winemaking as an epic struggle, a search for truth and meaning, where the dragons to be slain are indifference to terroir, deafness to new ideas and winemaking by recipe. Quality is what he says he's chasing, wines that are "good, yummy, engaging and authentic". Glover is on a quest. He signs off all his written communications with the word 'Onwards'.

Glover returned to Nelson, where he was born 48 years ago, with wife Cath and the younger of their two children in 2015. His departure from Australia



was much lamented. In 2005 he had succeeded the celebrated Gary Farr in the winemaking role at Bannockburn Vineyard in Victoria. 'Tough act to follow' talk quickly subsided as Glover made the gig his own. His Bannockburn pinot noirs and chardonnays became every bit (if not more) as sought after as those of his predecessor. While there, he also began making a style of sauvignon blanc that won plaudits. Respected writer and critic Andrew Jefford hailed Glover as one of the best winemakers in Australia.

A number of reasons were behind his decision to leave all that for a new start in one of New Zealand wine's quieter corners. Family was one. His father Dave, a remarkable man with a PhD in algebra, was semi-retired and would need help with the Nelson vineyard he'd established.

Wine was another. While still at Bannockburn, Glover quietly started on a personal project. He'd long believed that the clay soils of Nelson's Upper Moutere district held something special for pinot noir if it was handled in a certain way. In 2013 he bought a tonne of fruit from what was then Woollaston Estate. It resulted in the debut of a new boutique Nelson label, the Mammoth Pinot Noir 2013, and a winemaker who knew he was on to

something. "That wine convinced me... the Moutere Hills are pinot noir gold."

The influence of place figures strongly in the Glover manifesto. It's an influence he believes shapes people as well as plants. A teenaged Michael Glover helped his dad plant the original family vineyard back in 1989. Nelson was where he began to fall under the spell of wine; listening, talking and tasting with his parents. So when he was offered the winemaking job at Mahana Estates (as Woollaston Estate was renamed), he knew he had to take it.

The Glover manifesto, indeed. What else is lurking in the roadmap he's using in his search for the soul of New Zealand wine?

Actually, in terms of wine production, much of the prescription is more old school – as in pre-agrochemical age – than new wave. Glover is a believer in terroir, in handing the voice of the land a megaphone. So the Mahana vineyards are dry farmed (for the vine roots to run deep and draw more influence from the soil) and managed organically. For Glover, conventional viticulture's spray regimes blur the uniqueness of a place, whereas organics help bring that into focus. He also says it's about quality. "With organics you're getting better fruit, so you make better wine."

In the winery, wild ferments, no filtration, no added enzymes and low

sulphur regimes are all in the mix. If that sounds very 'natural wine' to you, you'd be right. But that's not a term you'll be hearing Glover use. "I don't mind saying 'organic', but I hate the label 'natural' and the dogma that goes with it."

With pinot noir especially, Glover's ferments are 100 per cent whole bunch, which means none of the grapes are destemmed, but are tossed in the vat as intact bunches, just as they came off the vine.

"Whole bunch is about bringing perfume, restraint and tradition. It's difficult to master... but the tannins are finer, there's a freshness, the wines are more cerebral and they age better. Domaine Romanée-Conti and other great Burgundy estates have turned away from the destemmed, modern style – what I call the slick, suave, hedonistic style – and have embraced 100 per cent whole bunch."

But then there are Glover's "tradition be damned" wines. The 2017 vintage will be his third at Mahana. I've just tasted through some new releases, most of them whites from the 2015

and 2016 vintages. Behind the vivid, at times playful, new labels are a collection of fascinating, risk-taking wines.

The most off-piste is the Mahana Feral Lahar Sauvignon Blanc 2015, described by Glover as the "most wild and adventurous winemaking I have performed". It's unlike any sauvignon you've ever tasted. It gatecrashes your mouth like some unruly, ill-mannered hip-hop artist, shouting lines that are disturbing yet unforgettable. In essence, a sediment most winemakers discard was kept on by Glover for the making of this wine. It was given its name because the ferment looked like "a seething mud pool in Rotorua".

Less confronting is the Mahana Sauvignon Blanc 2015, though it's still far from trad. It's a green bean, jalapeno and nectarine-infused treat, intense and serious, but lip-smackingly fresh. A captivating orange wine, the Mahana Blood Moon Pinot Gris 2014, is another highlight. The first pinot noirs Glover has made at Mahana, from the 2015 vintage, are due for release later this year.

Glover says he's been to the dark side,

and he'll never return. "I've worked for big wineries, entered wine shows, I've judged, I've added yeast and enzymes. When you leave that path, there are times when you question yourself. Then you have moments of clarity, you feel them, and you know this is the right way and that there's so much out there waiting to be discovered.

"What I'm doing now has been well thought through. A lot of it is driven by my love of wine. I'm a winemaker, but I'm also a wine drinker and a wine lover. I've spent a quarter of my income over the last 20 years on wine (much to my wife's horror). Half of all the wines out there are boring and the same. I wouldn't want to drink it, so I certainly don't want to make it. It's about exploring and living.

"Whenever I did a vintage in Europe, it was about the lifestyle, the food and the people, birds and roses, of which wine was just a part. It was all one. In Oz, I could never live that life... the conditions are too harsh and hostile. But here I can. I can live my life like I'm in a French film... full of colour." ■