



# Welcome to my office

It sounds like a romantic, aspirational existence, but the reality of running a winery is a little different. Blair Walter, of Felton Road Winery in New Zealand's Central Otago, gives a very personal account of the highs and lows of getting grapes to glass

## Walter at a glance

**Born** 1969 in Hamilton, New Zealand

**Studied** Horticultural Science at Lincoln University, Canterbury, NZ, 1987-1990, including a year's exchange at Oregon State University in 1989

**Employment** vineyards and wineries around the world including:

**1991** Saxonvale Wines, Hunter Valley, Australia;

**1991-1994** Giesen Wine Estate, Canterbury, NZ;

**1992** Sokol Blosser, Oregon, US; **1994-1996** Newton Vineyard,

Napa Valley, US; **1996** Tarrawarra, Yarra Valley,

Australia; **1996** Rippon Vineyard, Central Otago,

NZ; **1996** Domaine de L'Arlot, Burgundy, France;

**1996-current** Felton Road, Central Otago, NZ

Photographs: Blair Walter was photographed exclusively for Decanter by Gilbert van Reenen at Felton Road, Central Otago, New Zealand

1998 WAS A brilliant growing season in Central Otago, on New Zealand's South Island, and our second vintage at Felton Road was going to bottle. I was very pleased with my effort: a worthy follow up to the 1997, which was already starting to attract a lot of attention and great reviews. I was a young Turk, not yet 30, but with a dozen vintages notched on my belt and itching to make a few waves in the wine scene... I cringe now to think about it.

The 1998 was again made with wild yeast and natural malolactic fermentation, and also not filtered. The wine tasted great in the bottle for the first eight months but in the summer it started to change. It became slightly spritzy and was taking on worrying aromas and flavours that soon led to the characteristic farmyard and manure characters of *Brettanomyces*. I was mortified. My second vintage and the reputation we were quickly forging would soon be in tatters: 'inconsistent', 'microbial time-bombs', 'too young'... I could see the headlines.

Amazingly, that wine continued to get some very good reviews ('Old World complexity, barnyard, funk....'), and in time I was able to put that particular bottling behind me. I learned a lot from that vintage though, and not for nothing does Todd Stevens, my assistant winemaker today, say that winemaking is 2% luck, 2% judgement and 96% cleaning! I was young, inexperienced, cavalier and willing to push the boundaries. I learned, though, that you bend the rules at your peril. But perhaps this attitude is necessary to craft interesting wines?

*'You wake up in the middle of the night with panic attacks.*

*Fortunately, after 27 vintages, these are becoming less frequent'*



Above: 'Check your work' is Walter's eighth commandment. Here he smells the wine cap for faults (left) and reviews charts on a wine's malolactic fermentation

I grew up on a farm and am from a long line of farmers, so I guess working on the land was in my blood. I actually wanted to fly planes, but that wasn't on the curriculum at school. But science was, and horticultural science seemed the most interesting branch, so that became my university subject. Lincoln University in Canterbury, as well as Oregon State, where I had an exchange year, were both winemaking universities, and I quickly fell in with the hard-partying wine crowd.

I immersed myself in this world for four years and at the end was very close to starting a PhD in wine science. But working a few back-to-back vintages straight out of university, I enjoyed getting dirty again; I enjoyed all the hard work and long hours and seeing the results in a beautiful glass of wine at the end of it all. This was farming, but a different planet from potatoes and watermelons! The more I worked, read, tasted and travelled, the more I fell in love with wine and realised that making wine was all about being in the pleasure business: all of our hard work is intended to put a smile on someone's face and make them feel happy.

### The importance of drinking

1994. It was my first day of work in my new position as white winemaker at Newton Vineyard, one of California's leading wineries. I was nervous, excited and looking forward to the challenge ahead. The head winemaker, John Kongsgaard, said to me in the morning: 'Get settled in and meet me at 5pm. I have a fan of the winery who wants to share some wines with us.' We met as planned and out of the customer's briefcase came 1970 Lafite, 1964 Cheval Blanc and 1948 Latour. We opened and drank all three between four of us – not a bad first day at work!

Drinking widely and well is so important for developing your palate as a winemaker. I learned this early on from my winemaker mentors like Marcel Giesen (Giesen and Bell Hill) Rudi Bauer (Rippon, Quarz Reef), John Kongsgaard (Newton,

## Walter's 10 winemaking commandments

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| <p><b>1</b> Winemaking is not all glamour: 95% is cleaning – just get on with it</p> <p><b>2</b> Trust your palate and instinct: many great wines were made before all the science we now know</p> <p><b>3</b> Respect your fruit through the entire process – treat it as if it were your best friend... which it is</p> <p><b>4</b> Surround yourself with a great team. Then trust them</p> <p><b>5</b> Breathe deeply and take the calculated risk – all great wine is made on the edge</p> <p><b>6</b> Your total spillages for the day should not be enough to get you</p> | <p>drunk – don't pour your profits down the drain</p> <p><b>7</b> Be inspired by a great bottle of wine – taste widely and well, and search carefully and quickly for the next one</p> <p><b>8</b> Check your work</p> <p><b>9</b> Remember: all great winemakers are humble</p> <p><b>10</b> If a chef burns a steak, he cooks another one. If a winemaker stuffs up a wine, it can be up to two years of hard work down the drain. Don't stuff up!</p> |
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Kongsgaard) and Jean-Pierre de Smet (Domaine de l'Arlet), and also through sharing many bottles with friend and Burgundy authority Anthony Hanson MW of Christie's. I love drinking great wine: learning, tasting and visiting the great wine regions of the world has certainly been a big passion and hobby for me ever since discovering wine. Having these reference points is so important and really motivating. The wines don't need to be from a similar climatic zone or from the same varieties as I use – they just need to be intriguing, inspiring, authentic and pleasurable.

Winemaking is a job with lots of highs. There really aren't any lows – or none that I can think of. Sure, there is all the cleaning... and bottling is not much fun either. But you just need to look at the positive side of all those bottles clinking down the bottling line and the pleasure they will give to people around the world. The hours are long, but what job doesn't take long hours if you want to be the best you can?

*'Sure, there's all the cleaning, and bottling is not much fun. The hours are long, but what job doesn't take long hours if you want to be the best you can?'*



## Hands-off approach

Sometimes I struggle with the idea of being called a winemaker. The words 'wine' and 'maker' imply that I make the stuff. Many winemakers like to earn their money – put their signature clearly on each wine they make – but that's not how I was taught. I'm lucky to have worked the past 15 vintages as winemaker at Felton Road and prior to that at some leading estates that helped form my winemaking ideas (see box, p81). These are based on a very hands-off approach that allows the fruit and site to speak for itself.

While science is very important, it's the artistic side that says: 'push the science aside and allow the wines to make themselves'. Less is more when it comes to making fine, and especially authentic,

wine. You have to really believe in the quality of the site and the interesting aspects of the climate. While the winemaker usually gets all the kudos, the viticulturist deserves equal mention for all the careful work that must be done in the vineyards to achieve high quality wines. While you can't help making some decisions that create a 'house style', you can make wine where the style is both consistent and light in touch so that the site shines through.

## Panic attacks

Hands-off winemaking does become nerve wracking and used to give me considerable anxiety: I'd be driving home from the winery after a big day during vintage thinking: 'How can I have just left all that

**Above: Walter punches down the cap on a tank of Pinot Noir grapes: 'it's the artistic side that says "push the science aside and allow the wines to make themselves"'**





Above: 'Although we're very proud of what we've achieved at Felton Road in such a short period of time, we're fully aware that this is only the beginning'

valuable grape juice sitting around unprotected waiting for the natural yeasts to do their thing? What about the temperature of this? What might happen with the fermentation rate of that?' You wake up in the middle of the night with panic attacks. Fortunately, these are becoming less frequent after 27 vintages, and I am sure my wild yeast and bacteria are also getting to know my ways just as I get to know theirs.

What can also cause considerable anxiety is the weather leading up to harvest. However, we're really blessed in Central Otago with such a dry climate that we are very seldom challenged by excess rain and disease issues. I have to remind myself how spoiled we are and I'm really not sure how I would handle vintage in more challenging climates. I'm sure I'd have a lot less hair, and that remaining would be very grey... Frost can be an issue for us in our cool climate, and we're always worried in the spring about getting 'the big one' and losing most – or all – of the crop. But frost can usually be successfully fought with frost-protection systems and minimised by planting on north-facing slopes.

### Drive for authenticity

Considering all the anxiety and stress involved, I often get asked, 'How do you manage this?' For me it's easy: I'm really driven by the quest to make interesting and authentic wine that people will enjoy. It can be easier said than done for a

winemaker to switch off and just enjoy wine for what it is – there's always that tendency to continue analysing: How was it made? Where did those tannins come from? Are there any faults?

I rarely drink my own wines at home, only when we are entertaining guests. And even then there will be plenty of other bottles opened. But to taste your own wines in context at a restaurant on the other side of the world really helps you to understand exactly what elements of the wine are drawing people back for that second sip, glass or even bottle.

So what would I look for in a winemaker, knowing the challenges involved? Certainly patience, respect, humility and – most importantly – a quest for adventure and the unknown. It's a journey where the destination is unknown and a long way away. Growing grapes and making wine is a very long-term undertaking. Although we're very proud of what we've achieved at Felton Road and in our young region of Central Otago in such a short period of time, we are fully aware that this is only the beginning. It will be some decades before the real potential has been fully explored. And while it is frustrating to know that I won't be here to see and taste all those gains, I must take solace and a genuine sense of satisfaction at having been part of the early efforts. **D**

*Blair Walter is head winemaker of Felton Road Wines in Central Otago, New Zealand*

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