

Sea Level Wines

Sam Smail is finding success on both sides of the Whangamoas. He recently established a label for his Nelson vineyard – Sea Level Wines – while continuing his work as winemaker at Marlborough’s Whitehaven Wine Company, a position he has held for the last 12 years. His skills as a maker of aromatic wines were recognized recently at the International Aromatics Wine Competition where two of his wines brought a trophy home: the Whitehaven 2010 Marlborough Gewürztraminer was named the Supreme Champion Wine in the Show and the Sea Level 2011 Home Block Pinot Gris won The Press Champion Pinot Gris Trophy. That is not bad for a very first vintage.

In 2006 Sam and his father, Mike, purchased the apple and pear orchard on the coastal highway between Tasman and Motueka. The apples were soon replaced with 8 hectares of pinot gris, pinot noir, chardonnay, gewürztraminer and a small trial block of chenin blanc. The vines are planted near the water’s edge and rise up the gentle north-east facing slopes. The deep, free-draining, clay soils, regular sea breeze and cool climate, are proving to be an ideal combination for producing clean fruit and balanced, intense wines. This year the fruit ripened relatively early and was all picked by the end of March. The Sea Level Art Gallery will be reopening soon, and there is a possibility of adding a tasting room here too.

While still living in Marlborough, Sam takes care of the wine making. Mike is based in Christchurch from where he manages most of the sales and marketing of Sea Level wines – fitting this in around running his own bathroom ware company. Coming from such a different industry Mike can bring an objective eye to the wine industry. Ben Clark is the third team member – he is the vineyard manager and lives on site. Most of the Sea Level wine is currently being sold to the New Zealand market with small amounts being exported to the UK and China.

Sam feels that Marlborough has been a great place to gain winemaking experience, and while he continues to remain loyal to the region, he is keen to make the best possible wines from the Sea Level vineyard. He is enjoying the learning curve of working with soils, fruit and climate which are different to Marlborough’s. Being a smaller region, Sam feels there is more scope for Nelson winemakers to express their individuality in their wines, leading to a wider variation in styles. He is keen to produce small quantities of top quality wines which are an expression of their unique site. Both Mike and Sam are building the Sea Level brand while working at other jobs, but they are totally committed to their

Nelson wines. They are definitely in agreement that focusing on the quality of their wines is the only way to go.



Mike and Sam Smail