



# From The Cellar

## John Stichbury – Jackson Estate

He would much rather be let loose in his shed where he can let his engineering skills loose, than talking to a wine industry reporter. But when you are the face of one of the region's larger mid-sized wineries – sometimes you have to give in.

The land where Jackson Estate's grapes were first planted has a long and involved history. It was first purchased by Adam Jackson in 1842. It has remained in the family ever since, providing the wherewithal for an array of farming practises - sheep, crops, fruit, garlic, deer, goats and now grapes.

John Stichbury is Adam's great great grandson and the owner of the wine company that bears his ancestral name. Trained as a mechanical engineer in Wellington, John wasn't one of the earliest growers to jump on the bandwagon when Montana arrived in the province back in 1973. He watched with interest what was happening in the region, but after returning to run the family farm in '79 he instead chose to look at other forms of income off the property. He planted garlic, which was going through a boom at the time, as well as beans, wheat and peas. In 1984 he saw an opportunity to get into the deer market, and set about protecting the property on the corner

of Jackson's and Old Renwick Rd with deer fencing. Then came the plan to farm goats, which was a huge success. But as the mid 80s were reached, crippling interest rates and a change in the tax structure impacting on the farmers, meant John had to re think his initial ideas. With brother Warwick, who was running the family importing company in Wellington, he decided that looking in from the outside at the grape industry was no longer an option. Both wanted to put the family land to better use and grapes may just be the answer. They had been offered an incentive by Penfolds, who had contract growers in the region at the time. The company would supply the grapes, posts and wires, the Stichbury's would provide the land. There was a catch though – John had to agree to plant blackcurrants as well. Why? Well we won't go into that. Instead John decided to plant mandarins. "We thought we were going to make our fortunes. But it didn't work out, we quickly

realised that it would take us ten years to get the trees to a fruitable level."

So he headed off to Auckland and began talking with some of the old hands of the New Zealand wine industry – George Fistonich, Bill and Ross Spence and Richard Ward. He quickly realised the wine industry was the way to go, but only if you were intending to produce quality, rather than quantity. It was around the era of the grape pull and it had become obvious the bag in box style of wine was not the way Marlborough should be heading. Other growers in the area were already moving towards varietals, and Ernie Hunter had recently gained recognition for Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc in London. John decided to follow these leads and initially planted out 100 acres of what he describes as "sticks". Thirty-three were Sauvignon Blanc, 33 were Chardonnay and 10 each of Pinot Noir and Riesling

John's goal was to grow quality fruit at the lowest possible cost, even if they initially

never had a contract for the end product. “We were told we were fools to plant without a contract with a wine company, but when we approached some companies they didn’t want any new growers. So we decided we will go ahead and grow grapes so good that everyone will want them – that was wishful thinking.”

The land surrounding the family homestead of Runnymede provided long stretches of flat, pliable ground. In total 150 rows, all one kilometre long were planted, in a method not seen in earlier plantings in the province. “We created rows of mounds that went for 1km each, which provided better growing conditions for the vines, or sticks as we called them at the time. Then we placed polythene up the rows and had side irrigation. It was pretty novel looking.

“When we started planting we thought we may have adopted a T-bar trellising system but realised this would be the wrong direction so opted for the Scott Henry system.”

Jackson Estate’s first vintage was in 1990, a small portion of Sauvignon Blanc. The label, very tongue in cheek says “Hand harvested by six foot four inch blonde Swedish nymphomaniacs.” Not surprisingly the limited production sold quite well.

In 1991, with more fruit on hand, Jackson Estate signed up to be one of the founding companies to use Vintech – the first contract winemaking company to be established in New Zealand. The nymphomaniac label wasn’t going to work this time round, so John had to come up with a more serious label,

deciding on a large gum tree that has been on the Jackson Estate site for more than 140 years.

“My great great Grandmother planted that tree back in 1867, and it is very much a symbol of this property. It seemed appropriate.”

Learning as he went, John discovered that there wasn’t the machinery available

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to deal with the ever growing wine industry. With his own background as a mechanical engineer, he began thinking of ways to improve the life of the grower. Firstly came the bird scarers. Gas guns were used predominantly in the 80s and 90s, much to the consternation of those not involved in the wine industry. There were some heated battles between growers and other rural residents, due to the guns going off in the middle of the night, making sleep for neighbours rather hard to come by.

“They were a major issue at the time because some people weren’t taking responsibility for them. What was happening was the timers often didn’t work, so I made a light sensor timer that

would only work during daylight hours. It meant the gas guns only came on at daylight and when off at sunset. Initially I made six for ourselves, but they became so popular that I ended up making 200 for other growers.”

Some of the originals have been donated to the Marlborough Museum’s Uncorked Wine Exhibition, which is due to open early next year.

John didn’t stop at the gas cannons; he also began looking carefully at other machinery within the vineyard that could be improved.

“We used choppers for frost protection back then, but we never had any idea what the air temperature was up where the choppers were operating. So I made a thermometer attached to a helium balloon that we could release into the air. It was able to transmit the temperature down to the person on the ground. It meant we could direct choppers to where we needed them.

Then after that I made a strobe light thermometer that sat at canopy height, which would set off an alarm when the temperature reached a certain low.” Later he developed a self adhesive labeller that could cope with 1000 cases a day. Later still he went on to become a vital player in the development of the Screwcap Initiative. Fiercely adamant that corks weren’t the way of the future, he along with John Belsham, John Forrest and Ross Lawson helped change the closure face of New Zealand wine forever. It is one of the areas he is most proud of, and still has the original machinery that he experimented with, to test the pressure of caps, in his shed. With 150 years of history behind him,

in terms of the land he has turned into a vineyard, John is very much a Marlburian at heart. But over the years he has seen changes – some for the good, but not all.

“I think money has to be spent on developing new markets. When I was in London recently I saw quantities of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc selling for £4.99. What does that do to the market? Does it damage it? I guess it could start people drinking our wines, but it does create a certain amount of hardship within the market for people like us who are selling quality wines at far higher prices.

“There are so many changes out there. Just look at the growth. I was always told that good grapes



*Where John is most home, in his shed surrounded by his engineering tools.*

grow where apples grew well. I still believe that's the case. So we have to look at where the new plantings are going.

“It's immensely important to protect the Marlborough name. It is perceived very highly, and it now an internationally recognised region. Marlborough provides the doorway for so many individuals and companies – but maybe the time has come for rules and regulations to come in, because it seems some people can't operate without them. And it only takes one bad grape to spoil the lot.” ®

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