

*The Wine Exhibition*. Marlborough Museum, Brayshaw Park, 26 Arthur Baker Place, Blenheim. Reviewed on 23 July, 1 and 15 August 2009. [<http://www.marlboroughmuseum.org.nz/museum/index.mvc?ArticleID=47>]

IN COMMON WITH MANY PROVINCIAL MUSEUMS in New Zealand, the Marlborough Museum has its origin in a centennial. Provincial celebrations in 1959 provided the impetus for the recently formed Marlborough Historical Society to amass significant items of local heritage, alongside a comprehensive archive of photographs and ephemera. Not surprisingly, the content of Brayshaw Museum Park, which opened in 1968, emphasized its colonial past. In the late twentieth century, when increasing professionalism changed how many provincial museums interpreted their collections, the Marlborough institution remained under the sway of an impressive number of knowledgeable volunteers, many from local families. Little changed until 2006 when the museum appointed its first professional director, the energetic Steve Austin who, navigating constrained budgets and cultural sensitivities, set about updating the museum.

Dramatic demographic change in the Marlborough area, which has seen 70% of its population arrive in the last 10 years, has contributed to palpable tensions in the district between some sections of Old and New Marlborough. Old Marlborough is frequently ambivalent about the dominance of wine in the district and uncomfortable with the interlopers, especially vineyard workers from remote Pacific Islands and transients camping in their vans in suburban car parks between pruning jobs. *The Wine Exhibition*, the newly branded museum's permanent exhibition, set out to reflect the New Marlborough while honouring its past. It has shifted the museum's focus from its Victorian pioneering heritage to include more recent history.

Led by Austin and project managed by Virginia Watson, *The Wine Exhibition* was curated by science researcher Dr Adam Friend. He offers visitors an insight into viticultural technology and history that complements the more familiar museum territory of social history. The display is organized in sections, including changing land use, cultivars and cultivation, pest control, bottling and production, consumption and temperance, and the jewel in Marlborough's crown, the rise of sauvignon blanc.

On entering the exhibition — through a heavy cellar door — you find yourself among displays of sponsors' products. These include Auntsfield, which boasts a restored wine cellar from the 1870s on its estate; Montana New Zealand, whose massive buy-up of Marlborough farms in 1973 kick-started the local industry; and other early winemakers, such as Hunter's Wines. The museum has secured over 30 wine sponsors, categorized as 'cellar selection', 'premium business reserve' and 'limited edition', for 20 years. They are crucial to this exhibition, since their bottled archives make up the majority of exhibits.

Other sponsors are ingeniously acknowledged throughout the exhibition. A set of historic scales illustrates the Bank of New Zealand's story of financial service to the agricultural and wine sector, while painter Derek Borland tells his company's story of providing decorating services to the wine industry. The Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology's oenology courses are introduced through pioneering agronomist Ralph Ballinger's story. Both NMIT's Wine Science Centre and the Marlborough Wine Research Centre stand on Ballinger's former farm. This weaving of sponsor stories with broader local history cleverly asserts the way that the area's arts and industries rely on sponsorship.

The transition from pastoral farming to vine tending is represented by sixth-generation Marlburian farmer John Walsh, while Pai Perano's photographs of international workers at Ormond Nurseries convey some of New Marlborough. Retired librarian Perano was visiting with her mother and mother-in-law on a day I was there. The quiet space meant I could hear her proudly guiding her family through the exhibition, and, as they sat discussing bottles displayed on glass shelves, I pitched in and we shared memories of

evenings drinking early products, such as McWilliams Sauterne, Cold Duck and Villa Maria's Sangria.

With the emphasis on the last 30 years, this is an accessible exhibition; it allows the joy of recognizing something familiar. It also rewards a lingering visit as it is densely layered with quotes, objects, graphic illustrations and text. The brief to the designer, Nelson-based artist Sally Papps, was to 'keep the feel of the old museum'. Facts are baldly stated — 25 million screwcaps used in 2003, land prices increased 679.5% between 1995 and 2005 — while comprehensive information is provided for those wanting more detail about wine processes or issues such as the threat to the soil of arsenic-treated poles. Exhibits and props are intermingled: a steel vat section acts as a spacing mechanism, while a huge synthetic wine bottle doubles as an interactive station. Two old vine roots evoke the transformed landscape and provide a perch for (stuffed) pesky birds. A pruning display contrasts a clunky 1970 method with slim wrapped canes from 2000.

The exhibition's themes are comprehensively interpreted throughout and even extend to helpful phonetic spelling of wine cultivars, but object labels are often brief or absent. Why is the building in W. Forster's glazed painting circled? I suspect it is because it was an historic Marlborough public house. The relative paucity of object information stems from seriously constrained resources available to the museum and, pleasingly, will be attended to in coming months.

Regardless of these shortcomings, the authenticity of the exhibition is striking. The pragmatism of winemakers is demonstrated in items such as a labelling machine cobbled together from a bottling plant conveyor belt and wheel parts from a horse float. Connoisseurship and the art of wine is reflected in beautiful displays of cut glasses and decanters, elegantly shaped and coloured wine bottles affixed with designer labels and fine photographs and films. Modern museums tend to shy away from collecting food and drink on account of the perilous storage issues they present, but the 'grandma's attic' approach that characterized the museum's collecting until 2006 means that this exhibition benefits from a number of bottles of liquor still complete with their contents.

Since opening *The Wine Exhibition* the museum has raised the adult entry fee from \$5.00 to \$10.00. It mostly attracts tourists; locals attend on the five to ten annual free entry days. However, the excellent quality of the experience lingers and word of mouth should play its crucial part in slowly attracting more locals from, hopefully, both Old and New Marlborough.

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*Blenheim*