

Editorial

The Importance of the Grafted Grapevine Standard.

By Tessa Nicholson

Traceability of New Zealand wine is an important marketing tool which should cover every aspect from the vines, through to the bottled product. It is a process that New Zealand Winegrowers has worked hard to develop, through programmes such as Sustainable Winegrowing New Zealand.

But one facet of the traceability is probably not as well known as many of the others, and that is the certified quality of the grapevines themselves.

Back in 2006 NZW established the Grafted Grapevine Standard (GGS) to provide certainty for those purchasing vines, that they were not only certified true to the varietal level, but also the vine physical specifications vines, and the associated management systems and most importantly of all, were free of the devastating Leaf Roll Associated Virus III. The necessity for such a standard became apparent when the virus began showing up in increasing numbers in certain regions.

Working alongside NZW has been the Vine Industry Nursery Association (VINA). For the past five years they have been involved in helping to develop the GGS and Chair Ben Wickham says the long-term benefits of buying certified vines are vital to the on-going reputation of the New Zealand wine industry.

But more importantly it is vital to the future economy of growers and wineries. Leaf Roll Virus can decimate vineyards, particularly those with red varieties. There is no cure, the only remedy is to remove all infected vines and replant, as articles in recent New Zealand WineGrower have explained. Added to that is the impact of Leaf Roll Virus on the quality of wine, which has been well documented.

While new vineyard development has been on the backburner since 2008, many growers and wine companies have chosen to remove surplus varieties and replace them with up and coming varieties. A lot of top-grafting has taken place and more is expected in the near future.

Wickham is concerned though that unless testing of the mother material and budwood is carried out prior to the grafting, there is a risk of virus being spread into the new

vines. Leaf Roll Virus doesn't tend to be obvious in white varieties like Sauvignon Blanc, so if these vines are top grafted with say Pinot Noir or other red varieties, which can be seriously affected by Leaf Roll, the potential for virus spread is high. The only guarantee is that whatever virus the mother material contains, it will be passed onto the grafted vine.

VINA wants to ensure growers are well aware of the GGS standards and how they have been established to help them. Top-grafting may initially be a cheaper option, but unless the mother material and budwood is confirmed as being free of virus, the potential long term cost is high.

“Growers need to be asking questions,” he told me. “Otherwise it might be like buying a Rolls Royce with a Mini motor. It's never going to perform.”

The GGS is an important tool in the New Zealand wine industry's arsenal. The establishment of it by NZW was innovative and forward thinking and all those involved including the five nurseries who have worked hard to gain certification need to be congratulated.