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# FROMM HERE TO ETERNITY

**Paul White meets the pioneering Hätsch Kalberer, one of the two Swiss winemakers behind New Zealand's Fromm Winery, and discovers what makes this Marlborough producer of grand cru quality tick**

Some of the greatest unsung heroes of New Zealand wine are immigrants. While the 19th-century pioneers were primarily British, Spanish, Lebanese, or Dalmatian, the modern industry owes much to 1970s- and '80s-era Austrians, French, and Swiss. Most of these individuals simply kept their heads down and quietly got on with things.

Back when the vast majority of New Zealand's producers were mucking around with sugared-up Müller-Thurgau planted in humid, overly fertile parts of the North Island, it took two Austrians, Danny Schuster and Herman Seifried, to prove that Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Gewurztraminer, and Riesling had huge potential in the cooler climates of the South Island. Similarly, another Austrian, Rudi Bauer, has played a central, behind-the-scenes role in the development of Pinot Noir in Central Otago from its very beginnings.

The common thread here is a traditional European sensibility that intuitively understood that great wine springs from intensively grown grapes matched to suitable terroir. For many years, this approach was viewed suspiciously by a

relatively isolated young industry dominated by Roseworthy College graduates, themselves shaped by an Australian bias toward wine styles created in the cellar. And yet it is highly unlikely that Nelson, Waipara, or Central Otago—indeed, all of New Zealand—would be producing the style or quality of wine it is today if it hadn't been for the influence of Old World immigrants and their strong terroir orientation.

Another figure central to New Zealand's long-term success is Swiss born: Hätsch Kalberer, of Fromm Winery in Marlborough. Despite the fact that Marlborough is the center of industrially made wine in New Zealand, since its inception, Fromm has quietly shown an alternative route to great wine. This wasn't a matter of being contrary; it was more like a default setting destined to run its course. After many years, Fromm is about as close as Marlborough gets to a grand cru level producer. And, although Fromm's reputation was built on Pinot Noir, every variety it offers has been carefully grown and thoughtfully created. Hätsch, as he is popularly known, is central to that story.

All photography courtesy of Fromm Winery



Dry River's Neil McCallum once said that Hätsch was one of the rare winemakers in New Zealand who had done his own thing from the start and had never wavered. I asked Dr McCallum to elaborate. He knew Hätsch as "quiet, self-effacing, and single-minded—completely dedicated to wine. He lives it. He's unswayed by fashion; his wines are all Hätsch." Another close colleague, Escarpment's Larry McKenna, shared similar views: "No one in the NZ wine industry enjoys wine more or is more committed to it than Hätsch. Combine this with his unfailing Swiss attention to detail, in both vineyard and winery, and you know why he is considered the 'winemaker's winemaker' by his peers."

Although Hätsch is generally a man of few words, those he uses are carefully chosen. Years ago I asked his thoughts on what made a Pinot Noir great. His response was along the lines of: Pinot should be "concentrated without being thick." I found that quite profound. In a few words, he not only summarized the great structural borderline between most Old and New World wines, but also slipped in an ironic commentary—whether intended or not—on a gaping intellectual divide. As is often the case with his wine, Hätsch must be taken on many levels.

Experience has taught me that it is often the little, sometimes intangible, details surrounding a winemaker's life that reveal the inner workings of the wines a person creates. The last time Hätsch picked me up at Blenheim Airport, he hauled me back home in his trusty, everyday car—a nicely worn-in 1964 Mercedes 220SE with a steering wheel large enough to have graced a Mississippi steamboat.

We parked near the family's "frighteningly new" 1989 Mercedes estate ("electric windows and all"), which was lined up next to his son Simon's 1987 Audi and, from his birth year, Hätsch's own unfinished weekend project, a 1955 Morris Minor. Hätsch clearly has a deep appreciation of classics: technology, wine, music...

### Escape Hätsch

Hätsch has come a long way. During the height of Cold War paranoia, with thousands of tanks and missiles facing off against each other in central Europe, Hätsch came to the reasonable conclusion that Armageddon might be just around the corner. Fleeing Switzerland for New Zealand in 1982, he eventually found his way into one of the wildest corners of the country (not all that far from where the film *Whale Rider* was shot). It was there, in Gisborne, at Matawhero Wines, that Hätsch began his new career. He returned to Switzerland a few years later to visit his mother. But when he left again, with his wine cellar, she knew he wasn't coming back. Hätsch had staked his claim.

Starting his Matawhero apprenticeship as a cellar rat, Hätsch soon moved to growing and making wine. That relationship lasted close to a decade. Within 1980s-era New Zealand, Matawhero had a strong cult following for what was considered the country's finest Gewurztraminer, alongside other varieties that were stylistically much more European than Kiwi. What I hadn't known was that Hätsch authored many of those wines, including the country's second Syrah in 1990 and some of its earliest Malbecs.

## (veraison)

A serendipitous meeting in the late 1980s between Hätsch and visiting Swiss winemaker Georg Fromm eventually gave birth to Fromm Winery. After bouncing “what if?” scenarios back and forth across the world for a couple of years, Fromm bought land in Marlborough and planted a vineyard in 1992. Hätsch agreed to take on the winemaking duties. And so he and his Maori partner, Lavinia Hiroki, an accomplished vineyard manager in her own right, moved on to Marlborough’s considerably cooler climate.

Georg Fromm is no less progressive a figure than Hätsch. He applied the sustainable practices he had learned in Switzerland to his new vineyard at a time when many of these practices were unknown in New Zealand. The vineyard was close-planted with 4,000–5,000 vines per hectare, while the norm for New Zealand was 1,850 vines/ha. From the early days, the vineyards ran on near-organic principles, with biodynamics introduced in turn. Although Isabel Estate had pioneered close-planting and had proved it could work economically in Marlborough, Fromm took it all to a new level of efficiency and dedication. Eighteen years later, the vineyards speak for themselves.

### Brands and terroir

Fromm’s branding was revamped a few years ago with the splitting of La Strada and Fromm to create stronger divisions between terroir and style. La Strada now places more emphasis on variety than on terroir and is drawn primarily from younger vines. The wines are fresher and fruitier than the terroir-oriented Fromm but with “sufficient drinkability” to serve in restaurants. La Strada is all hand-picked, like the Fromm range, reinforcing its positioning as a parallel brand rather than a second label. Although fruitier than the Fromm range, La Strada is considerably lower-toned than the vast majority of New Zealand wines, and it matures more gracefully than most as well.

The new Fromm brand effectively carries on from the older La Strada Reserve range, which was primarily drawn from the original vineyard planted around the winery in 1992. The range has expanded to draw grapes from three distinct soil types: two single-vineyard wines, Fromm and Clayvin, and a Brancott Valley wine from two adjacent vineyards.

Although Clayvin Vineyard is within the Brancott Valley, it is sited on a north-facing slope, with heavy clay-based soils planted to Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Syrah. The Brancott Valley vineyards sit below, containing a mix of eroded clays over alluvial gravels and producing Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Syrah, and Malbec. The original Fromm Vineyard is quite different again, made up of fine silt over alluvial gravels more typical of the Wairau plains; it is planted to Pinot Noir, Malbec, Syrah, Riesling, Pinot Gris, and Gewurztraminer. Climatically, the Brancott Valley is drier than Fromm Vineyard but with more extremes: higher daytime temperatures in summer and colder nights.

Hätsch observes that, over the “past three vintages, the three vineyards show consistent terroir characters.” Fromm Vineyard, he says, tends to be “more Burgundian and not New Zealand at all, with fewer sweet-fruit aspects.” He

particularly likes the “tarry” ripe tannin quality it delivers to reds. Fromm Pinot Noir is often picked as the “outsider” in blind-tasted lineups of New Zealand wines. Hätsch sees Clayvin as casting red wines with a “richness and generosity” that sits comfortably alongside “softer textures.” Clayvin consistently produces small-berried Pinot Noir with a high skin-to-juice ratio that increases focus and concentration.

In terms of Chardonnay, it is notable that French oak is used entirely for textural reasons; only the Brancott Chardonnay sees any new wood, and even then only 5–10 percent. Hätsch sees Clayvin Chardonnay as being “more minerally. It is richer textured and weightier than Brancott while at the same time exhibiting a more Chablis-like austerity and structure.” When I queried the apparent inconsistency between “richness” and “austerity,” Hätsch replied, “I think richer (or perhaps denser) texture and austerity can go together, particularly with some Grand Cru Chablis, but also with the likes of Ramonet and Leflaive in cooler vintages. Often it’s a function of real concentration, tight structure, uncompromising dryness, and the absence of new-wood sweetness.”

In my experience, it’s rare to find Kiwi winemakers who drink Chardonnay beyond their own regions, let alone discuss the finer points of Burgundy in detail. Of all the Chardonnays produced in New Zealand, Fromm’s relentless minerality and fearless austerity mark them as the most likely not to stick out in a lineup of Burgundies. There’s a lot to be said for having a deeper understanding of what is possible.

### Other ideas

Although Fromm was first set up exclusively for red-wine production, the original eight red varieties have since dwindled to three. Hätsch laments that the global-market collapse of Merlot forced theirs to be planted over to white varieties: “Our Merlot was far more Bordeaux-like than many Cabernet Sauvignons. If it’s grown where Cabernet is challenged, Merlot has its own serious strength and quality.”

Hätsch’s passion for Malbec dates back to 1983 and his Matawhero experience. He sees “wonderfully perfumed” Malbec as delivering “double or triple the concentration of good Beaujolais.” Paradoxically, if it’s taken seriously in a cool climate and the tonnage is kept low, it “delivers extra levels of concentration that isn’t delivered in thicker textures.”

Fromm’s third red grape is Syrah (you can read his comments on the variety in *WFW* 25, p.82). Logically, it would seem somewhat challenged in Marlborough’s cool climate, but Hätsch argues that Marlborough is “almost too good for Pinot Noir. Syrah takes the whole season—provided you moderate crops—and [it requires] lots of attention to get there, but you could argue that it is perfectly suited to Marlborough’s environment, too.”

Asked to comment on Rhône Syrah styles, he replied, “I used to have a strong Rhône section in my private cellar. I did like Syrah a lot, and the price was fair, too, even for the great Guigal wines of the ’80s. But prices went up,

Hätsch Kalberer (top right) with scenes of Fromm vineyards and winery



## (veraison)

everyone seemed to bring out a high-priced Parker monster with bigger, sweeter, darker fruit, and I realized that I enjoyed the subtlety of great Bordeaux (not Michel Rolland) a lot more. There is still a lot of Rhône Syrah I like but, more often, the honest, entry-level wines of traditional producers. I had Olivier Clape from Cornas here for vintage this year, and I do like their authentic style."

A few months back, I surveyed Kiwi Syrah producers for their views on Rhône styles. Only a few could name any producers, and of those, none seemed aware of the radical changes in Rhône style after the 1980s, where monsters now rule. To me, the fact that Hätsch had an historical awareness of what has been lost in the Rhône over time speaks volumes about what his Syrahs aim to achieve now. Having tasted all Fromm's Syrahs back to 1996, I would say that each one accurately represents the vintage that created it and is completely satisfying in its own right.

Although Fromm Winery started off as a "red only" winery, it has steadily taken on white varieties as the mood struck. "We always liked Chardonnay, so that was the first white grape we tried to secure a good supply for," says Hätsch. Then came Gewurztraminer, planted in 1997, "more because we liked it than as a strategic business decision." Next was Riesling, inspired by Daniel Vollenweider (a former Mosel Young Winemaker of the Year), who made the first three while visiting in 1998. Pinot Gris and Sauvignon are more recent additions, but Fromm is notable for not having built its business around the latter, Marlborough's forte.

Hätsch says he was fortunate that market pressure never "forced the issue to a point that I would have had to make a wine I couldn't drink, and none of the owners wanted to go down the cash-flow track to produce a green, unripe fashion beverage we could not stand behind. Thankfully, having missed that 'opportunity,' we can make something along the lines of a ripe dry Riesling but with Sauvignon Blanc, which has texture and some elegance and may benefit from maturing in old barrels." Hätsch admires Austria's South Styrian Sauvignons, and his "light, fresh, crisp" rendition tips in that direction—a million miles away philosophically from the cookie-cutter styles that dominate Marlborough today. Who says being fashionably late doesn't have its benefits?

Over time, Hätsch has come to take Riesling very seriously, too. Initially focused on a dry style, it took Daniel Vollenweider to broaden Fromm's portfolio to include more traditional, lower-alcohol, sweeter styles: Spätlese, Auslese, Beerenauslese, and even Trockenbeerenauslese when the vintage suited. These are easily among the most interesting Rieslings made in New Zealand. Unfortunately, they are made in small quantities and mostly drunk up locally.

Hätsch's dry style aims for varietal purity, purposefully avoiding any botrytis. Although he "respects Grosset and Aussie Riesling styles," they're not really to his taste; for his palate, they often hang on what he calls a "fragile balance." He prefers this style to be "tight and crisp," enjoying its "acidity" and finding "a touch of residual sugar enhances the flavor of Riesling." The wines are still perceptibly dry, just not relentlessly so.

Fromm's Spätlese, hovering around 7% ABV, has an avid following in New Zealand; he once sold more than 250 bottles of it in a single day. The 2008 vintage is stunningly pure and botrytis-free: steely and floral, mouth-wateringly succulent, and not the least bit cloying. Leaning more in the direction of a Kabinett style, with perfect acid-to-sweetness balance, it should keep well for decades. Fromm's Auslese hovers around the same alcohol levels, with upward of 80–90g of residual sugar per liter. The 2001 shows impeccable acid balance and fruit depth, obviously sweet, but not cloying. Beerenauslese (180–270g/l RS) and Trockenbeerenauslese (360g/l RS) are produced more rarely, when fruit presents itself. They are intense, ultra-pure wines with superb acid balance, and they finish far drier than they are.

Few realize that Hätsch had a hand in many of the legendary early Matawhero Gewurztraminers. Fromm's current style follows an Alsace Vendange Tardive approach intent on "concentration but with lightness [and] elegance." The 2008 Gewurztraminer I tried (12% ABV with 50–60g/l RS) was a dazzling wine: with delicately pure varietal aromas, it was smooth, finely structured, and refreshing. The Pinot Gris, when it's in full production, will aim for a similar style.

### Tasting notes

As I said earlier, it's often all the interesting stuff surrounding the winemaker that somehow finds its way into the wine. One of Hätsch's other great passions is opera, so I asked him who his favorite performer was. He said he admired Maria Callas, recalling a comment made by Noël Ramonet: "truly great wines are never perfect." As for operatic composers, he "prefers the tension and passion of Verdi and Puccini to Mozart," whom he compared to a "perfectly crafted and well-balanced New World Chardonnay with 2g/l of residual sugar." It was a game he clearly enjoyed playing with me.

While most people's knowledge of opera comes from ads during the soccer World Cup or for washing powder, real opera lovers have an attention span of three to four hours. And they often have an encyclopedic knowledge of different performances going back almost a century. That sort of intense focus and breadth of knowledge can come in handy when making wine to stand the test of time. ■

#### CONTACT INFORMATION & PRICES FOR RECENT VINTAGES

La Strada Sauvignon Blanc

Fromm Clayvin Vineyard Chardonnay

La Strada Pinot Noir

Fromm Brancott Valley Pinot Noir

Fromm Clayvin Vineyard Pinot Noir

Fromm Fromm Vineyard Pinot Noir

Fromm Fromm Vineyard Syrah

Fromm La Strada Reserve Malbec

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## FROMM'S FINEST WINES

**La Strada 2008 Sauvignon Blanc (Brancott Vineyard)**

Aromas lead with delicate aloe vera florals and an undercurrent of minerality, with flavors leaning toward subtle, mineral-infused, green-apple and ripe-grapefruit characters. This is a light and refreshing Sauvignon style, with finely balanced acidity. (12.5% ABV) **15.5**

**La Strada 2007 Chardonnay (Brancott and Clayvin Vineyards)**

An unoaked style fermented on the previous year's lees from Fromm range for added complexity. Earthy, oaty aromatics and a complex minerality pervade both nose and palate. Again, fine acidity perfectly balances against textures and fruit: light, fresh, unbusy, but completely satisfying. (13.5% ABV) **16.5**

**Fromm 2006 Clayvin Vineyard Chardonnay**

Amazingly, no intrusive alcohol notes on the nose or finish. A complex mix of tarragon, oregano, chalk, vanilla, and cashew characters pervade aromas and palate. Although initially rich, creamy, and mouth-filling, this tapers off to a finely oiled texture kept in check by crisply tart, apple-like acidity. Very long, perfectly balanced, and still very young. (14.5% ABV) **18.5**

**La Strada 1999 Reserve Chardonnay (Clayvin Vineyard)**

Leading with malty, minerally, chalky aromas that persist throughout the palate. Textures are condensed, savory, and austere, demonstrating a restrained power and elegance rarely seen in Australasian Chardonnay. It could stand in for Ramonet any day. Although it's ten years old, there is not a hint of oxidation on this bottle. (14.5% ABV) **18**

**La Strada 2007 Pinot Noir**

Complex aromatics of dried herbs and spices accompany sweetly ripe Pinot fruit. Good length, and a touch of wood on the finish. A lovely, nicely fruited wine with great promise. (14% ABV) **16.5**

**Fromm 2006 Brancott Vineyard Pinot Noir**

A nice mix of dried- and fresh-herb characters with a sweet, sun-dried tomato baseline. On airing, it develops cinnamon and gamey, savory, sulfide-rich aromas. Densely fruited, showing muscle as well as elegance and well-focused fruit on the finish. Like modernist architecture, the wine has a transparency that displays its structural elements within. (13.5% ABV) **17.5**

**Fromm 2006 Clayvin Vineyard Pinot Noir**

This shows more minerality than Brancott, with subtler fruit characters underscored by milk-chocolate notes (associated with this vineyard, not barrel toast). While it shares Brancott's dried-herb high tones, it seems softer, silkier, more integrated, and prettier on the palate. Seductively long and delicately fruited throughout, this was clearly built to last, with ultra-fine tannins extending well into the finish. Expect further evolution over time. (14% ABV) **19**

**Fromm 2006 Fromm Vineyard Pinot Noir**

Pronounced aromatics mix dried tarragon with fruitier red-fruit notes. In the mouth, it's full, rich, and velvety, with these textures chased by a restrained tart juiciness... Then, suddenly, strong tannins kick in very late on the finish. It feels broader, richer, and more multilayered compared to Clayvin's more feline linearity. (13.5% ABV) **18.5**

**La Strada 2000 Pinot Noir (Fromm Vineyard)**

From a cool, low-yield vintage, this is still relatively shy and tight. Dried herb (tarragon, oregano) and well-focused cherry flavors emerge with airing. Expansive on the palate, it finishes with tight,

tart, pure cherry juice. Showing excellent length and a fine but firm structural balance. Initially subtle, it grows and evolves in the mouth. Just hitting its stride, this still has plenty of years left to go. (14% ABV) **18.5**

**La Strada 2000 Clayvin Vineyard Pinot Noir**

Comparatively funkier, smokier than the Fromm Vineyard, this shows some roasted tarry aromas and red-currant flavors. Given its comparatively savory non-fruity aromatics, it's surprising how intensely focused the fruit is in the mouth, with an equally surprising succulence through the finish. (14% ABV) **17.5**

**La Strada 1996 Pinot Noir 1996 (Clayvin Vineyard)**

There is a strong temporal aspect to this wine, which takes time to unfold in the glass. Closed, forest-floor aromas develop into intense tar, dried black fruit, and prune scents. Initially hard and grippy in the mouth, it fleshes out on the palate, filling with dried black-cherry and cranberry flavors, then carries through a pleasingly tart finish. The wine grows in stature by the minute. Darkly flavored, dense, and tarry, this is a broodingly complex, masculine style of Pinot. (13.5% ABV) **19**

**Fromm 2004 La Strada Reserve Malbec (Fromm Vineyard)**

Although showing ample spice, violet, and black-plum aromas, accompanying berry and tar flavors, this Malbec also offers an unusual degree of linearity, elegance, and refinement. (13.5% ABV) **17**

**Fromm 2001 La Strada Reserve Malbec (Fromm Vineyard)**

A more forward style, with a mix of tarriness and tertiary fruits developing alongside violet and aniseed florals. It's still a big, chunky, happy wine, with plenty of vibrant fruitiness on the finish. (14% ABV) **16**

**Fromm 1998 La Strada Reserve Malbec (Fromm Vineyard)**

It's startling how young and fresh this nose is: crammed with dense, purely fruited, crushed-blackberry aromas lifted by violet-like perfume. Although laden with fruit, the palate isn't heavy or thick. Although varietally correct, Malbec's finely powered, mid-palate tannins normally tend to limit length—but not here. This is about as good as Malbec ever gets. Considering its tremendous fruit and structure, is it even close to reaching its half-life yet? (14% ABV) **18.5**

*The following wines were previously reviewed in WFW 25*

**Fromm 2005 Fromm Vineyard Syrah**

Marked by an intense mix of black/red fruits, dried-herb florals, cracked black-pepper aromatics, and tartly balanced raspberry-coulis flavors, this wine shows terrific concentration, finesse, length, and a superb, melt-away finish. (ABV 13.5%) **18.5**

**La Strada 1996 Reserve Syrah (Fromm Vineyard)**

Savory, white-pepper, mineral, tart raspberry characters infuse both nose and palate. A very tightly focused, condensed, linear style, with incredible persistence. Remarkably young, so expect at least another decade of development. (ABV 12.5%) **17.5**

**La Strada 1999 Reserve Syrah (Fromm Vineyard)**

Remarkably purple for a ten-year-old wine. A complex cinnamon and sarsaparilla spiciness, cracked-pepper, tar, and dried black-fruit aromas are echoed by similar flavors and delivered through velvety textures. The wine shows flawless back-palate concentration, supportive acidity, and firm tannins, and there is tremendous fruit persistence on the finish. Complete and satisfying now. (13%) **18.5**