it’s in the stars

A CALIFORNIAN COUPLE LEAPT OFF THE CORPORATE TREADMILL, BOUGHT SEVERAL BLOCKS OF LAND ON WAIHEKE ISLAND AND LET DESTINY TAKE ITS COURSE.

WORDS LYN BARNES
PHOTOGRAPHS MINKA FIRTH
Mike still receives royalties from the book he co-wrote, Five Frogs on a Log: A CEO’s Field Guide to Accelerating the Transition in Mergers, Acquisitions And Gut Wrenching Change. It’s in its sixth edition and has been translated into five languages. However, the acquisition of the Waiheke property was fraught with more challenges than most of the businesses he had been involved in. “Instead of buying just one block to retire on,” Mike says “it got completely out of control” and they ended up buying 18 hectares. Today the north-facing six-hectare amphitheatre-shaped vineyard is planted with 15,000 manicured vines. Much of its shelter comes from steep ridges and a dense patch of native bush. The Spratts bought at the right time. Land prices on Waiheke have nearly quadrupled since 2000 and back then the Kiwi dollar was worth US$1 to 50cents. “The combination was in our favour,” admits Mike. “It was meant to be!” Rather than aim for the middle market, the Spratts decided to shoot for the stars and produce top-end wines. “The quality here is on a par with what I’ve always wanted to do,” says Mike. Destiny Bay produces three labels: Magna Praemia with 74 percent cabernet sauvignon and Mystar and Arelous that are also cabernet-heavy but less so. The difference is the balance of other grapes, at present merlot, cabernet franc and malbec. These are not heavy inky-black reds but more a rich magenta. “Elegant and velvety, displaying subtle nuances” is how former television personality and wine writer John Hawkesby describes them. He was particularly impressed by the Magna Praemia. “This is one to watch. It says put me down and I’ll reward you.”

The Spratts say Destiny Bay wines are produced through a meticulous sorting and gentle processing techniques in its evolution. “As is obvious from the meticulously kept winery, the Spratts did their homework and were prepared to pay for the best. They brought in consultants and talked with Stephen White, owner of Stonyridge Vineyard on Waiheke. Stephen makes Larose, an ultra-premium blend of classic Bordeaux grape varieties that Destiny Bay now growing: cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, malbec and petit verdot.

After that, says Mike, the vineyard took on a life of its own. Most of the 1300 cases from the last vintage have been sold offshore to collectors. Only a small amount of each vintage is kept for the New Zealand market. Already Destiny Bay wines are selling at top dollar in several highly rated San Francisco restaurants and in New Zealand it features in reputable establishments such as dine magazine. “Vegetative taint isn’t a flavour we want in our wine,” says Mike. “No green stems or undeveloped berries are left by the time the fruit gets to the crusher, where the top-of-the-line French machine gently splits each berry rather than crushes it. Winemaker Luc Desbonnets believes the meticulous sorting and gentle processing increase the fruit characteristics of the wine and emphasize the purity of the bouquet.”

The inside of the winery is like an A-grade hospital. Everything is new, sparkling and high tech. Each tank is monitored every minute of the day. Luc spent 10 years working and studying in France, where his father was born. Most of that time was in the Loire and Bordeaux. His passion is hand-crafted, high-end reds. “The quality here is on a par with what I’ve always wanted to do,” he says.

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