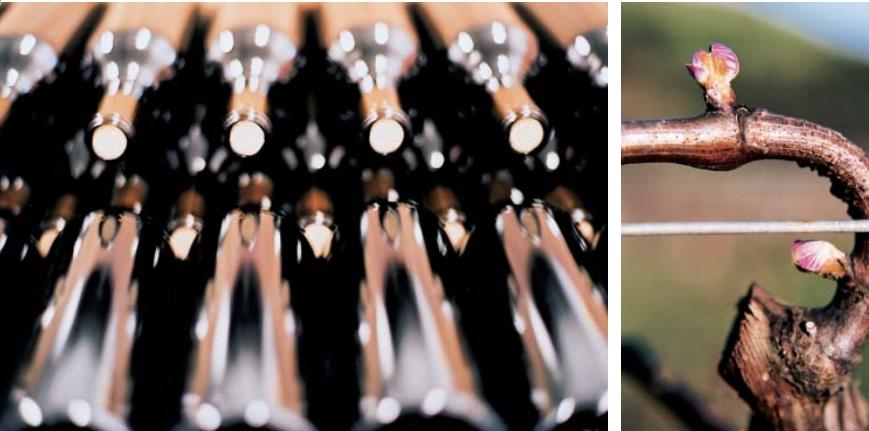


# it's in the stars

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

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LESS THAN A DECADE AGO, Californian Mike Spratt knew New Zealand was “down here somewhere”, but that was it. Today he’s producing wine on Waiheke Island and selling it back to the United States, sometimes at up to US\$390 a bottle. He and wife Ann, along with 35-year-old son Sean, have established their dream winery on the island and are producing serious blended reds, mainly for wine collectors.

A four-week holiday in New Zealand in 1998, their first vacation in 30 years, had them sold on the country. “New Zealand was such a joy,” says Mike. “We were infatuated with the country. It had elements of our childhood but with all the mod cons – like the 1950s with the Internet.” On the flight home, Mike and Ann planned their next trip. Second time round they toured the country, looking for land. They say Destiny Bay, which was then known as Rocky Bay, found them. The day in 2000 when they returned to New Zealand to live, they planted their first vines.

Mike had worked as a consultant for companies such as PricewaterhouseCoopers, specializing in corporate mergers and acquisitions. Born in Iowa, he is the son of a professor of art and loves to collect art. Ann is from a military family. The couple went to the same high school but only met at college. They married young and completed their degrees – Mike’s in psychology and Ann’s in microbiology. Son Sean, who is now general manager of Destiny Bay Wines, was born early in their marriage. “Then it was nose to the grindstone for 30 years ... I reached 50 and thought I was going to die in the saddle if I didn’t make a change.”

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 US45 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. Their inspiration came from one red wine, Monte Bello, that Mike describes as “one of the top cabernet blends in the world”. It’s produced by their good friends at Ridge Vineyard in California. Destiny Bay has adopted and adapted many of their winemaking 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 is 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 1200 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 by Peter Gordon, Mollies and O’Connell Street Bistro.

Once the Spratts had decided to produce only premium red wine, they knew they had to come up with the packaging to match. An old contact at Saatchi and Saatchi recommended Rob Coats of Coats Design in Auckland. “Rob nailed the concept with the comet image and the world-class packaging,” says Mike. Destiny Bay produces three labels: Magna Praemia with 74 percent cabernet sauvignon and Mystae and Aeolus 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 now 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 teamwork. Four people, including Sean and Ann, work full time in the winery and three in the vineyard. All year the vines are

nurtured, pruned and fussed over. Come vintage and there are likely to be 30-odd workers amongst the vines. Harvesting is all done by hand and each bunch is carefully sorted. Once the grapes are picked and taken back to the winery, they are fed into a machine to separate the fruit from the stems. Next it’s on to a vibrating table and sorting conveyor. “We have 10 people to pick out every grape that’s not perfect,” explains Mike. While some winemakers leave in stems and other material for flavour complexity, they don’t do that here.

“Vegetative taint isn’t a flavour we want in our wine,” he says. “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.

#### WHAT I'M DRINKING

Sean, Ann and Mike: Monte Bello from Ridge Vineyards in the Santa Cruz mountains of California is a favourite – incredibly dense and complex but pure velvet texture on the palate. They also enjoy Stonyridge Larose. Sean recently appreciated the intensity and purity of fruit in a 2005 Peregrine Pinnacle pinot noir.

Luc: Absolute favourite is Chateau du Terre Rotebeouf from St Emilion. Other Right Bank wine that he always enjoys is Chateau Cheval Blanc from Pomerol.