

# Gimblett Gravels red wines: A taste perspective

**Michael Schuster** describes the rapid rise of this New Zealand district, and finds, on the basis of the 2009 and 2010 Annual Selections, that the wines sit comfortably alongside top Bordeaux and Rhône

Location, location, location. Figure this: Gimblett Gravels land was worth \$NZ1,500 a hectare in 1988, but ten times that ten years later; and today, a hectare of developed Gimblett Gravels “real estate” is worth 80 to 100 times what it fetched 25 years ago! A reflection, of course, of the wine-quality potential of the locale. But it was a close-run thing that these deep gravels became a fine-wine terroir at all. Prior to being given approval for the development of viticulture in 1992, it was best known as an inland desert, unsuitable *even* for sheep, home of the regional rubbish tip, and for a “petrolheads” drag strip.

## Soil and climate

The gravels on Hawkes Bay’s Heretaunga plain were laid down by the Ngaruroro River and were exposed when the river changed course after the substantial floods of 1867. About 80 percent of the soil consists of profound layers of shingle, with an admixture of varying proportions of sand and silt. It is thus very free draining and nutrient-poor, both aspects so crucial for non-vigorous vine growth and low-yield quality. The district, a few miles west of Hastings and about 10 miles (16km) from the sea, is one of New Zealand’s warmest vineyard areas, with a temperate maritime climate not dissimilar to that of Bordeaux. It benefits from a cooling midday “sea breeze” in summer, and the grapes benefit at night from the stones’ absorbed daytime warmth.

## Statistics

The area under vine is 800ha (1,976 acres)—the same as Pomerol, and 2.3 percent of New Zealand’s total vineyard area—closely defined by the soil type. According to the New Zealand

Winegrowers Vineyard Register (2013), it is 90 percent red grapes, of which 35 percent are Merlot, 20 percent Syrah, and 15 percent Cabernet Sauvignon. But to put this in context, Cabernet Sauvignon represents 4 percent of New Zealand’s red varieties, Syrah 5 percent, and Merlot 16 percent. Pinot Noir is 70 percent!

## Youth

This is a very young vineyard. The very first red grapes were planted in 1981, the first Syrah in 1982 by Dr Alan Limmer of Stonecroft, but by 1991 there were still only 20ha (50 acres) planted. The planting fury, and price escalation, came after the area’s approval for viticulture in 1992. By 1998, 400ha (1,000 acres) had been planted, and there is now very little undeveloped land.

## Association

The Gimblett Gravels Winegrowers Association was formed in 2001 to promote the district’s red wines. It has instituted two initiatives, which form the basis for this taste perspective. One has been to pit Gimblett reds against first-growth clarets in blind tastings—three so far, and I attended the 2009 London tasting. The other has been to offer to “leading media, trade, and educators” an Annual Selection of 12 wines, chosen by Andrew Caillard MW and starting with the 2008 vintage, to be representative of the vintage in question. This is described by the association as “a unique snapshot of a particular vintage which helps to chart the evolution of Gimblett Gravels red wines on a vintage by vintage basis.”

## Bordeaux blends

At the 2009 London tasting, we had six 2005 Bordeaux first growths and equivalent versus six 2006 Gimblett Gravels Bordeaux blends. Although we had to taste at a canter (12 wines in 35 minutes), I found this an illuminating

and rewarding comparison. Tasting the Gimblett Bordeaux blends blind next to the clarets, the stylistic characteristics were close, and it was not immediately obvious which came from where. I identified the six clarets very much on the basis of their overall completeness, scope, and length, rather than because the Gimblett wines were very different in their expression of Cabernet Sauvignon/Cabernet Franc/Merlot.

But perceptible stylistic differences within an overall similarity? The 2005 clarets mostly had gently earthy, gravelly, mineral impressions of aroma and flavor, and a slightly drier fruit-tannin texture. The 2006 Gimblett had a sweet core fruit, a fine-textured natural fruit tannin, but often a clear, less well-integrated, dry oak-tannin texture and occasionally an alcoholic warmth on the finish: details, but Gimblettness, if you like.

There was practically none of the greenness or herbaceousness of character that would have marked out New Zealand even a decade ago. But what was clear for me was the quality difference in the mid-palate length, the tenacity of flavor in the mouth, and the notable persistence of both fruit and aroma on the finish of the clarets, and the comparative lack of mid-palate density of texture and complexity, followed by finishes that were less persistent, and less resonantly rich in aroma and flavor, of the Gimblett wines. These are often telltales of wines made from younger vines. That said, I thought the performance of the New Zealand wines was all the more remarkable considering that the youngest vines in the clarets were probably 30 years of age, whereas the oldest Gimblett vines were a bare 13! A similar comparison based on 20- to 30-year-old Gimblett vines would surely be much less clear cut in quality terms.

## Syrah

Gimblett Gravels Syrahs seem more distinctly individual expressions of Syrah, by comparison with Syrah elsewhere, than the Cabernet/Merlot mixes as Bordeaux blends, compared, especially, with Bordeaux. The first thing to say (frequently observed) is that they have nothing in common with Australia’s

traditional Shiraz. I say “traditional” because there is now an increasing number of more Northern Rhône look-alike Shirazes in Australia. The Gimblett Gravels Syrahs are not “Northern Rhône,” but it is a good reference point because there are many

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similarities, and the Northern Rhône itself encompasses many different Syrah styles and quality levels.

I first noticed New Zealand Syrah (and its potential) in 1996 when tasting Stonecroft Syrahs with Alan Limmer, and Te Mata Bullnose Syrahs with Peter Cowley. In both cases, the vintages were 1992, 1993 (both very cool years), 1995, and 1996. In all of these, I noted three consistent, standout characteristics: the pronounced pepperiness (black or white, depending) that indicates a cooler-climate expression of Syrah (typical of much of the Northern Rhône); a distinctly floral (violets, roses), fragrant perfume on nose and palate; plus a particular sweetness of fruit, even if that fruit was “red.” And if the cool-year acidity was occasionally a little edgy in these vintages, the alcohols were moderate, tannin textures supple, sometimes silky, the wines transparent and graceful. My immediate comparison was with the fragrance and delicacy of fine Côte-Rôtie. I tasted a different benchmark with Neil Culley at the end of 1998. Here 1998 Babich Gimblett Road Syrah had the pepper and the fruit sweetness, but there was also a distinctive succulence and richness (the 1998 vintage, yes), less fine than the Stonecroft and Bullnose, more young-vine lesser Cornas? Generically these turned out to be reliable early indicators.

Today’s well-made Gimblett Syrahs echo those early leitmotifs of pepper, perfume, and sweet core fruit, within overall proportions that are elegant and refined. A recent tasting with John Hancock also illustrated qualities and

styles that are usefully defined by the Northern Rhône; the Trinity Hill Gimblett Gravels Syrah is good to top Crozes-Hermitage qualitatively, with a sweeter core fruit and in a more refined register. A vertical tasting of this wine, back to 2005, illustrated how well the wine ages and how well the grape copes with extremes of vintage variation here: black-fruit ripeness, generosity, opulence in 2009 and 2010; a lighter but delicious, gently juicy red fruit in 2011 and 2012. And at a different extreme of quality and style, again a new benchmark for me, the 2010 Trinity Hill Gimblett Gravels Homage Syrah: black pepper, sweet fruit, a beautiful texture, with all the richness, complexity, and class of fine Hermitage. There are many (but not enough!) others.

## A Gimblett red style, then?

In the best wines—and that indicates the potential—there are early seductive bouquets, a sweetness of core fruit, a lovely natural freshness, an obviously fine natural fruit tannin (where the wines are not overextracted or overoaked), mineral rather than earthy aromas, an alcohol sweet spot perhaps more quaff-comfortable at 13.5% than 14.5%. An overall elegance, freshness, restraint, and, in the top wines, a clear sense of class.

## Vintages... and oak

There is not the space here to consider the vintages in detail (which can be found on [gimblettgravels.com](http://gimblettgravels.com)), but 2010 and 2009 were both very fine for Gimblett reds. 2010 was cooler and seems to have produced exceptional Syrahs alongside very fine Bordeaux blends. The grapes in 2009 were clearly particularly ripe, very much in the black-fruit and plum spectrum, and the Bordeaux blends especially are deliciously showy and seductive, whereas the Syrahs (in the Annual Selection anyway) were less convincing than in 2010. In both vintages, the wood integration seemed better than in 2008. It is one area where (as in much of the wine world!) there is progress to be made. The proportion of new wood (always French in the wines noted here) and time in barrel are often not helpful explanations for excess astringency, because so much depends on the quality and grain of the wood as well as on the constitution of the wine.



All photography courtesy of Gimblett Gravels Association

Left: A handful of well-draining, nutrient-poor Gimblett Gravels soil, of shingle, sand, and silt

**Summary**

What is already clear is that in terms of absolute quality, the best-made Gimblett Gravels reds, especially from recent fine vintages, sit very comfortably next to their top-drawer French counterparts. Take Craggy Range The Quarry, Sacred Hill Helmsman, and Trinity Hill Homage, to name (invidiously) but a trio.

But we have to remind ourselves of the very limited availability of these wines. There are about 720ha (1,780 acres) of Gimblett Gravels red wine: Château Lafite alone is 112ha (278 acres)! It is a sad fact that the majority of Gimblett reds are produced in tiny quantities, mostly in hundreds of cases. If the top Northern Rhône are also rare, claret cases are mostly numbered in the many thousands. But the Gimblett reds are worth ferreting out and laying down. None of these wines has a proven long-term track record in bottle yet, but the track record of a few of New Zealand's older-generation reds (we have recently had 1994, 1995, and 1998 Esk Valley The Terraces at home) suggests they will age with grace and beauty.

Prices have risen for these wines, but given their relative quality, the top Gimblett Gravels Bordeaux blends and Syrahs remain good value for money, as do many of the much less expensive, and deliciously drinkable, bottles. Go, seek!

**2010 GIMBLETT GRAVELS ANNUAL SELECTION (TASTED AUGUST 2013)**

**RED BLENDS / BORDEAUX VARIETALS**

**2010 Villa Maria Reserve Merlot**

(81% Merlot; 14% ABV)

Showy, sweet, cassis-ripe fruit to smell, very come-hither! An abundant, fresh, and sweetly ripe fruit within a light, still slightly oak-dry tannin; nice length to taste and to finish. An excellent expression of Merlot—accessible now, even better in a couple of years. 2014–20+. | 16

**2010 Babich Irongate**

(one third each of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc; 13 months in 40% new wood; 13% ABV)

Cedary nose with a touch of oak; light, supple, just a touch of tannin; ripe, fresh, easy, and attractive Bordeaux blend, modest complexity, and length, but it's not expensive either. Lovely purity of fruit: a juicy, attractive wine. Now to 2016+. | 15

**2010 Mission Estate Jewelstone**

(81% Merlot, 11% Cabernet Franc, 8% Syrah; 18 months in 50% new wood; 14.5% ABV)

Lightly cedary, sweet-fruited nose, an attractive early bouquet; supple, fresh, elegant wine with a very gentle tannin; ripe, restrained, stylish, sweet-cored Merlot fruit, with a gentle complexity, fine length to taste and a lightly aromatic to finish. Already a delicious, harmonious drink, though slight wood-dry texture suggests a couple more years would be rewarded. Now to 2020. | 16

**2010 Sacred Hill Brokenstone**

(61% Merlot, 13% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13% Syrah, 13% Cabernet Franc; 16 months in 40% new wood; 14% ABV)

Ripe, blackberry Merlot bouquet; fresh, elegant, finely tannic, very nicely balanced wine with a crisply juicy core fruit, a nice aromatic complexity, and excellent, gently aromatic length. Fine, complete, beautifully delineated. Perhaps slightly "international" in style? But none the worse for that. Attractive now, but with such freshness, there is no hurry! Now to 2022+. | 16.5

**2010 Newton Forest Cornerstone**

(63% Merlot, 26% Cabernet Sauvignon, 11% Malbec; 21 months in 30% new wood; 14% ABV)

Sweet, fragrant bouquet, blueberry and violet-scented; nicely balanced, fresh, ripe, pure-fruited wine, a touch wood-dry (for my taste), with modest complexity and length and just a touch of alcohol warmth on the finish. Perhaps a little overwooded for the available fruit and class, but this is still a good glass. Now to 2018+. | 15.5

**2010 Esk Valley Winemakers Reserve**

(73% Merlot, 14% Malbec, 13% Cabernet Sauvignon; 18 months in 50% new wood; 13.5% ABV)

Lovely, early, blueberry-sweet bouquet; delicious wine with a good fruit core, fresh acidity, and very fine dry tannin; crisply sweet, ripe, and juicy, gently complex, long, and graceful; still a touch wood-dry, but I expect this will integrate given time. 2015–25. | 16.5

**2010 Babich The Patriarch**

(64% Cabernet Sauvignon, 23% Merlot, 13% Malbec; 13 months in 40% new wood; 13% ABV)

Restrained, ripe, cedary nose with the merest hint of leafiness; finely tannic, elegant wine, long and firm and fine, with the aromatic complexity and definition of quality Cabernet Sauvignon very clear to taste; long across the palate, with both flesh and finesse, close-grained and with excellent length. A classy, complete Cabernet Sauvignon-based blend. Needs time. Should be very rewarding. 2018–30. | 17+

**2010 Craggy Range Sophia**

(63% Merlot, 27% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot; 18 months in 44% new wood; 13.5% ABV)

A discreet but cedary, fragrant nose, with gently sweet ripe fruit; a crisp, medium-full Sophia, a slightly lighter expression of the brand, but also complex, elegant, compact, and with very nice aromatic length; austere at the moment, and needing 8–10 years probably, but this is a very good, classy, harmonious, long-term wine. 2020–35+. | 17.5

**2010 Sacred Hill Helmsman**

(45% Cabernet Sauvignon, 44% Merlot, 11% Cabernet Franc; 18 months in 55% new wood; 14% ABV)

Closed, cedary nose; close-knit, elegant, finely tannic, and sinewy, long-term wine; taut, complex, aromatic, long, and subtle across the palate, with a lovely concentration of fruit and very fine aromatic length. Tight, classy wine, that is full of long-term promise. Needs 10 years. 2020–30+. | 17.5+

**SYRAH**

**2010 Crossroads Winemakers Collection**

(100% Syrah; 14 months in 27% new wood; 14% ABV)

Ripe red fruit and peppery Syrah to smell; finely tannic, moderately concentrated, very nicely balanced wine; sweetly ripe to taste, a subtle pepperiness, gentle complexity, and length. Typical brisk, cooler climate Syrah, with a sweeter core fruit than the Northern Rhône. 2014–23. | 16.5

**2010 Mills Reef Elspeth**

(100% Syrah; 15 months in 63% new wood hogsheads; 14% ABV)

Ripe fruit and marked peppery Syrah to smell; dense, elegantly balanced and finely tannin-textured; long, ripe, peppery, aromatic, a rich, sweet, ripe-fruited, cooler-climate Syrah, with length, complexity, class, and persistence. Very nice indeed. 2015–25. | 17+

**2010 Trinity Hill Homage**

(100% Syrah; 14 months in 90% new wood; 13.5% ABV)

Dense, complex, finely black peppery to smell; rich, crisp, ripe, and with a very fine tannin, long and generous across the palate, very aromatic and subtle to taste, and with great length; complete, refined, and classy Syrah. Beautifully textured, both ample and discreet at once: outstanding long-term wine. This has all the class of a very fine Hermitage. 2020–30+. | 18.5

Right: Gimblett Gravels, where a hectare of vineyard is worth 80–100 times what it was 25 years ago



**2009 GIMBLETT GRAVELS ANNUAL SELECTION (TASTED AUGUST 2012)**

**RED BLENDS / BORDEAUX VARIETALS**

**2009 Montage Wines Alluviale**

Plummy fruit to smell, with a typical Cabernet Franc freshness to it, too; ripe and supple wine of moderate concentration, with a light, fine tannin and a fresh, slightly obtrusive acidity. Easy, attractive, straightforward, ripe-fruited, Merlot-based red, with, nice light length; for relatively early drinking. Now to 2015. | 15+

**2009 Trinity Hill The Gimblett**

Sweet on the nose, new wood still a touch to the fore; fullish wine, fresh, finely tannic; Cabernet structure, nicely judged, clear in the texture here; very nice combination of quite rich, sweetly ripe fruit and gentle tannic sinew, with moderate complexity and good length. Now to 2018. | 16

**2009 Te Awa Cabernet/Merlot**

Fresh, ripe, lightly minerally to smell, a fine nose in prospect; middleweight wine with a lovely balance of ripe fruit to freshness, and a still slightly dry, but fine-textured, delicate tannin; sweet-cored, elegant, quite complex, a fine, gentle aromatic quality, goodish length in the mouth and on the finish. Typical Te Awa elegance and poise: very attractive. Now to 2018. | 16+

**2009 Mills Reef Elspeth Cabernet/Merlot**

Freshly ripe fruit nose (with a hint of herbal); medium-full wine, with a light, dry, fine-textured tannin and fresh acidity; a lovely, juicy Cabernet fruit core, ripe and delicately minerally, long across the palate, with a gentle complexity and a fine persistence. An understated, classy beauty, graceful and delicious. Now to 2018+. | 16.5+

**2009 Babich The Patriarch**

Sweetly ripe, subtly cassis fruit to smell, with a hint of mineral, too; medium-full wine, with a fresh acidity and a finely dry, delicate tannin; elegant, refined, quite aromatically complex (the Cabernet Franc component), long and fine and restrained, a fine, sweet fruit core and excellent fruit persistence. Very nice now, and with 8–10 years in hand. Now to 2020. | 16.5+

**2009 Newton Forrest Cornerstone**

Still relatively closed to smell, a touch of Cabernet austerity, but fine and subtly minerally; rich and firm, with the wood surprisingly present as a drying texture, considering it is only one third new. The wood tannin (quality of the oak?) marks the fruit and dries the wine. Finishes a bit pinched. Not at all sure about this, the texture likely always to be a bit dry. Lacks harmony. 2015–25? | 16?

**2009 Sacred Hill Helmsman**

Fine nose, restrained, ripe fruit, freshness, subtle

minerality; full-bodied, firmly but not coarsely tannic, fresh in acidity; rich, complex, vital wine, sweet-fruited, close-grained, long to taste, youthful and a touch austere at the moment, with a nice complexity of flavor and excellent fruit and aroma length. The Cabernet Franc (one third of the blend) is clear in the aromatic complexity; a little tannin-dry still, so needs 2–3 years. 2015–25. | 17+

**2009 Craggy Range Sophia**

Ripe and plummy and gently minerally to smell; full, fresh, finely tannic middleweight; rich and vital, with freshly ripe fruit, and the Cabernet Sauvignon more obvious in texture and overall presence than the 25 percent would suggest; but a lovely, sweet, ripe fruit here within the firm tannin, and a subtle minerality clear, too; long across the palate, complex and aromatic, and with excellent, scented length. A fine, complete Sophia, a first-rate Gimblett Gravels Bordeaux blend. Leave 3–4 years ideally. 2016–30. | 17.5

**SYRAH**

**2009 Craggy Range Syrah**

Clear, subtle, ripe, black-pepper nose; fresh, vital, lightly tannic lesser Syrah; vivid, juicy fruit, modest complexity, good, light length; very nice of its type and at the price point. Pure, cooler-climate style, riper than the Northern Rhône, but also very clearly not Australian. An excellent expression of the variety. Now to 2016. | 15.5+

**2009 Squawking Magpie Stoned Crow Syrah**

Not at all clear to me what this is: slightly flat, stewed, baked; chewy texture, vivid acidity, awkward wine, not complete, the wood seems very dry, without the fruit to back it up; Syrah acidity without the actual fruit freshness, and relatively brief to finish. Tough, dry, tannic. A rogue bottle? Odd! | NS

**2009 Sacred Hill Deerstalker Syrah**

Black pepper and new oak on the nose; lean and dry, with an oak-tannin texture that is too tough both for my taste and its own good. The combination of both grape tannin and wood tannin dominates the ripe red-berry fruit, rendering it very awkward for the moment. Not at all sure this will age gracefully. | NS

**2009 Trinity Hill Homage Syrah**

Violets and cassis, high-toned sweetness on the nose, seductive and heady; generous, firmly and drily tannic, with a lovely natural acidity; deep and sweetly ripe in flavor, lightly peppery, gently spicy and smoky; oak very discreet, long and subtle to taste, with a long sweet-cored fruit persistence and a touch of alcoholic warmth on the finish. Fine wine. Good now with rich food, better in a couple of years. 2014–25+. | 17.5