



The Block – Tohu Vineyard

Mondo Kopua speaks of turangawaewae in lieu of terroir

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It's a spot you can imagine Mugwi Macdonald standing on in 2000, and deciding this was where Wakatū should plant vines - 220 metres above the sea, 45 minutes from Blenheim and far from all other vineyards.

"From what I gather when they came up here he said, 'this is the place,'" says vineyard manager Mondo Kopua.

Growing grapes at Tohu is hard work, with colder temperatures, lower growing degree days, low yields and risky late harvests. But there's a rich biodiversity, an ethos of land wellness, a duty to whanau, and a sense of home, says Mondo.

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It seems fitting then, that at the Bragato Wine Show awards dinner last month, where Tohu won Champion Sauvignon Blanc

(pg 39), Judge Ben Glover used the concept of turangawaewae to explain the importance of the land. "Turangawaewae – 'our sense of place', of 'where we stand', it is part of our mihi - This is our strength," he said.

Mondo, who also won the award in 2010, says in a traditional sense his turangawaewae is the Ngati Porou east coast of the North Island. "But it can also be a place you feel connected to, with a sense of belonging," he says. "This whenua, the surrounding environment and I, are connected through respective mauri and wairua".

One of the things that draws him to Tohu is Wakatū's ownership by 4,000 descendants of the original Māori land owners of Te Tau Ihu - the Nelson, Tasman and Golden Bay regions. So for him, turangawaewae - which encapsulates place and people - is a better term for Tohu than terroir, with its expression of land and climate alone.

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they have stood and said 'wow this is awesome, we appreciate the work you are doing'"

That work includes building a greater biodiversity at Tohu, where only 72 of the 121 hectares are planted in grapes, leaving bluffs and borders for a variety of plants, including the natives once prolific along this stretch of river. Marlborough daisies cling to rock faces, tussocks spill over edges and manuka clammers down cliff faces.

Mondo says it's a continuing project and a balancing act to ensure plantings don't put the vines at greater frost risk. On some vineyard boundaries he is considering late spring crops that will rise after the frosts have passed, then later be harvested for use in the compost he plans to develop on the vineyard. "Our big aim is to improve the soils on our land through biodiversity," he says.

That ambition means the vineyard is mostly run under organic principles, with insecticide brought in only when pests like the brown beetle threaten entire crops. Mondo says they originally set out to be 100% organic by 2020, but the beetle made that

goal impossible. It is a barrier for a lot of people looking to achieve organic management, he says, "because who is going to risk their crop if you are going to lose it?"

For the past three years, Tohu has been working with PhD student Mauricio González-Chang (pg 32) on natural defences against the beetle, which can devastate a vineyard if not checked. One of Mauricio's projects is to use the mussel shells from Wakatū company Kono Seafoods under the vines, to try to change the beetle's behaviours.

Mondo says the shells were initially laid as a mulch to suppress weeds, reduce herbicide applications and reduce irrigation requirements, while tapping into a natural waste product from the mussel company.

The management of the organically managed blocks is a challenge, and Mondo has found that spring canopy and bud burst have been affected by undervine competition. But he plans to continue to draw on experts and scientists to help deliver on Tohu's "land wellness" goals.

"It is something Wakatū want to get across for all their land. What have you got? What is the present state?"

What are the plans for the future? The biggest aim is we want to improve the soil health of the whenua and everything else will benefit from that."

It's a lot of work on a vineyard that's already considered marginal in terms of its location, yields and risk. Because of its altitude and climate, the vineyard generally offers lower yields, with 10-11 tonnes to the hectare for Sauvignon Blanc and 5-6 tonnes to the

The location also means harvest at Tohu tends to come a week or two after the Wairau Valley, sometimes stretching into the first week of May, which brings the greater risk of rainfall. Growing costs also tend to be a bit higher because of the frost risk and distance to town.

"But we always make a profit, because we tend to command higher prices and when we provide our winemaking team with great fruit then the resulting wines are of exceptional quality," says Mondo. And in years like this one, when the growing season was perfect, the disease pressure was low, the yields were better than normal and the Sauvignon Blanc was deemed the best in the country, this turangawaewae seems like the perfect place.

On a wide blue day, at the edge of a tussock bank, with the river below



Mondo Kopua

hectare for Pinot Noir.

"Accountants we have dealt with in the past have said 'why would you, when you could be in Grovetown or Rapaura, where Sauvignon Blanc could do 16-18 tonnes to the hectare and be good quality, or Pinot Noir could be 8 to 10 tonnes to the hectare, and still be good?'"

and the mountain above, Mondo seems pretty content with life. "The challenges and diversity are what makes it interesting. If this was a rectangular, featureless vineyard, I would probably get bored." ®

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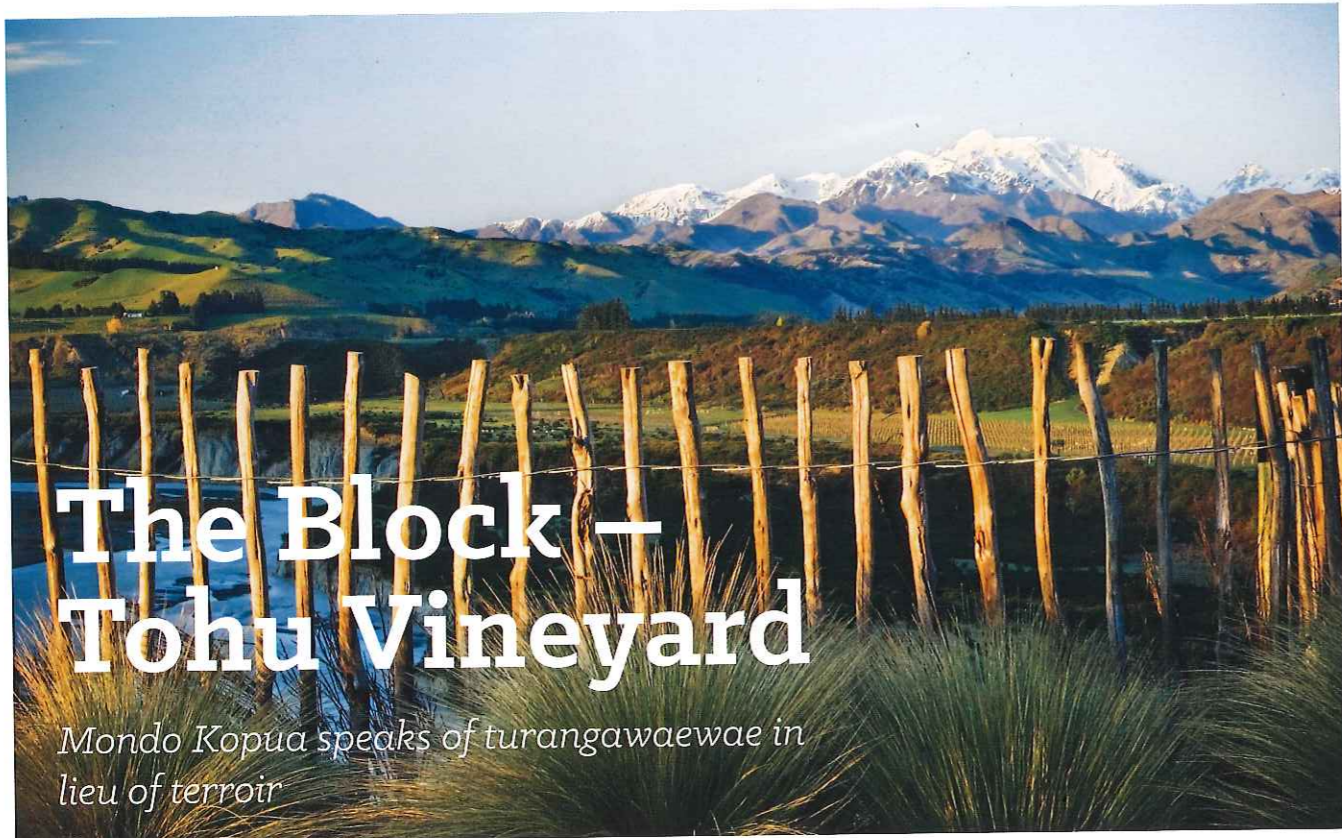
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