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An intense little wine, with overtones of hyperbole



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ONE of the recent trends in the use of language is to convert nouns into verbs, and to turn nouns into adjectival usage.

It's been a word class "free for all" – we can go antiquing in Greytown, go hikoi-ing to Hamilton, become book-clubby types, or we can festival in Martinborough.

The wine domain goes one better than most others when it comes to using nouns in adjectival form and, matched by colourful hyperbole, there are examples galore.

It's not surprising – wine is BIG, with more than 10,000 documented varieties of wine in the world, and new varieties being planted in New Zealand on the trot.

We now have established terroir in New Zealand, and legitimate appellations. We have Gimblett

Gravels. We left facetious terms such as "round wine", "vanilla wine" and "super wine" with Blue Nun and Cold Duck, and now we are neck deep in the very serious business of wine-tasting notes.

Let's look at riesling, described as the ultimate summer wine. The *New Zealand Herald* Viva column

describes Kerpen Riesling Kabinett Mosel-Saar-Ruwer 1999 at \$24 a bottle as "honeyed, toasty and minerally, it has developed mature riesling's keroseney character and is driven by the tension between its gentle sweetness and vibrant

grapefruit acidity".

Not to be outdone, others elsewhere have described this particular vintage as "perfect summer drinking with a long, long, lingering seduction".

But perhaps surprisingly, it is also "moderately fleshy with a delicately tangy backbone". Tempered images of a scraggly mountain goat, perhaps?

The French Rolly Gassman Riesling 2004, on the other hand, has a character in which "masses of restrained fruit flavours produce a minor peacock's tail of floral and spice characters on the finish. It's haunting".

A Palliser Estate Riesling has been described as "intense riesling with Gala apple and lime juice flavours". Curses, you might think, not my favourite apple. Will a Granny Smith or Braeburn ever feature?

Champagne tasters can do better, adjectively. Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs must be quite a drop: "The style is epitomised by subtle stone-fruit and citrus aromas, Marmitey richness, an easy-flowing, lovely, smooth palate, elegant structure and excellent length" (*Cuisine*, November 2008). On the other hand, Vegemite is evident in a Northfield Home Creek Pinot Noir 2007, which is described in the same publication as having "a rich, taste-mosaic of violets, dried herbs, black cherries and Vegemite".

We have no doubt all been tempted during tastings to be mischievous, as I was once during a seriously reverent bout of tasting. "Mmm, artichoke" was my sarcastic response to a Marlborough sav – to which all others in the hallowed circle responded in unanimous agreement "Mmm – yes, artichoke". (Another quip was to be "Mmm, Roundup" but restraint ruled.)

Is it just a bit of fun, then, or is this hyperbolic description a serious part of the cult of wine?

Benjamin Franklin said in 1755 that "When the Wine Enters, out goes the Truth". It is tempting to think that those who write tasting notes such as those cited here are suffering from over-enthusiasm or an overdose of the blessed beverage. (Is wine a beverage? Well, yes, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Despite the term being used more often for hot drinks, it defines wine as "the fermented juice of the grape used as a beverage".)

Writing and reading tasting notes and wine labels can be linguistically entertaining, if not an art form, anywhere in the world, but idioms of orientation and the special New Zealand landscape are encapsulated in names of vineyards such as Mt Difficulty, Escarpment, Dry River, Craggy Range, Stonyridge, Packspur, Bald Hills, Dry Gully and Main Divide, with vintages sourced from plantings at places such as Rocky Knoll, Charcoal Creek and Long Gully.

The imagery and connotations of a challenging, exposed and rugged landscape in these names make us almost as unique as the Marmitey flavours in champagne.

The vineyard monikers Squawking Magpie, Fat Pig, Twilight, Vicarage Lane and Three Pirates just don't do it for me, as a New Zealander. And nor does Vegemite. We might have to skip the Home Creek Pinot.

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■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz