

# Master of Vines



Last year, so they say, was a bad year. It was a time for hunkering down and hiding from the economic storm – not a time for business dreams or grand ventures.

Especially in the wine industry, overcrowded with labels, oversupplied with grapes, awash with wine they couldn't sell.

Yet Kevin Judd decided the time was perfect for him to quit Cloudy Bay, the Marlborough company he'd helped establish and had been winemaker at for 25 years, and set up his own company.

As colleague James Healy puts it: "It is the worst time ever, ever, ever to start a winery right now. No doubt about it. Kevin's probably the only bastard in New Zealand that could do it."

If there were nerves they've long disappeared. Judd's new label, Greywacke,

Kevin Judd, the winemaker who made Cloudy Bay one of the world's most sought-after labels, has moved on after 25 years. Mike White meets the man who makes art from stony soil, in more ways than one.

released its first wine in October to local and international acclaim. One UK importer called it, "arguably the most exciting new sauvignon blanc in a generation", and all 6000 cases were quickly sold.

Remarkably, amid the maelstrom, Judd found time to follow his parallel passion as New Zealand's leading wine industry photographer, producing the lavish, encyclopaedic *The Landscape of New Zealand Wine* by year's end.

New job, new company, new book – not a bad year.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE WHITE AND KEVIN JUDD.



**Above: Kevin Judd with his dog Dixie and cases of his new label Greywacke, which released its first wine in October to acclaim. One UK importer called it “arguably the most exciting new sauvignon blanc in a generation”. All 6000 cases sold quickly.**

It's not the first time Judd has struck out into new territory in disastrous times.

In the mid-eighties, when Cloudy Bay planted its first grapes, the government was paying \$5000 an acre to rip out vines because the industry was saturated with cheap müller-thurgau and hybrids. A quarter of the country's vines were uprooted.

Still in a post-Cold Duck period, the wine industry had yet to become stylish, celebrated or an investment darling, remembers Judd. “There was a general feeling that if you had a special occasion you bought something from overseas. There was no pride in New Zealand wine.”

It was into this landscape that Cloudy Bay's founder, West Australian winemaker David Hohnen, arrived in 1984 with an idea of establishing a vineyard, only to be immediately warned off by accountants. “They effectively said, ‘While you've got the price of your return ticket and the coat's still on your back, you might as well go back to Australia, mate, coz the industry's pretty rooted over here.’”

Hohnen's trip had been sparked by a bottle of sauvignon blanc some visiting New Zealand winemakers had left him the previous year. Struck by its intense fruit flavours, he decided to cross the Tasman.

And it was on this trip that he spotted a man standing aside from his colleagues at

an Auckland wine-show function – a lean, aloof Kevin Judd.

“Most people treat those things as social occasions and piss-ups, but Kevin was getting round tasting his peers' wines and treating it with the respect that tasting needs. And it kind of caught my eye.”

At the time, 25-year-old Judd was a winemaker for Selaks, the Dalmatian family winery in Kumeu, where he was starting to use sauvignon blanc grapes, while refusing to have anything to do with “some horrible sherries” the company also produced.

Born in Britain, Judd had shifted to Australia when he was nine and trained as a winemaker at Adelaide's Roseworthy College. After three years at Selaks, he and wife

Talk to people about Judd and they'll all say he's a man of few words. "I think 'few' is being generous," roars wine writer Keith Stewart.



Kimberley were preparing to return to Australia when Hohnen visited and offered him a job.

Not that there was any certainty involved – there was no land, no grapes, no winery, people were rapidly quitting the industry and Hohnen was back in Australia, hocking everything he had and borrowing \$1 million at 23.5 per cent to fund the venture.

But Judd, who hadn't even visited Marlborough at that stage, had great belief in the province's climate and the sauvignon blanc grapes starting to come from the Wairau Valley.

And he also had great faith in Hohnen, a two-time winner of Australia's most prestigious wine award, the Jimmy Watson Memorial Trophy. They immediately found themselves on the same wine wavelength.

In 1985, they bought 40 tonnes of Marlborough grapes, shipped them to a winery in Gisborne and Judd, still working at Selaks, secretly gave winemaking instructions down the phone.

That first Cloudy Bay vintage, with its full-on fruit flavours, raised eyebrows as people dipped their noses into glasses here and abroad.

Judd shifted to Marlborough that winter and oversaw the construction of the new company's winery and purchase of 150 acres of dry barley and beef land from a local farmer.

"By the time the '86 vintage came around, it was awesome," remembers Hohnen. "We

were on a roll that nobody had ever imagined. I was crapping myself initially, raising that million dollars – it was pretty dangerous.

"But I had confidence in Kevin as a winemaker. He'd made successful wines with very, very average fruit at Selaks. So if we gave him decent fruit from Marlborough, we had every expectation he'd do a very good job – and he sure did."

Hands roughened by 25 years of Marlborough sun, boots scuffed by the province's chapped land, Judd still can't say just why Cloudy Bay became so special, so sought after. By the early nineties, it had become a virtual holy grail for wine aficionados around the world, its success giving the entire New Zealand wine industry exposure and confidence.

Judd puts it down to a good team and persistent striving for a perfect product. "We made sure we were making really good wine every year because there were a lot of shit years back then that made it really tough going. And if it wasn't good enough, it didn't go in the bottle – let someone else put it in their bottle. There was a bit of early Cloudy Bay pinot that wasn't good enough that was sold to the rowing club – Rowers' Red."

Not entering competitions also helped preserve the label's mystique. "There's nothing worse than getting a bronze medal. And the reality is that some really good wines are often overlooked in shows – it's not necessarily the way to find the best wines. And you don't need a gold sticker on your label to tell you you're making good wine."

The company never did any print marketing; it pitched itself at the premium end of the market and sold everything Judd could produce.

"David's vision wasn't to build a little New Zealand company that sold wine in New Zealand – it was to build a company that would make really great wine."

In 1990, Veuve Clicquot, part of international business behemoth Moët Hennessey Louis Vuitton, bought a 70 per cent stake in the company. And gradually things changed as the company expanded. Hohnen sold out, Judd ended up spending more time in the office or on planes, and control started to slide to the company's Australian head office.

Judd goes out of his way not to criticise Cloudy Bay's current management. But it's no secret in Marlborough and wine circles that the company's culture changed, leading

to the departure of key staff. Judd's contribution also seemed to become less valued, the company ignoring how much of its success and brand was tied up with Judd. Despite his founding role and being Cloudy Bay's head winemaker for 25 years, remarkably, you'll find no mention of him on its website.

In late 2008, Judd found himself on a plane to London with former Cloudy Bay colleagues Ivan Sutherland and James Healy, who'd left to establish Dog Point winery.

Judd talked about how he'd turn 50 the next year, that he'd been at Cloudy Bay half his life and that he didn't want to get into a rut. Sutherland and Healy told him they had spare space at their winery and that Sutherland had some grapes available. Judd already had a name, Greywacke, registered in 1993, taken from the sandstone found throughout the province's vineyards.

And so the seeds were sown and, within six months Judd was crushing his new label's first grapes.

The obvious reasons why he shouldn't go out on his own – the economic crisis, wine glut and industry gloom – were put aside, Judd deciding the timing was actually perfect. "I'd seen Cloudy Bay start as one company, seen it evolve slowly into another type of company and eventually become part of a huge international luxury goods company and all the things that come with that. And a number of times I wondered if I'd probably prefer to go back to a quieter, less complicated way of life, more hands on. Because, to be honest, I'd become more remote from twiddling the nuts and bolts than I'd like to have been.

"And for many years I wondered whether I ever would set up my own company but in the end I decided that I should give it a go or live to regret it. Hopefully, I won't live to regret giving it a go."

Talk to people about Judd and they'll all say he's a man of few words.

"I think 'few' is being generous," roars wine writer Keith Stewart. "He's a minimalist, shall we say. Laconic is the best way to describe Kevin – and David Hohnen.

"There's a story that goes around that when David Hohnen asked Kevin to come and work for him it must have been a monosyllabic conversation and how did they ever get round to answering the questions each wanted to ask the other?"

Stewart says Judd's an exceptional winemaker, at the very top of his craft in New

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Zealand and internationally renowned.

The fact he was just the second recipient of the George Fistonich Medal, for outstanding contribution to the New Zealand wine industry, reflects his status.

“He’s a highly respected, highly regarded man,” says Stewart. “He’s straight, he doesn’t bullshit, his honesty is frightening at times – even about his own wine. He’s a terrific guy and everybody has a lot of time for him and you know when he says he’ll do something, he’ll do it.”

The other thing they say about Judd is that he’s methodical, fastidious, someone who pays extraordinary attention to detail.

That’s abundantly evident in his photography, which portrays the country’s wine regions as exceptional landscapes, vertical vines contrasted against horizontal plain, curving hillside and oblique sky.

His father had dabbled in photography and, when Cloudy Bay wanted a label image, Judd fancied himself to come up with something – his photo of Marlborough’s monochromatic Richmond Range becoming the company’s motif. A chance meeting with Mick Rock, who ran the world’s leading wine photo library, saw Judd take his photography more seriously and led to his first book, *The Colour of Wine*, which sold 8000 copies.

His wine industry involvement has allowed access to remote sites, where he’s spent countless dawns and dusks behind tripod and camera waiting for the shot he’d imagined.

*The Landscape of New Zealand Wine* required extraordinary commitment from Judd even after all the photos were taken. Dissatisfied with how they were being reproduced, he bought an expensive scanner, learnt how to use it, and prepared every photo in the book.

“I wanted to control the look of every single image, get it exactly how I wanted it. My idea was for it to be the ultimate souvenir of New

Zealand wine. Something you could pick up and read wherever you are and get a really good picture of the industry and the place. And definitely be timeless.”

If you search for similarities between Judd’s photography and winemaking you can easily find them. They’re disciplines of patience and perfection, bounded by technology but with room for expression and personality.

As Hohnen says of Judd: “There’s this nice mix of being artistic on one side and extraordinarily competitive on the other.

“But he’s never read too much of his own publicity and let his ego get in the way of doing a decent job; he’s down to earth – and there are so many big heads out there in the wine game.”

While Hohnen says Judd’s reputation will ensure inevitable scrutiny of Greywacke’s products, wine writer Michael Cooper says it’s that reputation, along with his undoubted ability, that will see Judd succeed at a time when others are going under.

“He knows what he’s doing, so he can probably go into it with a great amount of confidence. It’s a logical move and, really, I can’t see that he’s put a foot wrong.”

As Judd crunches across the gravel between office and oak barrels, dog Dixie shadowing each footfall, he does so with the reassurance he already has contracts to sell his wine in Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, Singapore, the UK, Australia, Japan and Denmark.

Later this year there’ll be a riesling, pinot gris and late harvest gewürztraminer, followed by a wild sauvignon using natural yeasts, pinot noir and chardonnay in 2011.

Even after 30 years as a winemaker, it’s not paint by numbers for Judd – there are always





**Kevin Judd's photography includes vineyards on the hillsides above the Waingake Valley, near Gisborne (opposite page), and the close monitoring required in the fermentation process (above).**

different directions, fresh fermentations, innovative techniques.

"I aim to make wine not like any other, in that sort of left-field style."

And there's much more of that artisan approach to Greywacke. Sleeves rolled up on a denim shirt, gumboots over jeans, greying hair whipped wild by Marlborough's nor-westers, Judd has no lab assistants or cellar-hands – just his failed farm dog at his side,

and occasional help from James Healy.

"This business will only grow to a point. There's a line at the bottom on the spreadsheet that says, 'Don't go past this point,' because I never want to get into a situation where I've been, where the company gets too big.

"I want to keep it small and personal so I can be responsible for the decisions myself – and not have a marketing manager and HR manager and all that shit." +