

Young Horticulturist of the Year travel report

Viticulture in Europe

Braden Crosby¹

In August 2013 I undertook a three month journey funded in part by the travel grant from winning the 2012 Young Horticulturist of the Year (YHOTY) competition. The goal of this travel was to view viticultural and oenological (winemaking) practices in Europe, primarily in Italy and France. Italy and France are the benchmark by which quality wines are set, so it was a great opportunity to travel around the most important wine regions of these two countries.

During my travels, I visited the Italian winegrowing regions of Tuscany and Veneto, and the French regions of Sancerre, Champagne, Alsace, Côte Rôtie and Burgundy. The focus of these travels was to view a diverse range of viticultural regions, expanding my ideas on viticulture, creating an international network and enjoying the cultural differences and experiences that Europe has to offer.



Fig. 1 A vineyard in the Chianti region of Tuscany, Italy.

Tuscany is well known for its wines made from the dark red Italian grape variety 'Sangiovese'. Here I visited wineries and vineyards in the Chianti (Fig. 1) and Montalcino regions; these visits gave me the opportunity to view warm climate viticultural and winemaking practices, which are based on traditional methods of cultivation. After visiting Tuscany,

I travelled to meet with Dr Laura Mugnai, Associate Professor of Plant Pathology at the University of Florence, where we had a discussion on trunk diseases of grapevines. This meeting provided me with valuable insights into the difficulties that many growers in Europe face in mitigating the devastating effects of these fungal pathogens.

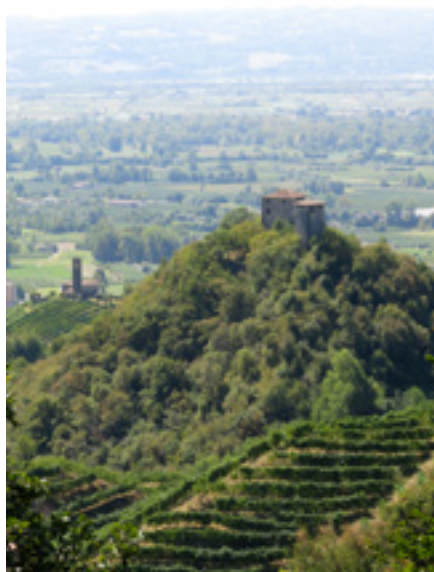


Fig. 2 The hills of Voldobbiadene, northern Italy.

Veneto in northern Italy is a diverse region, specialising in a range of wine styles and grape varieties, from bold reds through to aromatic whites and sparkling wines. There I visited vineyards and wineries in the Friuli and Piave regions. These regions are steeped in tradition, but are also open to experimentation. The focus on Italian varietals and traditional Italian cultivation methods was very interesting to view and broadened my ideas to differing cultivation methods. In the north of the Veneto region I spent some time in the Conegliano and Voldobbiadene areas (Fig. 2) which are most well known for their Prosecco sparkling white wines. The viticulture here was extreme to say

the least, with vines planted on very steep slopes where all work had to be done by hand. The people I visited were very passionate about the region, and open to sharing ideas. I was also fortunate to visit the Della Toffola factory, producers of winery equipment, and the Garbellotto barrel coooperage. The visit to Veneto was a highlight of my travels, and was one of the richest cultural exchanges I could have enjoyed.



Fig. 3 Among one of the vineyards of Champagne, France, with viticulturist Aurelie Prevetaux.

From Italy I flew to France, where the climate, grape varieties and wine styles are closer to what New Zealand models itself on. I visited the Sancerre wine region, home of New Zealand's most prolific grape variety, 'Sauvignon Blanc'. From Sancerre I travelled to the Champagne region, to examine the production of high quality sparkling wine and the vineyards from which they are produced (Fig. 3). What I encountered was a complex system of growers, cooperatives and large Champagne houses, which led to a region with a determined focus. From here I visited Burgundy, the home of

¹ Winery Manager, Borthwick Vineyard, Dakins Rd, RD7 Wairarapa, New Zealand; Braden@borthwick.co.nz

'Pinot Noir' and 'Chardonnay' grape varieties; and Côte Rôtie, the home of Syrah (Shiraz). I gathered insights into grape varieties that are integral to the New Zealand wine industry. Burgundy is extremely focussed on the importance of place, and as a result, the area of origin of the vines is inextricably linked to the value of the wine.



Fig. 4 The harvest team at Meyer-Fonné winery, Alsace, France.

The culmination of my travels ended with an opportunity to work during the harvest period in the world renowned Alsace wine region. Here I spent four weeks at the Meyer-Fonné winery (Fig. 4), one of the most respected wine producers in the region. The Meyer-Fonné family have been growing grapes for five generations and producing wine for three generations. The domaine (vineyard) is a family affair with the current vigneron (grape grower) Félix Meyer (Fig. 5) taking over from his father in the mid-1990s. The Alsace region has many things in common with New Zealand, including its relatively cool, dry climate. The area specialises in aromatic white grape varieties of 'Riesling', 'Pinot Gris', 'Gewürztraminer', Muscat cultivars, and red wines made almost exclusively from 'Pinot Noir'. The key learning outcomes from my experience with the Meyer family were:

- The emphasis placed on soil type and topography in producing quality wines.
- The focus on quality in the vineyard, with organic management and an emphasis on cultural and plant husbandry practices.

It was a rich and rewarding opportunity to work with such a well-established and renowned producer in a great international region, dealing with varieties that are so important to the New Zealand wine industry.



Fig. 5 Crushing 'Pinot Noir' during harvest with Félix Meyer of Domaine Meyer-Fonné.

At the end of my journey, I travelled to Cologne, Germany, to visit the crop science division of Bayer (Fig. 6). As one of the sponsors of the YHOTY competition, Bayer was very supportive in giving me the opportunity to visit their facilities in Germany. The chemical compound bank was significant, while the processing and research facilities were impressive. It was a great insight into the production of agrichemicals used in horticulture.



Fig. 6 Outside the Bayer CropScience headquarters at Monheim, Germany.

The key learning outcomes that I achieved from my travel experiences were both practical and cultural. I came back with a wider understanding of viticulture in the context of its practical, social and cultural aspects. The trip expanded my knowledge of the practices involved in growing grapes which will aid me to think outside the square in the future. I felt culturally enriched after arriving back in New Zealand, and the hospitality and support that I received during my travels exceeded my expectations. This was a once in a lifetime experience that I am very grateful to have received, and my thanks goes to the RNZIH Education Trust and sponsors of the YHOTY competition that made it possible.

Braden Crosby is viticulturist at Borthwick estate in Carterton. He was first place-getter in the 2012 Young Horticulturist of the Year competition.

Braden has a travel blog at <http://bradencrosby.wordpress.com/> and a YouTube video diary at www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Si_CNGSIqg.