

# Winery testament to Rainer's skill

By GEOFF LEWIS

THE boutique Birchwood Lane Vineyard at Tamahere is coming to the end of the 2010 season and stands as a testament to the patience and skill of Rainer Eschenbruch.

A viticultural scientist, Rainer was born in Germany. He came to New Zealand from wine-making in South Africa to work for the government's viticultural research station at Te Kauwhata.

When this closed in the late 1980s, he provided his skills as wine-maker to nearby Rongopai Wines for six years before moving into consulting. During this period he helped to establish vineyards on Waiheke Island and provided expertise nationally and internationally.

Originally from a farming background, Rainer was familiar with the rhythms and practicalities of rural life, and in 1998 established his own vineyard on 4.2ha near Tamahere.

When it comes to growing wine, the Waikato it has its difficulties. "People said to me 'Are you stupid? Can you grow grapes in Hamilton?'"

"But it is as good a place as any. The climate is not as benign as the Hawke's Bay or Nelson. The Waikato is not as hot or dry, but the approach is to choose suitable varieties and get on with it."

Rainer's initial choice was pinot

noir. He then imported viognier (pronounced vee-on-yeh), an ancient variety from the Rhone Valley in France. "Since I imported viognier I have fallen in love with it. It crops biannually and is a fascinating variety in its character and type of wine. It is difficult to grow. I've had a few headaches. It crops biannually and is sensitive to some diseases."

Rainer planted 1ha in 1998 and suffered the heartbreak of a wild hailstorm which destroyed his first crop in five minutes.

He picked himself up and continued introducing the dark red malbec variety which was originally intended as a blended with the pinot noir.

"As it turned out I did not need to blend as you can produce a drinkable wine from each variety."

Over the past 12 years he has also developed his own approach to the growing of vines and is now all organic using only natural fertilisers and compost. He no longer uses pesticides, fungicides or chemical herbicides.

"A lot of New Zealand vineyards are like parks. But to keep the grass and weeds under control you have to spray with chemicals like Roundup. Roundup only kills what is on top, so six weeks later you have to spray again."

The Tamahere soil is a sandy loam to which Rainer adds highly nutritious liquid fish manure and seaweed extract. "The diet for



vines is the same as people. They need proper nutrition."

Birchwood Lane has also taken on the biodynamic system which seeks to create an equilibrium between the potentially counter-productive agents and the environment in which vines grow.

With the assistance of Vilagrad Winery and bottlers Mills Reef at Tauranga, Rainer produces about 2000 bottles a year.

Birchwood Lane Vineyard is one

of a small group of wineries in the Waikato which also include the well-established Vilagrad near Rukuhia, Mystery Creek Wines at Mystery Creek, and Hill Top Wines also near Tamahere.

Birchwood Lane's production is too small to sell through commercial outlets, so Rainer frequents the Hamilton Farmers Market and the surrounding fresh-produce markets in Tamahere, Pirongia and Cambridge.

**ORGANIC AND BIODYNAMIC:** Tamahere vintner Rainer Eschenbruch amid the vines at Birchwood Lane Vineyard.

**OFF TO MARKET:** Land's End 2009 Waikato Rose and Land's End 2009 Waikato Viognier.  
Photos: KATRINA BIELESKI



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