

Kelvin King reports on some wines to watch out for...



John Vickery from Richmond Grove.

Of black cats and weathervanes

A BLACK cat, a fine old foot-bridge, an intricate weathervane and French casks might sound like random clues at the beginning of a mystery story. There's no mystery, however, in how these seemingly diverse factors come together — they are all components of the Richmond Grove Icon Range which replaces the brand's former Silver Series.

And anyone who has visited the interesting Richmond Grove chateau-style winery in the Barossa Valley will be able to fit together the jigsaw pieces, because they are all features of that unique establishment.

The Icon Range is produced there by chief winemaker John Vickery and his team.

Included in the range are Black Cat Shiraz, French Cask Chardonnay, Weathervane Cabernet Merlot and Footbridge Riesling.

Leo Buring, one of Australia's great wine names, transformed what was originally known as the Orange Grove winery under his ownership; he created the chateau design and had plans to add copper spires. This was achieved by Orlando Wyndham about five years ago, including a tower spire and weathervane standing almost eight metres tall, and a turret spire and wind-vane some 4.5 metres in height.

The vanes reflect local wine lore by featuring two symbols traditionally feared by marauding birds: a big black cat on the alert and a large black hawk guarding a plump bunch of riesling grapes.

The French casks are easy to understand, being a mainstay of Richmond Grove winemaking, while the old footbridge straddles the North Para River as it passes through the chateau's parkland.

The story behind each symbol is presented briefly on the front label of each wine — something to talk about at dinner!

Monkey Bay hits the world

NEW Zealand doesn't have a fully-fledged equivalent to [yellow tail], that marvel of wine making and marketing from the Riverina which has been such an enormous sales success in the United States (and elsewhere, including Australia itself).

But Nobile Wine Group, part of the Hardy stable and therefore a cog in the huge Constellation wine wheel, has created a New Zealand brand which is taking Marlborough sauvignon blanc to wider markets thanks to an offbeat name and a cute little green monkey character.

Monkey Bay has expanded of late from the initial sauvignon blanc which wowed the Americans. Three Monkey Bay wines have been launched in New Zealand: a chardonnay (also available in the US now), a cabernet sauvignon and the original sauvignon blanc.

These are definitely not "two buck chucks". Nobile describes them as being "premium-priced and targeted at serious wine drinkers who want to have a bit of fun in their lives". I found the chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon pleasant enough, but the sauvignon blanc really wowed me to the point where I've been buying it regularly at the supermarket...regrettably promotional discounts have not yet been much in evidence.

That there was a place called Monkey Bay came as a surprise. I thought it was a name created for marketing advantage in the US where wines with animal names have prospered. But there is, even though it doesn't appear on some maps. I've even been there, although I didn't know of its name at the time.

The little bay is close to Nobile Wine Group's Rarangi Vineyard on the Marlborough Coast, between Blenheim and Port Underwood. It's part of the much bigger Cloudy Bay, a more familiar name in wine.

Monkey Bay's naming came from an incident in the late 19th Century when a visiting Englishman claimed he had seen a monkey on the beach. The locals pooh-poohed this, suggesting it might have been a possum, but it could have been for real, given that trading ships and whalers (and the area was a whaling base) were known to sometimes carry exotic pets.



Lindauer expands

THE NEW Zealand-made Lindauer range of méthode traditionnelle sparkling wines are big sellers on both sides of the Tasman. The brand took on an extra dimension in 1996 with the introduction of a reserve tier, the original Lindauer Reserve being joined in 2004 by a blanc de blancs style, made predominantly from chardonnay.

Now there is also a Lindauer Reserve Cuvée Riche which, as the name has it, is of a rich and soft style akin to Champagne. A blend of chardonnay and pinot noir, the secret of its appeal lies in the dosage — the addition of a small amount of specially prepared, sweet golden noble sémillon just before the wine is finally sealed for sale.

The Lindauer brand is currently on the market, as a result of the 2005 buyout of the Allied Domecq global liquor giant by Pernod Ricard and Fortune Brands (the parent company of Jim Beam Brands).



Diageo, another giant, had an option to buy Lindauer and other Allied Domecq wine making interests. But this deal fell through. Pernod Ricard is required, as a proviso of the Commerce Commission — New Zealand's equivalent of the ACCC — approval of the Allied Domecq sale to shed Lindauer because it would otherwise hold a dominating position in sparkling wines.