



## REBEL WITH A CAUSE

**JOHN SAKER** meets  
a winemaker who's  
marching to the beat  
of her own drum.

**THIS STORY IS FOR** *Cuisine's* entertainment issue, I tell Julianne Brogden (who likes to be called Julz). So I ask her to imagine there's a big get-together at her place and all the people she loves most are sitting around the table. What's going to land on their plates?

She begins: "Well, I'm a cabernet girl, so..." Let's pause there. Those words demand it. There's nothing surprising about her starting thought being a wine thought—she's a winemaker, after all. It's her reverence for cabernet sauvignon.

In a country where pinot noir is the prevailing red-wine orthodoxy and syrah's adoring flock is steadily

growing, there's a whiff of rebellion, even defiance, in that stance.

She completes her catering musings: "... so I'd go with lamb, herb-encrusted, maybe using a tapenade, served with spuds and crusty baked kale with lemon juice. Just a big rustic cook-up."

The cabernet she'd pour would be Collaboration Wines Argent 2010. It's OK, you're allowed to look blank. Collaboration Wines is hardly a household name. It's relatively new and very boutique—no more than 100 cases are made of each of its wines. The Hawke's Bay brand was created in 2010 by Brogden. She named it Collaboration because she sources all the fruit for her wines from growers, with whom she works closely. Each label features a piece of strong, atmospheric visual art, the work of an American painter friend, Angela Tirrell. There's a message in those labels that can be read this way: this wine is not mass-produced—it's a personal exploration of beauty and meaning.

There are currently four Collaboration wines available: Ceresia 2013 (a blend of merlot and cabernet franc), Aurulent 2015 (chardonnay, pictured above right), The Impression Red 2012 (a Bordeaux blend) and Argent 2011 (cabernet sauvignon, above left).

Brogden's winemaking manifesto was largely drawn up in America. She arrived in California's Napa Valley in 2000 as a 21 year old with a Bachelor of Wine Science from Hawke's Bay's Eastern Institute of Technology.



Eight years later she returned a formed, confident winemaker.

"After a few years in the Napa I managed to get a foot in the door of a small, cult winery [Lewis Cellars]. The attention to detail, everyone being immersed in wanting to make the best wines possible... I just loved it. I remember the 2006 vintage at Lewis... every ferment was dialled in, I was going for it and that's when I started to learn. The long hours didn't matter because everyone just loved what they were doing. I couldn't have asked for a better grounding."

She came back to a very different world in Hawke's Bay. There were no winemaking jobs, Brogden discovered, although even if there were, she would still have felt the urge to do her own thing: "For me to be happy, I need to make wines that I feel good about."

And what kind of wine is that? "Acidity is key. I don't want big, rich wines. I want wines with layers, with interesting texture and length, wines that aren't boring. For me a boring wine is just fruit—simple and short and without much weight."

Which brings us back to cabernet sauvignon, a variety that has been taking a hiding in this country for a while. In 2002, the majestic red grape of Bordeaux's Medoc occupied 745 Kiwi hectares. Today, that is down to 283ha. "Won't ripen, too hard," is a line you're likely to hear from growers. Julz Brogden is having no truck with any of it.

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"Cabernet hasn't been well treated in New Zealand. It depends on the site and how everything is managed, both in the vineyard and in the winery. It's hard if it's not picked at optimum ripeness. I also like to work it with oxygen. I love cabernet! I love it when you have those dark cassis characters, and it's not rich and ripe. It's a wine that can be gutsy but elegant."

Brogden's cabernets are fascinating. They embrace a distinctive, risk-taking style in the New Zealand context, with leafy, gooseberry-like highlights dancing over the darker fruit flavours. The effect is complexity and an uplifting freshness. For many, like myself, that is exactly how *a point* cabernet sauvignon should behave; others balk at these characters, which they see as green or vegetal. Brogden: "I don't care. I'm going to do what I like."

Whiff of rebellion? More like open protest. In an industry that attracts its share of free spirits and alternative practitioners, Brogden's act is very off-Broadway. She's championing an unfashionable variety in a style that is contentious with a new label

that has limited resources. And making the pathway tougher is the fact that Hawke's Bay is not the Napa, where the cult wineries have San Francisco and indeed the entire Californian economy at their backs.

"It's a struggle, here. There's not enough money, which in turn is influencing the quality of the wine being made in Hawke's Bay. I'd love it long-term to stay small and dedicated to quality. Many wineries I've spoken to here have said their biggest mistake was growing too big. But the financial side of things is hard. I can't see how I'll ever own my own vineyard. It can be disheartening."

And yet... despite all that, and despite the fact that it's a moonlighting operation (Brogden fits Collaboration work in around her full-time gig at Pask Winery on the bottling line and in the lab), the quality of her wines has been attracting attention.

Smart restaurants that look beyond the mainstream, such as Sidart and Cocoro in Auckland, have added them to their lists. Wellington's hot new wine bar, Noble Rot, was recently serving

the Collaboration A rulent Chardonnay 2014 by the glass. "People loved it – it went very well," reported co-owner Maciej Zimny. Critics have also been impressed, myself included. I rated the Collaboration Wines Argent 2013 (to be released next year) as the best Kiwi cabernet sauvignon I'd tasted in 2015.

Brogden is happy with how it's tracking. "Over the last couple of years, I've sensed a door opening. I think I can make it work. I'm seeing an increase in sales. Talk to me in a few years... but right now I feel I've barely touched the surface."

Let's return to that gathering she's hosting. I quiz her about the music she'd play. The question necessitates a consultation with her partner Richard Painter, also a winemaker (at Te Awa and yes, they talk shop constantly apparently). She comes back with: "Rich knows what I like. He said to say 'downbeat electronica'".

I nod, wondering what on earth that might sound like, and then ask what she might wear. "A cheongsam, over jeans, and probably bare feet. I'm not a high heels kind of girl." ■