

NEWS RELEASE

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John Belsham Marks His 35th Vintage And 20 Years of Being the Infamous Mr. Fox

MARLBOROUGH, NZ 30 March 2011 International winemaker and consultant, John Belsham celebrated the start of his 35th vintage and 20th vintage at Foxes Island with the first pick of grapes this week. With blue skies and a chill in the morning air, Belsham casually commented between long, quick strides on his way to the vineyard “6°C. It finally feels like proper, vintage weather”. For someone who admittedly doesn’t multi-task well, he seems to seamlessly move between getting updates from his staff, answering calls from his clients and conversing in oeno-tech speak all whilst standing in a long, narrow row of grapes considerably tasting the Pinot Noir berries about to be harvested and envisioning the wine it would become. Vintage can have a lot of externals all converging at once but for Belsham, 35 years of winemaking has him taking it in stride. Nothing much fazes him these days when it comes to wine production hurdles as Belsham has seen most of it all before; although his tenure has admittedly added a few gray hairs over the years earning him the infamous alias, Silver Fox.

Belsham confesses to being a “project guy” and because he never seems to sit still, his innovative thinking and ability has helped shape and evolve the NZ wine business over the past 30 years. After holding respected winemaker posts at Nobile, Matua Valley and Hunters, Belsham started his first business in 1990 and built the first contract winemaking facility in New Zealand, Rapaura Vintners. Prior to Rapaura, there were no other options for winemaking in NZ outside of owning one’s own facility; limiting the industry’s ability to grow to a viable, commercial level. Belsham’s instinct for good business was on the mark. Demand was such that Rapaura tanks were full in the first year and the client list was an impressive read; including the likes of Delegates, Villa Maria, Babich and Allan Scott.

Belsham’s first vintage commenced in 1977 in the Medoc region of Bordeaux, France; it was here that he became acquainted with the fine oak barriques produced by Dargaud & Jaegle in Beaujolais. Belsham returned to NZ in 1982 and along with a handful of other winemakers on the scene, pushed traditional boundaries to make wines that would eventually command international fanfare. With a limited number of barrel options in NZ at the time and a desire for the D&J barrels he knew from France, Belsham rang the cooerage. Msr. Jaegle wasn’t quite sure what to initially make of a French speaking Kiwi with a Bordelaise accent but the pair struck up a relationship; eventually leading Belsham to found Marlborough Oak Imports in 1990 and becoming the exclusive NZ agent.

The early 90’s also found Belsham brainstorming his own wine – a wine that would focus on crafted wines with pedigree, of discerning vineyard selection and with the ability to age. Foxes Island made its official debut with the 1992 Chardonnay; a varietal that still holds pride of place at the Fox House. So what are “Mr. Fox’s” favorite five wines that he has made thus far? To begin: the 1982 Chateau Saturnin Bordeaux, the 1985 Matua Valley Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot, the 1991 Wairau River Sauvignon Blanc, the 2006 Foxes Island Riesling and alas, the yet to be released, barrel select 2010 Foxes Island Pinot Noir; a new wine that has yet to have a name but one that has Belsham struggling to restrain a grin of excitement. Could it possibly be called Renard d’Argent?

Foxes Island wines are currently distributed in New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, China, Canada and the U.K.



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