

Crouching Plum Hidden Banana

By Jade Reidy



Cartoon by Nigel Love

Episode 1 [1,850 words]

There's something deeply sociable about living with a wine that's fermenting. The rhythmic plop, plop of carbon dioxide escaping through the airlock acts as a heartbeat. While the sound is just yeast eating the sugar and farting, this steady, background presence is doing something magical, alchemical. And like any living relationship, both are changed by it.

I never intended to be a winemaker. It happened soon after I came to live in a rural fishing village in the Waitakere Ranges. Huia is an enclave of artists, artisans, drop-outs, drinkers, fishermen and retirees who've traded money for people and time. Mixed in are the local 'landed gentry'. They've had farms and orchards on the hillsides since they were cleared for timber. When the actor Martin Clunes was on a film set here, he reported back to the English newspapers, "the most exciting thing that ever happens in Huia is three ducks crossing the road."

That first summer I moved here, my gnarly grapevine with its criss-crossed leaders, its peeling and brittle bark, produced a staggering 40kg of grapes. Then, in two weeks during autumn, the feijoa tree dropped a crop of fruit big enough to feed an army of opossums. What to do with it all? Standing at the kitchen window one day I watched a kereru, hanging upside down by its claws on a nikau. It was getting drunk on the tree's blood-red berries. 'There's your answer,' I thought. 'Make wine.'

Books on the subject were surprisingly scarce and out-dated. I searched the internet and found a store in a run-down Glen Eden mall that sold wine-making supplies, along with beer kits and distilling equipment. Its owner was a one-man operation, a frail bearded character. He was amiable about being quizzed for advice while selling me demi-john jars, a hydrometer and sachets of yeast. But my attempts to charm him into actually teaching me failed.

"I'm 79," he said. "My teeth are falling out, I've got arthritis in my knees. I'm more concerned about getting to the toilet on time."

The shop closed down shortly afterwards. I was back to trawling the internet for chat groups, which felt a bit like drinking alone. So, I put an ad into the local community magazine calling for winemakers to start a group, with the first meeting to be held at my place.

By then I had bottled my first-ever attempt at making wine. Chateau Jade exceeded my expectations and was actually quite drinkable. A few samples were sat on the dining room table.

First to arrive was a couple who had phoned earlier in the week.

"Giddy, I'm James and this is my partner Kiri," he said, taking the lead and extending his hand.

We had a bit of friendly chit chat and I asked him, "So what do you do?"

"I'm actually a senior winemaker with Pernod Ricard," he said, almost apologetically.

The country's largest wine producers! I didn't know whether to be wildly excited at my luck or to fall through the floor with acute embarrassment. Here was the best teacher I could hope for but I hadn't expected to be offering up my inaugural batch to such expert scrutiny!

"You've got a bit of carbonation going on there," he said, referring to the minor explosion of bubbles that occurred when I unscrewed one of the capped bottles.

"Is that a bad thing?" I asked anxiously.

"Only if you dislike champagne," he smiled.

And that was my first experience of how gentle and unassuming James could be. He'd come to support Kiri. She was completing a diploma in wine-making so she could move beyond being the maestro's helper.

"I'd like to make mead," she said.

We didn't actually get around to making anything that first day, and nobody else came, but Wines out West was born.

For the next meeting, I roped in beekeeper Dan. He's not a group person by nature because he's partially deaf in one ear. Dan's parents were Mormons and I think that religious upbringing also makes him allergic to groups. But I am persuasive. I'd already heard about his kick-ass mead. The story goes that Dan didn't know what to do with his mounting collection because alcohol gave him migraines and selling home brew is illegal. He off-handedly gave my neighbour Wayne a couple of bottles to try. When Wayne stood up to go take a leak, he opened his caravan door... and remembered nothing more until waking up, face down in the damp grass with a broken nose.

Dan turned up to James and Kiri's place with me and the four of us got stuck into making some mead together. And got talking about how making hooch has been a time-honoured tradition out here ever since the logging days and dam construction. The bought stuff was hard to come by. A road wasn't built until 1910 and the timber mill merchants supported Prohibition for the good reason that alcohol and pit saws didn't mix. Camps full of sweaty, thirsty men were supplied with spirits from the Pacific Islands being smuggled ashore at the Manukau Harbour entrance, or they made it themselves.

"It's still a long way to the nearest liquor store," said Dan, "but I reckon the real reason we continue making it ourselves is that westies are smart enough to figure out how to. And we're a stubborn bunch."

He could be talking about himself. Dan is a practical man who works for himself at odd hours. He tends to have over a hundred projects on the go, largely because he struggles to finish what he starts. His lawns are disappearing under yet-to-be restored vintage cars and his son's Trade Me car bargains that need new radiators or engines. There's a free range chicken coop, several beehives, piles of firewood that needs splitting, two boats yearning for the feel of salt water on their hulls and his partner Karin's half-completed art studio.

Dan is often awake at 3am with a restless mind. He gets up early and walks his Burmese cats in the farm park behind the house. On occasion, he brings home newborn lambs that need bottle-feeding or gets distracted sorting out raucous roosters.

He has a generous heart. For people, Dan will drop tools and be there, helping you out for free. There's a saying around Huia that there's only two things a man never lends - his wife and his chainsaw. I suspect Dan would even give you the chainsaw. Or come and do the job himself, if you're prepared to wait.

Personally, I find getting started on projects harder than finishing. The early stages of making wine are the most labour intensive. They involve a lot of preparation and justify the 'many hands make light work' maxim. For example, you don't wash grapes because the skins contain natural sugars that you'll want to keep. But you do have to go through each bunch and pick out any diseased or rotten bits before mashing all the fruit, or foot stomping them. With small fruits like loquats you have to remove the stones because they contain arsenic.

In winter, when there's not much free fruit falling off the trees, you can 'cheat' by using canned or frozen fruit. One of the best wines I've ever made was with a few cans of lychees. Concentrates like elderflower or even rose water also work just fine.

Once we had the mead all prepared we threw in the yeast, gave it a good stir and let the yeast get on with its business of producing alcohol.

Dan came to the wine group for three years, even though he didn't drink. He was our chauffeur when the rest of us were seduced by a particularly blissful wine. He had good intentions of making a cider press for the group. When inevitable distractions arose, he dropped off enough honey cappings

for us to sweat over squeezing out 100 litres of mead. But eventually he acknowledged, "You know what. I'd rather go diving for crayfish."

New arrivals to the group Scott and Sinead suggested we make weed wine. "I've heard it's all the rage in California," said Sinead. "You can get up to a hundred dollars a bottle for marijuana-laced syrah."

The active ingredient in marijuana that gets you stoned is THC. Handily enough, it's soluble in alcohol. Adding a good fistful of leaves to a bold red wine while it's fermenting will produce "an interesting little buzz".

Sinead and Scott were hosting for the first time. Their newly renovated bungalow was furnished with white leather sofas and a 65 inch TV hooked up to the internet, displaying swirling psychedelic graphics. We take turns at hosting the monthly meeting. It gives all of us a chance to 'mind the baby'. Once we've got a batch to the fermentation stage together the host then keeps it right through to bottling, which can take several months. Then we distribute it amongst ourselves. There's an awkwardness we've never managed to resolve about who gets how many bottles. Should a couple be treated as two individuals when sharing the spoils, or are they a unit?

Between us all we'd managed that day to bring a ridiculous amount of end-of-season peaches. A quite innocuous wine recipe compared to the potential effects of mixing wine and dope. Or so you'd think. But Scott and Sinead were about to have a wine making initiation that's a rite of passage.

Mine had come when I filled a glass demi-john right to the brim with pulped tamarillos and water, then fermented it in the hot water cupboard, with lots of yeast and sugar. The airlock that is meant to let carbon dioxide slowly escape exploded. Not a good thing when your entire collection of white Egyptian cotton sheets is also in the cupboard! Scott and Sinead minded the baby but Scott bunged a cork in the neck of the 40-litre glass jar before the wine had quite finished fermenting and the same thing happened, except the glass also shattered. Their spare bedroom was sticky and smelt sickly sweet for weeks afterwards, they said. It was quite some clean-up. We felt a bit guilty but, hey they're still with us.

Here are some other things our expert winemaker James has taught us about the fermentation stage of winemaking:

- If you're short of an airlock, a condom will do equally well.
- Diammonium phosphate (known as DAP) has a lot of uses: it's a nicotine enhancer in cigarettes, prevents afterglow in matches and purifies sugar but it's also "crack for yeast". Yeast gets addicted to the stuff that's politely called 'nutrient'.
- Put two different types of yeast into the same batch and they'll fight with one another. The outcome is anyone's guess.
- And lastly, if getting high is not your thing, mashed banana and a handful of wheat thrown into a red wine will give it more body.

That's how our favourite name for a wine was born: *Crouching plum, hidden banana*.

Episode 2 [1,870]

Just as artists must spend endless hours in art galleries, so vintners must drink. At the monthly wine-making session we regularly resolve to work first on making our chosen wine and only *then* drink and eat. It's a failed resolution. On a late Sunday afternoon faced with an array of cheeses and 12 bottles of wine to sample, is there really a genuine choice about the order of events? Perhaps wine made while sober is an oxymoron.

Wines out West was growing. After a year WoW had eight members. Kirsty joined the group with a loud splash. She was a master chef and an artist who spurred us on to bringing canapes that were just as exotic as the wines we were playing around with. Her layered indulgences of fresh lavender, pastry, chocolate and chilli were unrivalled until Ryan showed up one day with fresh-smoked marlin.

While some people launch themselves into groups, others have to be gently prised out of their isolation. That was Ryan. Perhaps in his mid 30s, he lived with his dog Sally and gave off a 'man alone' kind of vibe: polite but no invitation to venture beyond the gate. I suspect his neighbour Dan, feeling guilty that he'd dropped out, had done some persuading.

Kirsty quickly lost interest when her first batch of experimental pear and chilli wine wasn't a raving success but Ryan turned into the most loyal of members.

I felt nervous around him for quite a while because he was so different to anyone I knew. Ryan was a solidly built master panelbeater. I'd often glimpsed him over the fence on weekends, welding vehicles in his driveway. The first day he turned up at the wine group, his shaved head showed off chunky ball-and-chain silver ear studs. On his black t-shirt a busty blond was holding a mean-looking machine gun with the tag line: It's hard to resist a bad girl.

"I'm spending \$100 a week on wine," he said. "If I can make it for a dollar a bottle, what's not to like about that?"

Ryan is right about wine being cheap to make, especially if you can acquire your main ingredient for free. I've become like birds whose annual cycle revolves around knowing exactly when and where specific trees will be fruiting. Wine yeast is also just a few dollars a packet and so are the acids. Cafes will sell you 20 litre plastic buckets for a song. Bottling machines and wine presses are not necessary when your output is on a domestic scale.

Ryan's explanation for joining resonated with another group member, Deb. Her second husband became a P addict and she has essentially raised three children alone on the low wages of an activity coordinator in a retirement home. A true westie, Deb has a colour-coordinated collection of bling accessories. While the rest of us turn up to wine group in jeans and t-shirt, Deb's hostess outfit that day was green glitter eyeliner, a headband of coloured plastic roses, zebra skin leggings, layers of patterned knitwear and knee high boots. On that occasion we were making rhubarb champagne again. It finishes a pale oyster pink and tastes far better than you'd imagine for a vegetable so highly acidic.

It took panel beater Ryan a while before offering to host a wine-making session. On our first visit to his man cave I was curious. An array of fishing rods was stacked in one corner. A white cockatoo named Cole was flying freely around the living room. We sat around a dining table, next to a window that looked out onto our local farm park.

There were still fresh mushrooms in the fields and Ryan had made rabbit and wild mushroom terrine. "I like sitting here taking pot shots at rabbits through the open window," he admitted. "Sally has a good diet," he added, rubbing his border collie bitch's ear. It was mid-winter and the windows were wide open. I was freezing but Ryan, in short sleeves, seemed oblivious.

Ryan had already taught himself how to make an alcohol still so we were zesting mandarins, to make a mandarin liqueur from a batch of pure alcohol. He'd got the hang of making wine and spirits really quickly and I could tell he was going to outstrip the rest of us in no time, despite the fact that we were all getting better. Even our professional James has offered to trade one of his award-winning wines for a bottle of berry wine that Ryan made on his own. I reckoned it was the combination of being able to drink to what's politely called 'excess' and being technically smart.

The subject of our livers came up from time to time. Scott and Sinead had a big calendar page on the wall with the number 53 in huge letters. It's the number of days they proudly went dry.

"How's your liver," I asked Ryan.

"Fine" he said. "I balance my drinking with a hunter-gatherer diet of really fresh food. It works for me."

I was fishing for clues to a past we'd heard about. It involved some kind of loss. Dan had said maybe Ryan's girlfriend died of alcohol poisoning. He wasn't sure. I looked around but there were no photos anywhere of people.

The next time we went to Ryan's it was summer. I sensed a change in him that had nothing to do with the seasons. He was flirtatious... Huia is a small place where gossip spreads quickly and I'd heard he'd met another panelbeater. I teased him about being in love. "No," he corrected me. "I'm in lust."

Thinking about his black t-shirt with the busty bad girl who's hard to resist, I made a mental picture.

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I had discovered my own tagline was 'westie by nature'. It had just taken me nearly 40 years to get here and realise that. This intensely spiritual part of the world had become my turangawaewae - the standing place of my heart. A decade was long enough to be considered a local. I was still living alone, having lost a soulmate to cancer. The wine group, more so than drinking, was a way of staying connected. It had brought me unexpected friendships.

As so often happens, there was only one degree of separation between us. Deb rediscovered James had taught her karate many years earlier. At times, when Kiri and Scott got started on their mutual passion for sci-fi movies, I felt I was the alien at the table. Ryan helped me fix the bodywork on a lemon of a car I'd bought. The pith in that purchase had been pretty bitter and I was glad of his lack of judgement about it.

Between wine making sessions I got fascinated by reading up on the weird and wonderful things you can make wine out of, besides fruit, flowers, veggies and rice. Some of the strangest are from animals. Take caterpillars for example or a seagull wine made by stuffing a whole gull into a bottle of water and leaving it in the sun to ferment. In Vietnam you can still order cobra blood wine. The waiter will kill the cobra in front of you and drain its blood into a shot glass of rice wine. The Chinese prefer tiger bone wine. Sadly, you can't make it out of pure chocolate, although we are experimenting with raspberry and cocoa powder. Mmmm.

There are things we tried as a group and wouldn't do again: persimmons for some reason make lousy wine. Gorse flowers are a prickly pain to collect. We made grapefruit champagne but learned the hard way to use only the juice and zest. The pith of all citrus is really bitter. One time, Dan and I shook the berries out of a kahikatea tree onto an old sheet and gathered them up to ferment. The wine was a beautiful amber colour but it tasted weak and insipid. As Māori said on first contact with alcohol, it was wai piro, which means 'stinking water'.

Huia has a history of clandestine home brewing. It owes this history to the timber and dam construction industries that brought camps full of men to the area for extended periods. We also have a past connected with fruit trees. In the late 19 century, Edward Turner established an orchard in the clearings of Little Huia, to supply his city grocery shop. Turners & Growers soon became the leading fruit auctioneer but the orchard location wasn't a success. The soil had too much clay. You can still stumble on a brittle heritage peach or plum tree in a meadow studded with clumps of narcissi - although no hidden bananas.

We have a hidden treasure in another local wine expert who didn't want to join the group. Corinne has a love story connected to Huia. While working for the United Nations in Brussels she met her Kiwi partner. Corinne is spritzy, like a good champagne or a low-alcohol wine whose bubbles hide the lack of what's called 'mouth feel'. She was born in Bordeaux and grew weary of people expecting her to know everything about the grand chateau wines of her native region. So she studied them. Back in Brussels, all-day champagne tastings were a regular event, she said. Like art, when critics reviewed a champagne favourably it sold. It sold even though we all know that the perception of quality is also influenced by expensive bottles, hard-to-pronounce names and the word 'chateau'. In a blind test, even the caterpillar wine was given 7 out of 10.

When she abandoned Europe and came to live here, Corinne wanted to start up a business importing wine. But it turns out that west Auckland still has a hangover from its dry days. All sale and storage of wines is controlled by a licensing trust.

It took me months of perseverance, and learning to play petanque, before Corinne would sample any of the wines we made. The human brain is wired to confuse prejudice with fact. Expectations get in the way. These expectations will cause people to infuse their judgement of the wine – even as they taste it – with prior knowledge of caustically bad home brews.

I seduced her finally with our mandarin cello, a gorgeously rich amber liquid. It even sounds like a classical serenade.

She took a sip and said "Wow. Nectar of the gods."

I was at a loss to think of something suitably humble to say in response.

Now, when a group of us plays petanque at the local 'court', by the Huia Bay, on a Saturday afternoon she shouts out after any particularly bad shot, "Not enough strawberry wine. Open another one..."

I have cheerfully resigned myself to being an amateur in the winemaking stakes. I don't drink enough or understand chemistry - in wine or in love. Ryan's new girlfriend turned out surprisingly to be a shy, petite brunette. Her drinking habits and knowledge didn't extend much beyond Lindauer fraise. So much for the bad girl image of her I'd built up in my head!

Ryan is now building a new and improved copper still and is also contemplating going into business as a boutique whisky maker.

Episode 3 [1,950]

You can tell when a wine stops fermenting because the rhythmic heartbeat that accompanies your days has ended. The yeast has finished devouring all the sugar. Or, it has died because the weather got too cold. Mostly, I don't notice this mini martyrdom. I guess it's like cicadas. At dawn in the summer months, they collectively start making a racket on cue, as if the conductor has waved a baton. Will they never cease! And then one day in autumn, you realise the cicadas have gone silent - but the exact day or week when it happened is elusive. You weren't paying attention.

It's a cliché that west Aucklanders are a druggie lot. You might as well say in south Auckland four families are crammed into every house. We're more diverse than our image suggests. Sinead's suggestion for our wine group to add marijuana leaves to the fermentation phase has never gained much traction.

Mixing drugs has a long and socially respectable history, though. In 1886, a commercial drink was launched in the USA that contained both alcohol and cocaine. Coca cola's creator John Pemberton was addicted to morphine and was looking for something to replace his addiction. He touted his coca, kola nut and damiana drink as "a most wonderful invigorator of sexual organs". It rapidly out-sold its competitor Vin Mariani, a red wine mixed with cocaine. Vin Mariani was made by a French chemist, and endorsed by such luminaries as Queen Victoria and Pope Leo XIII.

Until 1940, cocaine was the most-prescribed drug in New Zealand. Seems unthinkable now.

Native plants had been experimented with by adventurers and missionaries. Captain Cook brewed beer using young Rimu branches to prevent scurvy. Early European settlers made wine from the berries of the Tutu and wineberry trees. Tutu wine gained a bad reputation after the Rev. Stack wrote in 1889 in memoirs of his South Island tour that he'd been offered some. He almost passed out and fell off his church bench seat due to its effects - scandalous behaviour for a minister. Perhaps it's just as well this particular wine fell out of favour since the berry's seeds are fatal and many Maori children died from ingesting them.

The first vineyard in New Zealand was Mission Estate. It was established in 1851 by Catholic missionaries to aid in that most deceptive of miracles: turning water into wine. Most orchards were initially planted close to city markets but Dalmatian immigrant winemakers understood the concept of 'terroir': that God is in the soil. They made decisions about where to plant that were based on the vines' viticulture needs. In west Auckland, early vintages were scathingly referred to as Dally-plonk. When the Prime Minister William Massey announced in 1914 a new Act licensing winemakers, he passed judgement that "vile Austrian wine... is a degrading, demoralising and sometimes maddening drink... there has been loss of lives attributed." Two yeasts - of racism and colonial morality - made a rather nasty-tasting brew.

Rumours persist of lost Dalmatian vineyards somewhere in the Waitakere Ranges, but I am yet to find any trace... Planting grapes and drinking wine was also their statement about dissension from the dominant and beer drinking culture. That's our local wine group all over.

Today, we manipulate wines in ways French artisans in past centuries would never dreamt of or desired. The post-modern process of making wine is all about chemical reactions. The element of mystique is evaporating. But the best wines still need art as well as science and our group has a pretty good balance of both strengths. The scientists get out their brick meters, run tests and use precise measurements. The artists take whatever's available and guesstimate quantities. We eschew recipes, preferring to imagine possibilities. This approach results in either a wondrous but unrepeatable wine or utter failure. The scientists create balsamic vinegar from some of our artistic failures or put them through a still and turn the wine into pure alcohol and new possibilities...

At the wine group, we each take turns to be responsible for nurturing a batch of wine through to maturity. It feels like quite a responsibility. When we get stuck we turn to James. He's an award-winning winemaker who grew up in Gizzie and worked in the oil industry before turning a teenage past time into a career . Perhaps, like Corinne from Bordeaux, he has wine in his blood. I've often wondered why he continues to grace our small amateur group, so I asked him one day.

"I still like to play around and experiment on a small scale," he replied. "I can't do that at work because it's a highly controlled environment. Failure isn't an option when you're dealing with millions of litres."

James took us all on a tour of his manufacturing site, where one in every four bottles of New Zealand wine is produced. The place is kept at a constant 15° Celsius to ensure the wine doesn't deteriorate; the tank rooms hiss with pressure-released nitrogen and conveyor belts snake their way through the plant. Despite all of this mechanisation, the winemakers are definitely still needed and must regularly taste the wines. That's because science can only help them achieve their artistic aims; it can't determine what those aims should be. Nature, too, is rebellious. Every row of grapevines will, every year, produce grapes with aromas and flavours that differ. Case in point: this year my white diamond wine initially tasted more like apples than grapes. The lack of sunshine hours at the height of summer gave the grapes a high malic acid content - or a case of sour grapes. Nature's malice.

While the yeast has done all the hard yards in the fermentation stage of the process from fruit to wine, it's roll up your sleeves time again towards the end. There's a stage called racking off. It sounds posh but is pretty much the same as siphoning petrol. By sucking the wine from the top of the container through a plastic tube you don't disturb the sediment and dead yeast that has sunk to the bottom.

There's not a lot that can go horribly wrong and isn't fixable following this stage. That is, unless your wine has turned to vinegar along the way because bacteria has proliferated and you didn't bomb it with sulfites. BUT, turning an average wine into a bottle you'll want to drain the last drop from is where science comes into its own.

Here are some things James has taught us about finishing wine:

- Wine gets acne. It goes through a horrid teenage stage on the way to maturity. Just breathe. Wait. It may get better all by itself. If not, there are various therapies available.
- One therapy for an excess of hydrogen sulphide is the illegal practice of defacing coinage in current use. You drill a hole in a 10 cent coin and suspend it in the wine. The copper in the

coin will draw out the excess sulphur, making the wine smell and taste better. The coin will incidentally come out shiny new as well.

- The main fix for overly dry wine is to add very small quantities (and I stress here that less is more) of non-fermentable sugar, called lactose.

One of the last stages is clarifying the wine so you get that lovely transparent look in the glass when it's poured. To achieve this you can add what's called 'finings', such as bentonite clay, gelatine or egg white. Any remaining solid particles will attach to them and sink to the bottom of the container, but you only do that as a last resort because these finings may affect the flavour in an undesirable way. Putting the wine somewhere cold for a while is the best bet. My pond is the perfect place and the goldfish don't seem to mind the occasional obstacle.

"Art is a lie that makes us realise the truth," Picasso said. We inspired the local art group with a competition to see who could come up with a suitable label for our *Crouching Plum Hidden Banana* wine. The winner produced a comic sketch of a plump plum with a karate headband chasing a banana with bared teeth and a sword in each hand around a cellar full of wine barrels.

Commercial wine labels are art in their design and artful in their wording. When most of us read the wine has aromas of spicy fruit cake, dark cherries, blackcurrants, liquorice and dried herbs it's a 'yeah, right' moment. Fruit wines are more out there. Fruit wines genuinely do taste like plum or peach or mango... Fruit wines, being essentially organic, are less likely to give you a hangover.

Yet, perhaps labels can only suggest a range of possible options because there's as much as 1,000 per cent difference in sensitivity to certain smells and tastes. Our brains are designed to believe themselves; we're incapable of distinguishing opinion from actual sensation. The senses of smell and taste are particularly susceptible to mental biases and beliefs because they're the only senses that connect directly to the brain's long-term memory – that's the real hangover. Sight, touch and hearing don't summon up the past with nearly the same intensity.

Before you can taste a wine you have to judge it. Taste is a historic experience - and maybe that's why we lose as much as half our taste receptors by the time we turn 20. We've learnt all we 'need' to know.

So, on a Sunday afternoon, when we prise ourselves out of our little boxes to go and make wine together we are still alone with our personal history of experiences that shape what we taste and smell. Plenty of robust argument takes place around the drinking table. Scott finds bitterness where I taste umami; Sinead wrinkles her nose at seafood; Kiri and James don't care for sake. Deb can't understand why most of us are averse to her feijoa wine. Just about all of the wines gave Dan a migraine because he expected them to... And on it goes.

"In the final analysis," says James, "whether you love a wine or hate it, you're right. It's the famous 'yum/yuck' test."

Sometimes, listening to the conversation, a feeling of quite pride steals over me that's nothing to do with whether the wines themselves are any good. I've created a group with a life of its own, a bunch of people who enjoy each other a lot and have connected in many unexpected ways. It's been eight

years since Kiri and James first walked into my living room. We're like different yeasts that went into the same batch of wine and nobody was quite sure at the start what the outcome would be. The 'yum/yuck' test applied and those who thought it was yum stayed.

Corrine and I decided to hold a Bordeaux dinner and I went on the hunt for a Medoc or a Pomerol. Before joining the wine group I didn't even know the difference between a syrah and a shiraz, let alone grand chateau wines. Despite all I've learnt, I was feeling out of my depth in a fine wine shop among racks of bottles with sky high price tags and unfamiliar labels. It was mid-afternoon and the shop was quiet. I started chatting about Wines out West with the owner. "You sound like fun," he said, giving me his card. I wasn't sure if he meant the wine, the group or me. Who knows what will come from it. Let's celebrate possibility. Here's to the taste of life. Kia ora! Cheers.