

MEDIA RELEASE

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Mark Weldon joins Board of leading olive oil exporter

Mark Weldon has purchased a holding in leading New Zealand olive oil company, The Village Press, and has also been appointed chairman of the Hawke's Bay-based company.

Weldon left the NZX after ten years in charge in 2012 investing in super-premium New Zealand wine, buying vineyards in Bannockburn, Central Otago, and combining them under a new brand, Terra Sancta ('special land').

The Village Press chief executive Wayne Startup said Weldon's appointment would add a new dimension to the company. "We are confident Mark will help our business reach its full potential of growing a great New Zealand brand overseas, especially with niche marketing of our award-winning range of oils."

Weldon said he saw significant growth potential for the Village Press both domestically and offshore.

"My investment in The Village Press is a natural complement to my investment in the wine industry. Both are hand-made products that exhibit a real sense of place, being grown with the help of our world-renowned attributes of wonderful soil and climate by people with a passion for what they do.

"They are all about putting the essence of our country in a bottle and selling it to the world. Gone are the days when we blindly accepted bulk European oils that sat in transit for ages and had been through a manufacturing process. Artisan, hand-crafted wine and extra virgin olive oil is of increasing value to those interested in the provenance of what they consume."

Weldon's expanding investment interests extend not just to products with local provenance but also to products independent of location, for example his directorship on the board of US-based, high technology company Diligent.

His varied career has included public policy roles, for example, leading the Prime Minister's Appeal on Christchurch Earthquake fundraising in 2011. He represented New Zealand in swimming at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona and has served on the boards of the New Zealand Olympic Committee and High Performance Sport NZ.

Weldon's interests also include a directorship at Sileni Estates, the Hawke's Bay vineyard and winery where The Village Press has its presses for producing its extra virgin olive oil range.

For further information: Gerry Morris (04) 499 0224

Five minutes with Mark Weldon on pinot noir and extra virgin olive oil

Eyebrows were raised in business circles in 2012 when Mark Weldon resigned as NZX chief executive after 10 successful years, then invested in a vineyard in an industry seemingly under duress. He had transformed NZX into an information provider across New Zealand and Australia after developing new market services in the agriculture and energy sectors. The wine industry was suffering in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis but is now recovering. What is his rationale for investing in grapes and now olives?

Why a pinot noir vineyard in Felton Road, Bannockburn, Central Otago?

I had been in Wellington for some time, had worked in New York and never owned any land. It was time to move on and build a house so we chose Queenstown, a place we thought that, regardless of the future, would be a good place to have a base.

In terms of vineyards, we looked at Waiheke, Hawke's Bay, Marlborough and briefly at Martinborough. Then we looked at Central Otago and decided it was the best place for us. We wanted to do something based on the particular attributes of the land. Bannockburn has some very distinctive features that make it suitable for my favourite wine, pinot noir.

What is behind the name Terra Sancta?

It means "special earth". Terra Sancta has a unique soil profile. The vineyard we purchased was the first one planted in the area and as a result has significant vine age at around 22 years. There were details that made sense and, though some said at the time the wine industry was in decline, we were looking at the long term. So far it has been a fulfilling time, plus we like the variety pinot noir. It only grows in a very few places in the world unlike varieties such as chardonnay.

How have you positioned your wine?

All Terra Sancta wine comes from own grapes. We do not buy fruit on the market. So it is traceable by block and that is reflected in our labelling. We have a strong belief in the New Zealand component - credible reputation, pristine growing conditions with soil purity and air and water quality. Putting all that in a bottle is pretty exciting.

We see the emerging trend of value sets not based on mad, frenetic, consumerism but focused on healthy consumption based on knowledge of producers and provenance - where they come from, the story behind the product.

The discerning consumer wants to know exactly where their product came from. So we sell wine with direct reference to the block of vines it was sourced from. It's a noticeable shift that is fast becoming important for food producers rather than mass produced, generic product.

What is the synergy between olive oil and wine?

The Village Press oils are up there in quality which owes its reputation to the hand-made nature of the product, just like Terra Sancta wines.

Twenty years ago, New Zealand did not have a reputation for being a producer of world class premium wine. Ten years ago you could not have imagined that "NZ + coffee" would have more prestige than "Italy + coffee" yet, as the most brand-savvy company in the world, Monocle, showed when opening their new London cafe, New Zealand coffee was the coffee of choice. This is the type of brand channel I will be seeking for Village Press oils.

Today our olive oil industry resembles wine in the early days: high energy, passionate people producing great product with olive groves producing extra virgin olive oil unlike any other in the world. Yet, like the early days of wine, our industry is characterised by many small growers and producers.

Does New Zealand olive oil have a place in the world?

The New Zealand industry is now characterised by olive groves of an age where we can produce extra virgin olive oil of world-leading quality. As global health concerns and issues grow, the demand for absolutely pristine extra virgin olive oil is only going to grow as well. So the category is a great place to be as the demand for "good oil" will just continue to accelerate.

Recent issues with global players and adulterated oil, as well as the sheer time it takes to ship oil to places like New Zealand, create a real opportunity for an at-scale local player.

The Village Press brand, familiar to many visitors via its accompaniment with Air New Zealand in-flight meals, has a great team, a wonderful brand and the scale and distribution capability to take the hardest step - to get to a globally viable scale and become a national champion in a category that is as old as the Bible.

Products like wine and olive oil that are tied indelibly to place have a competitive advantage that no other company globally can obtain; it's the essence of New Zealand. This opportunity with The Village Press is one I am fortunate to be able to participate in, and I am excited by the opportunity to grow a great brand from New Zealand.