For some NZ winemakers, Māori beliefs lead the way

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Members of the Tuku Māori Winemakers Collective, from left, Hayden Johnston (Kuru Kuru Wines), Haysley MacDonald (te Pā Family Vineyards), Royce McKean (Tiki Wine & Vineyards), Jeff Sinnott (Ostler Wine) and Steve Bird (Steve Bird Wines). [Tuku Māori Winemakers Collective]

A philosophy of respectful custodianship of the land and the importance of one's place of origin may sound familiar to those who seek out terroir.

In February, I travelled to New Zealand for the first time, to take part in Pinot Noir New Zealand 2025 in Christchurch, a gathering examining the central topic from all angles. We discussed soils and environmentalism, tariffs and trade, tasted dozens of wines, renewed old acquaintances and forged new ones. I gave a talk, on the place of New Zealand pinot noir on the world stage. (Spoiler alert: It currently has a bit role but shows potential.)

But one significant feature made this wine conference entirely different from any I've ever attended. Enormous care was taken to weave the Māori culture into the fabric of the event just as it is in the identity of the country.

During the conference, Māori speakers introduced and summarised the Māori conception of tūrangawaewae, how the characteristics of a place define the identity and culture of the people who come from there.

As I understood the thought, it goes well beyond the simple formula of place determining personality. Tūrangawaewae is often translated as "a place to stand," which suggests as well that people belong to a place and can be their most authentic selves when they are in that place.

It's a complex idea that I admittedly understand superficially. But, as any wine lover might do, I immediately jumped to the French notion of terroir, the idea that the singular qualities of a particular place and people can be expressed through a wine.

I wondered how, if at all, this Māori conception of place and culture might apply to New Zealand wine, and whether it might shape or strengthen the power of the wines to express the local terroirs.

Hayden Johnston, left, and Haysley MacDonald of the Tuku collective. MacDonald warns of the appropriation of Māori words and iconography by producers with no connection to the culture. [Tuku Māori Winemakers Collective]

Encounters between Indigenous peoples and colonising forces around the world have rarely been anything but destructive to the Native peoples. As in so many other places, the Māori endured war, diseases brought by settlers and severe cultural suppression.

“If you really want to destroy an Indigenous people you destroy the language first,” said Haysley MacDonald, the founder and owner of te Pā, one of a handful of Māori-owned wine companies in New Zealand. “My father’s generation was banned from speaking our native tongue.”

Since the 1970s, however, a movement has led to the revival of the Māori language from its near extinction. In the cities, this can be seen in place names, road signs and geographical markers written in both English and Māori. Language courses teaching Māori are popular with non-Māori New Zealanders.

Many locals of all ethnicities habitually use the Māori greeting, “Kia ora,” to say hello. They refer to the country as Aotearoa New Zealand, and the city as Ōtautahi Christchurch, combining the Māori and English terms into one respectful phrase.

“There has been a revitalisation of our culture and language,” said MacDonald, who farms land in the Marlborough region that has been in his family for centuries and makes resonant, complex sauvignon blancs. “With that, Māori are becoming a bigger part in the wider economy.”

Tuku is a collective of Māori-owned wine companies intended to promote unity and shared values. P[Tuku Māori Winemakers Collective]

MacDonald is a member of Tuku, a collective of Māori-owned wine companies intended to promote unity and shared values. Another member of the collective, Jeff Sinnott, a winery consultant of Māori heritage, spoke at the Christchurch conference, giving an overview of Māori-owned agricultural businesses and what he called “the cultural and spiritual significance our belief in the interconnectedness of everything”.

This particularly struck me, as the most enlightened farmers I’ve met in wine seem to believe something similar, though they come at it from different perspectives.

Simply put, vineyards are constructed by humans at the expense of nature. The more you tamper with nature, by destroying biodiversity, using chemicals on the vines and earth, fencing out animals, diverting natural flows of water, cutting down trees and the like, the more you damage the ability of an ecosystem to regulate itself. Instead, farmers must employ technological tools, like herbicides, chemical fertilisers and other crutches to replace natural processes.

Conversely, promoting biodiversity, maintaining life in the soil and hewing as closely to the natural order of things leads to healthier vineyards, better grapes and more expressive wines. It’s the interconnectedness of all things, respecting the intricate links and symbiotic relationships that govern the wellbeing of a healthy ecosystem. The best wines, I believe, come from farmers and winemakers who understand these vital connections.

MacDonald, when he started te Pā, was uncomfortable with the conventional farming that dominated the wine industry. He said he wanted to farm as his father had. Instead of fitting in with the well-manicured, chemically induced green vineyards of his neighbours, he worked to increase biodiversity in his plots, using natural materials like seaweeds and various cover crops to restore health to the soil.

“Now, we call it regenerative farming, but it was all I knew growing up,” he said. “The vineyard went from beautiful to really rugged, but I saw an immediate difference in quality. To see the soil moving with insects and worms, it was something we hadn’t seen in a very long time.”

Te Pā Family Vineyards is one of a handful of Māori-owned wine companies in New Zealand. [Tuku Māori Winemakers Collective]

Ben Trinick, a Māori winemaker, believes that Māori culture’s intrinsic links to the land can encourage more sustainable, regenerative practices in New Zealand.

“As a whole, the New Zealand wine industry hasn’t yet connected strongly with the concepts of tūrangawaewae,” he said. “However, in my short 10 years in the wine industry, I’ve seen a small number of grape growers and winemakers begin to look deeper – not just at the land itself but at the cultural connections tied to it. I feel that this curiosity is starting to spark meaningful steps toward bridging the two worlds.”

Trinick believes that creating networks of wine people who want to learn the Māori language, whether they are Māori or not, would be a valuable step toward increasing their understanding of the Māori world view.

“Māori, like many Indigenous cultures, have a deep connection to the environment,” Trinick said, “and I feel the best wine producers in New Zealand have that desire for connection beyond just farming.”

Nick Mills, the proprietor of Rippon, which produces some of New Zealand’s greatest wines in the Central Otago region, is one of the more sensitive non-Māori to show an abiding interest in te ao Māori, the Māori worldview. He embraces the idea of tūrangawaewae, though he cautions that, as a fourth-generation farmer of European descent, he does not feel he can own it.

“Our wines, issued from unirrigated, biodynamically grown, own-rooted vines, are clearly of this place,” he said, adding, “I’ve climbed this place’s mountains and swum its shores. I feel like I have been formed by this place and belong here.”

He says that the wider New Zealand wine community is beginning to discuss the relationship of tūrangawaewae to wine, but it's not clear what will come of it.

"There is much to share and learn in the spaces where pinot noir and te ao Māori are beginning to coexist, but it's still early days," he said. "For now, it's time for setting the right intentions and seeking healthy, mutually beneficial discussions between those who believe there is value in it."

The Māori I spoke with said they appreciated a genuine curiosity in Māori philosophy among those in wine. But they condemned the widespread appropriation of Māori symbols and words for commercial purposes.

"They are looking for what is trendy, and Indigenous – having a Māori wine – has become trendy," MacDonald said. "Using iconography and culture to try to sell wine, there are many companies doing this and they are just fake."

Even among Māori, a cultural understanding of interconnectedness does not come naturally to everybody. Jannine Rickards, proprietor of Huntress, a winery in the Wairarapa region, said many Māori grew up alienated from their own culture.

She said she has struggled as an adult to understand her whakapapa, the Māori term for one's connection to ancestors and the familial lands that shapes one's place in the world.

"My connection to my Māori whakapapa is something I have been searching for and connecting to since my mid-20s," she said. "I find most joy in knowing that we as Māori have turned a corner and that connection to our culture is being massively embraced and celebrated across Aotearoa."

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