

The grapes of joy at Tikitiki

by Michael Romanos

Grape harvesting on Maori land as a commercial proposition to benefit the Maori community seems a little like stretching the imagination — but that's exactly what's been done by some members of the Ngati Porou tribe in the East Coast right now.

When people tread the New Zealand wine trail in the near future, they could well be stepping on Maori-owned land and sampling entirely Maori produced and managed wine — stylish, beautifully textured red and whites.

There have been occasions in the past where Maori land has been confiscated or bought for a smile and a song by the pakeha machinery, to be turned profitably into grape harvesting territory.

But tribes like the Ngati Porou are starting to fight back in a strictly commercial sense.

In 1980, an agreement between representatives of several hundred owners of the land around Tikitiki (north of Ruatoria), the Maori Affairs Department and Penfolds Winery Ltd came into existence in order to develop land for viviculture.

Five years on, some grapes are readying for their third harvest, others their initial harvest at the Waiapu Valley Vineyards.

This exciting venture incorporates 263 acres spread over nine blocks of land and it's believed to be the first Maori-owned land to be utilised in such a fashion.

The former Prime Minister, Sir Robert Muldoon, well regarded as an admirer and adherent of the New Zealand wine industry, helped plant the first grape vine on the Tikitiki-Rangitukia land.

Chardon was poured into the hole that Sir Robert had dug but the sparkling white wine bears no resemblance to the Sauvignon (red) now produced by the vine he planted.

Though the land deal has a unique tripartite agreement with the Maori owners appearing to hold the trump cards, there are elements of controversy surrounding the deal.

One non-owner in Ruatoria termed the venture as a "sell-out" by the owners.

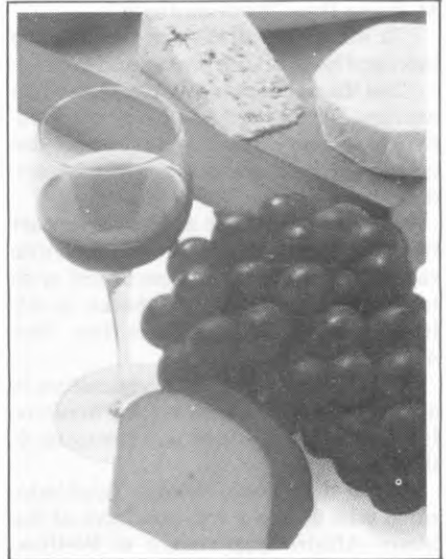
A prominent farmer in the area and East Coast identity, Apirana Mahuika said though the development of the land for grape harvesting is excellent for intensive land useage, he was dismayed the State vis-a-vis the Maori Affairs Department, were actually running the show.

Mahuika said unlike traditional farming (sheep and cattle) which by and large employs two people per 1000-1500 acres, the 263 acres of viviculture around Tikitiki means work for 30-40 local people, mostly Maori and including some of the owners themselves.

"My view is the owners are not getting their dues," said Mahuika.

"They own the land and therefore should have a say in the administration and running of their land — it's as simple as that.

"They should be on the management as of right."



Apirana Mahuika