

Michael Seresin – from film noir to pinot noir

The cinematographer and winemaker on seeking vintages with ‘deeper shadows’

Kit Wilson



‘I wanted my wine to have deeper shadows’

Michael Seresin claims, rather modestly, to “have no palate”, choosing instead to describe wine with light, colour and form. These are not your typical winemaker’s terms, but they make perfect sense given his unusual back story.

Born and raised in New Zealand Seresin emigrated to Europe in 1966 to pursue a career in cinematography. Movie buffs will know what happened next—Seresin, in his own words, “did really well, really quickly”, making a name for himself with series of Alan Parker Flicks: *Bugsy Malone*, *Midnight Express*, *Fame*. It was during this period that he leased a house in Italy—still his “favourite country in the world”—and fell in love with wine.

“We were surrounded by winemaking families, many of whom had been there for generations—I really loved the cultural life round there. That’s what made me think there was something magical about growing grapes.” Many of Seresin’s neighbouring vintners were also skilled musicians and painters and, inspired by the seamless blend of winemaking and the arts, he briefly considered setting up stall in Italy. “But then I thought, I’m not businessman—I’m just not smart enough.”

He eventually decided to buy a small pocket of land—around 70 hectares—in the Wairau Valley back in New Zealand. The first vines were planted in 1992, and the Seresin Estate’s first vintage was bottle four years later.

Today, the company comprises three vineyards—the original one, “Home”, Raupo Creek and Tatou—totalling 160 hectares, roughly the same area as Regent’s Park. All three are certified organic and biodynamic, and tended to by hand. They grow vegetables and olive trees alongside the grapes and keep livestock—“we’re fully self-contained”, Seresin says. He has also, in the past, commissioned poetry, and continues to run a literary residency with New Zealand’s Landfall magazine—an attempt, he says, to introduce a little of the Italian cross-pollination between arts and food to New Zealand.

The estate now grows seven varieties of white grape but it’s their Pinot Noir that excites Seresin the most. “It’s the wine that increasingly defines us—it’s a world-class wine. It’s known as the heartbreak grape, because it’s a little unstable genetically—you can do everything right when you grow the grapes and then nothing seems to come out right in the wine. Or you can have a lousy season and the wine turns out amazing.” Does he find the unpredictability maddening? “No, it’s all part of the magic!”

This love of mystery unites Seresin’s characteristically shadowy cinematography with his passion for wine. “Cities are so bright now—and there’s no mystery. That’s why I like shadows. You go to some of the older European cities where they still have their classic lighting—there’ll be a pool of light and then it’ll suddenly go dark. You go from recognizing somebody to only seeing their silhouette—then body language takes over from the expression on their faces. And I like that, I really do—I think the more mystery in our lives the better.”

He recently named one wine Chiaroscuro—“I wanted it to have the qualities embodied in the word, in a visual sense—to have some lightness, but then as you drink it, deeper, darker, more mysterious qualities. Shadows—deeper shadows longer shadows.”

Out of these come moments of unpredictable and spontaneous pleasure—such “magical” experiences capture, for Seresin, the essence of wine. When I ask him to pick the best wine he’s ever tried, he goes for a little-known Burgundy he once had at a friend’s dinner party. Nobody—not even the host—had any idea what it was. “We talk about it every time we meet up—I mean, I’ve had some stunning wines, but this was just the combination of the unexpected and the quality of the wine.”

Seresin tells me the delightful story of an old Belgian couple who, nearly every Friday—around 40 times a year—dine at the exact same table at the exact same restaurant in Brussels. They always choose the same aperitif, the same main, and the same bottle of Seresin’s Chardonnay Reserve. One day, a few years ago, the importer ran out of his wine. The restaurant owner, in a panic, got straight on the phone to Seresin—between them, they hastily arranged to have several cases sent by courier from England just to keep the couple’s ritual alive. “Now that’s magical,” he says. “It’s bringing pleasure to people—and that’s enough. If I knew that a few hundred people worldwide had something like that—that would be enough.”

In any case, Seresin shows no signs of slowing down. Besides an upcoming film for Warner Bros, he has a few experimental wines in the pipeline. Over the last couple of years the company has tried two small vintages of sulphur-free wines—a Sauvignon Blanc and a Pinot Noir. The former, he says, turned out unexceptional but the Pinot Noir has caused a bit of a stir. He still sees it as a “sideshow”, but one to be developed. There are, though, limits to his ambition—when I ask if he’d ever consider trying his hand at English wine, he replies without a moment’s thought: “Absolutely not!”