

## An old knives tale

By Jo Burzynska

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Val de Sil, Man O'War and Dancing Water. Photo / Babiche Martens.

In a bizarre ritual with more phallic connotations than you can shake a sabre at, a sword wielding sommelier runs his weapon up the neck of a bottle of champagne, sending both the glass lip of the bottle and cork flying off on a spurt of fizz. Allegedly popularised by Napoleon when toasting his victories, this is just one of the strange practices to be found at the wackier end of wine.

Sabrage, as it's known, is an extravagant method of opening sparkling wine largely employed on ceremonial occasions. I've been party to it in Champagne and though reassured that the pressure in the bottle means none of the glass from the decapitation falls back into it, call me overly cautious, but I feel much safer imbibing bubbly from a bottle opened by more conventional means.

Other rituals seem less ridiculous if they're more widespread. Take the toast, which apparently derived its name from the pieces of bread that were once dropped into a wine to improve its flavour. This soggy crouton became the name associated with drinking to the health of one's company in the 17th century, allegedly when admirers of a beautiful lady in Bath did this using her bathing water and one declared he'd rather carry off the lady within this particular liquor – its toast.

There are several theories as to why we clink glasses. It could have derived from making church bell-like sounds to frighten off evil spirits thought to dwell within alcohol or the practice of guests tipping a bit of wine from their own glasses into that of the host before drinking to ensure it wasn't poisoned.

Passing the port in the correct direction is an etiquette widely observed in the Navy and still de rigueur at some British tables. The host first serves the guest to their right, before the port is passed clockwise round the table. As it's deemed rude to directly request someone to pass the port, the person closest to it may be asked by the one desirous of a drop more, "Do you know the Bishop of Norwich?" If that fails, the person may be prompted with, "He's an awfully nice fellow, but he never remembers to pass the port!"

Port's home territory of the Douro is also the place where foot treading is still to be found. The gnarled reality of the old men's feet that pound the grapes to a pulp can almost put you off the end product, but I've been assured their tootsies are squeaky clean.

Unlike these other conventions, foot treading is a valid traditional winemaking method. The gentle pressure exerted by the human foot – which maximises the extraction of colour from the grapeskins while minimising bitterness leached from their pips – is considered so desirable that some port houses now use machines that replicate the action.

Some of our winemakers are even employing "foot stomping", as it's more widely referred to here, for their top pinot noirs that benefit in particular from this technique. I've even heard of a few who like nothing better than to completely strip off to stomp – it's a modification not connected with improving quality, but if you happen to be visiting a winery, it may pay to knock before entering or risk copping an eyeful of an emerging Kiwi wine custom that could be as shocking as a spot of sabrage.

### Custom made

#### Delicious and different

**Val de Sil Valdeorras "Sobre Lias" Godello 2008 \$36**

Spain is making some great whites its northwestern Galicia region, like this fresh and savoury example from Valdeorras made from its native godello grape. It's a midweight wine with flavours reminiscent of citrus peel and green apples and a wonderfully slaty finish. (Bacchus Cellars, Wine Circle, The Village Winery, The Wine Vault, Wine Direct.)

#### Going great guns

**Man O' War Waiheke Island Chardonnay 2008 \$27.99**

A very classy chardonnay made by new winemaker at Man O' War, ex-Waipara Springs' Duncan McTavish. Rich, toasty and smoky notes are counterpoised by a tight mineral-infused citrus acidify. (From Fine Wine Delivery Company, Hamilton Wine Company, Waiheke Wine Centre, selected Glengarrys, Scenic Cellars.)

#### Light footed gris

**Dancing Water Waipara Pinot Gris 2008 \$25**

Waipara is making some of the country's most impressive pinot gris, which, like this focused dry example from relatively new label Dancing Water, combine intensity with freshness. This is elegant and creamy textured with notes of quince, coffee spice and mineral. (Order direct from [www.dancingwater.co.nz](http://www.dancingwater.co.nz))

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