

April 2008

Montana Heritage Trail protects and promotes majestic local trees

Before the New Zealand wine industry first gathered impetus in the hills west of Auckland in the early part of the last century, the local economy was built on an indigenous plant – the giant kauri tree (*Agathis australis*).

These straight-growing trees were valued for ship masts, construction and furniture, while their gum was bled to make paint and varnish. Due to excessive logging early on, it is not easy these days to see a group of them together in their natural habitat.

The largest mature stand of kauri in the Auckland region can be found in the northern part of the Waitakere Ranges Regional Parkland, west of Auckland city. There are about 100 kauri, ranging up to 600 years in age. What saved these trees from the loggers is their inaccessibility.

Though it is less than an hour's drive away from the Auckland CBD, before the Montana Heritage Trail was developed visitors had to slog through a long and muddy trail to get close to the kauri. And when they arrived, their joy at seeing these forest giants was tempered by the knowledge that by walking around the roots, they were actually harming these natural treasures.

Recognising that the environment was being damaged and that it was difficult to get to this large stand of kauri in its natural setting, Montana decided to step in and help the Auckland Regional Council.

The winemaker's own roots were in the Waitakere Ranges, where Croatian immigrant Ivan Yukich planted his first vineyard in the 1930s. His sons carried on the tradition and adopted the name Montana (Latin meaning "mountainous") in honour of the vineyard setting. Though the winemaking operations have long since relocated to more suitable environments, Montana's early history is linked with the rugged West Auckland landscape.

Preserving its own heritage association with the Waitakere Ranges was one of the reasons that in 2000, Montana entered into an agreement with the Auckland Regional Council to sponsor the Montana Heritage Trail. The more important reason was to make a unique part of New Zealand's heritage more accessible to the public and to support efforts that protect the area for the enjoyment of future generations.

"Our aim is twofold," says viticulture manager Tony Hoksbergen, who has been intimately involved in the project from when it was launched in 2000.

"We want to give local people and visitors the opportunity to enjoy one of New Zealand's inimitable nature experiences. At the same time, we hope it will foster a greater awareness and respect for our environment."

Apart from the kauri stand, the Montana Heritage Trail takes visitors through ancient and regenerating forest with bountiful birdlife, past a waterfall and onto platforms that offer spectacular views of the land as it looked before human settlement.

The kauri trees create homes for many other species and grow alongside other native trees such as rimu, kahikitea, puriri, totara, puketea and tanekaha. The area around the Montana Heritage Trail is also the habitat of one of New Zealand's only two indigenous mammals, the long-tailed bat (the other being the short-tailed bat.) Among the birds to be seen are kereru (native wood pigeons) tui and piwakawaka (fantails).

Construction on the Montana Heritage Trail started in November 2000 and the trail was officially opened to the public in March 2002. In the last year, more than 85,000 people visited the area.

Montana's contribution not only covered the major construction carried out over the first two years, but also carries through to maintenance for the following 18 years. At the end of this period, in 2020, Montana has the option to extend the sponsorship further.

Montana is also taking their commitment one step further and involving its staff in forest restoration and track work along the Montana Heritage Trail. Volunteer opportunities exist across the ARC's regional park network and the Waitakere Ranges parkland is no exception. Montana staff have pledged to get involved with tree planting, weed and pest control, track maintenance and repair work on a few occasions each year.

"Crafting wine has always meant a close relationship with the land and we recognise our responsibility to adopt the best environmentally sustainable practices in all aspects of our business, for the good of our business, the New Zealand environment and for future generations" says Fabian Partigliani, Managing Director.

"With the Montana Heritage Trail, we are enabling locals and visitors to the Waitakere Ranges to make the most of this opportunity. We are very lucky in New Zealand to have primeval forest so close to the city. We talk about letting nature tell its story, but there's nothing like being out on the trail and hearing it first hand!".

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