

fighting fungus

by Jacqui Taylor

Creating the “nectar of the gods” is a complex and time-consuming process, and whether there is a cork or a screw cap sealing the next bottle of wine you open, chances are the grower has battled sun, wind, rain and often extreme temperatures to create it.

One important aspect of grape growing is the control of pests and diseases, including Botrytis, a fungal infection in grapes, commonly known as bunch rot. Botrytis thrives in areas that are wet and warm, such as Gisborne and Hawkes Bay, representing a potential, annual risk to around two-thirds of the New Zealand grape harvest. It is estimated that direct grape loss due to Botrytis infection costs the New Zealand winegrowing industry \$15.5 million dollars a year with estimated potential lost wine sales of an additional \$77.4 million annually.

Dunedin company, Botry-Zen Limited, was formed in April 2001 to research, develop and commercialise biological control agents for use in the horticultural and agricultural industries. The first biological control agent it has released commercially is BOTRY-Zen, specifically developed for Botrytis cinerea control. The company owns an exclusive licence to produce and market the product worldwide, plus it has other new products currently in development.

“We have successfully developed BOTRY-Zen in a water-dispersible, dry, granulated formation with a shelf life of 10 months-plus,” says Botry-Zen Ltd’s chief executive officer, John Scandrett. “The steps associated with this task challenged us on many fronts, but we will have the product ready for full commercial release in New Zealand from September this year.”

A major advantage of the operation, once off-shore registration is achieved, is the company’s ability to use the New Zealand off-season to meet Northern hemisphere market demand. In France, one million hectares of grapes are grown, while in Spain it is close to 1.2 million. In New Zealand, 17,807 hectares were grown in 2004, double the area in 1995.

The company’s aim is to expand its marketing beyond New Zealand to worldwide markets and to utilise BOTRY-Zen for Botrytis and Sclerotinia control across other crops. Both fungi affect crops such as kiwifruit, tomatoes, blackcurrants and strawberries as well as grapes.

BOTRY-Zen is a live spore preparation of a non-pathogenic fungus. It is deposited on to dead grape flowers and competes for the same ecological niche as Botrytis, out-competing Botrytis for the nutrients in the dead flower tissue. BOTRY-Zen is non-invasive and causes no damage to live tissue.

“International interest is very significant, largely due to the fact that biological alternatives to chemical solutions are now being actively sought for food safety reasons,” says Scandrett. “In addition, market interest in our successful off-shore field results is growing substantially and we have a number



Grapes infected with bunch rot

of international marketing and distribution concerns lining up to represent us in key countries.” **bmr**

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Botry-Zen’s research and development laboratory in its Dunedin plant

marlborough trust initiative

In the late 1980s, when New Zealand’s unemployment rates were particularly high, the Department of Social Welfare (now Work and Income NZ) needed an organisation to facilitate training programmes to help unemployed people develop the skills they needed to become self-employed. In Marlborough, the Marlborough Employment Enterprise Trust was formed and contracted to deliver Be Your Own Boss courses.

Once the trust was established, it was found to require a reasonable amount of photocopying. A photocopy shop was then set up, which later became a fully operational copy centre, Custom Copy Ltd.

Phil Elvy, who established the photocopy shop and manages the business, as well as doing all the trust’s administration, says all the profits from the business are put back into the trust to enable it to continue its work.

Since its establishment, the trust has been able to benefit hundreds of people in the Marlborough region, Phil says. However, as the New Zealand economy has improved in recent years, bringing almost full employment, the trust has changed its focus. “There is now little need for the original programmes that were being run, so the trust is now looking for other avenues to disperse the funds,” Phil says.

These include providing a grant scheme to assist job apprentices with financial difficulties to complete their respective courses. “If the employment situation changes again, however, the trust has all the resources to re-establish the courses,” says Phil.

Whatever its activities, the trust will continue to be funded by Custom Copy Ltd, which is “a very busy photocopy shop,” he says. “We offer all the services people need, including business cards, brochures and bulk photocopying.” **bmr**

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Millers Mechanical (NZ) Ltd wish Botry-Zen well for the future

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