



This image from one of the surviving glass negatives taken shows the wine barrels inside the tiny tin shed at Kaikino, 1916. The original photo was taken by Josip Babich.

FROM DESOLATE GUMFIELDS TO THE WORLD

The story of Josip (Joze or Joe) Petrov Babich and Babich Wines

By Erika Currie, with kind assistance from Maureen Babich. Photographs supplied by the Babich family, unless otherwise stated.

Unable to speak English and with little money in his pocket, fourteen-year-old Josip Babić (Babich) arrived in New Zealand in 1910 from an impoverished Dalmatia. He was accompanied by his 17-year old brother Stipan.

Josip was born in Runović, a mountainous area of Dalmatia and part of Austrian-ruled Croatia. He was the second son born to Petar Babić and his second wife Iva, but the fifth son for his father whose

first wife Matija had died earlier in child birth. Petar and Iva were to have two more sons. For about seven years and before they could build a place of their own, the family lived with Petar's brother Nikola, his wife and their five children in a very small house.

Homes and small farms were perched on the side of mountains. There were no schools in Runović. Like many other people in the area, Josip's mother was illiterate and, according to a recorded interview with Josip

in about 1980, she looked after the sheep and goats – and the grapes. His father had served in the Austrian Army in Budapest from 1880-1883 where he learnt some literacy skills and which he passed on to his young boys. It was the only “schooling” Josip had.

These were desperate times and, coupled with the social hierarchy prevalent at the time there was little, if any, hope for work or a better life than the one into which one was born. The only escape from a lifetime of poverty was to leave. Desperate parents told their young, unemployed boys to immigrate to the “new world”, work hard, send money home to help the family and village, and to forge a better future for themselves. New Zealand was one of the countries they set their hopes on.

To most of us this may seem extremely harsh, but Josip’s son, Peter Babich MBE, and Chairman of the Board of Babich Wines Ltd, has visited the birthplaces of his parents and says that after seeing the tiny old houses and walking on the steep, stony grounds it is much easier to understand why parents were desperate enough to send their young boys away; “they lived on the side of mountains, there were just rocks.”

Josip’s father, during one of his provision buying trips to Makarska on the coast of the



Babich Wines is still a family business, from left: Peter Babich, MBE, Chairman of the Board; Joe Babich, Managing Director; and Peter's middle son David Babich, General Manager. Absent from this photo is Maureen Babich, Peter and Joe's sister, who works part time helping with the day-to-day running of the winery.

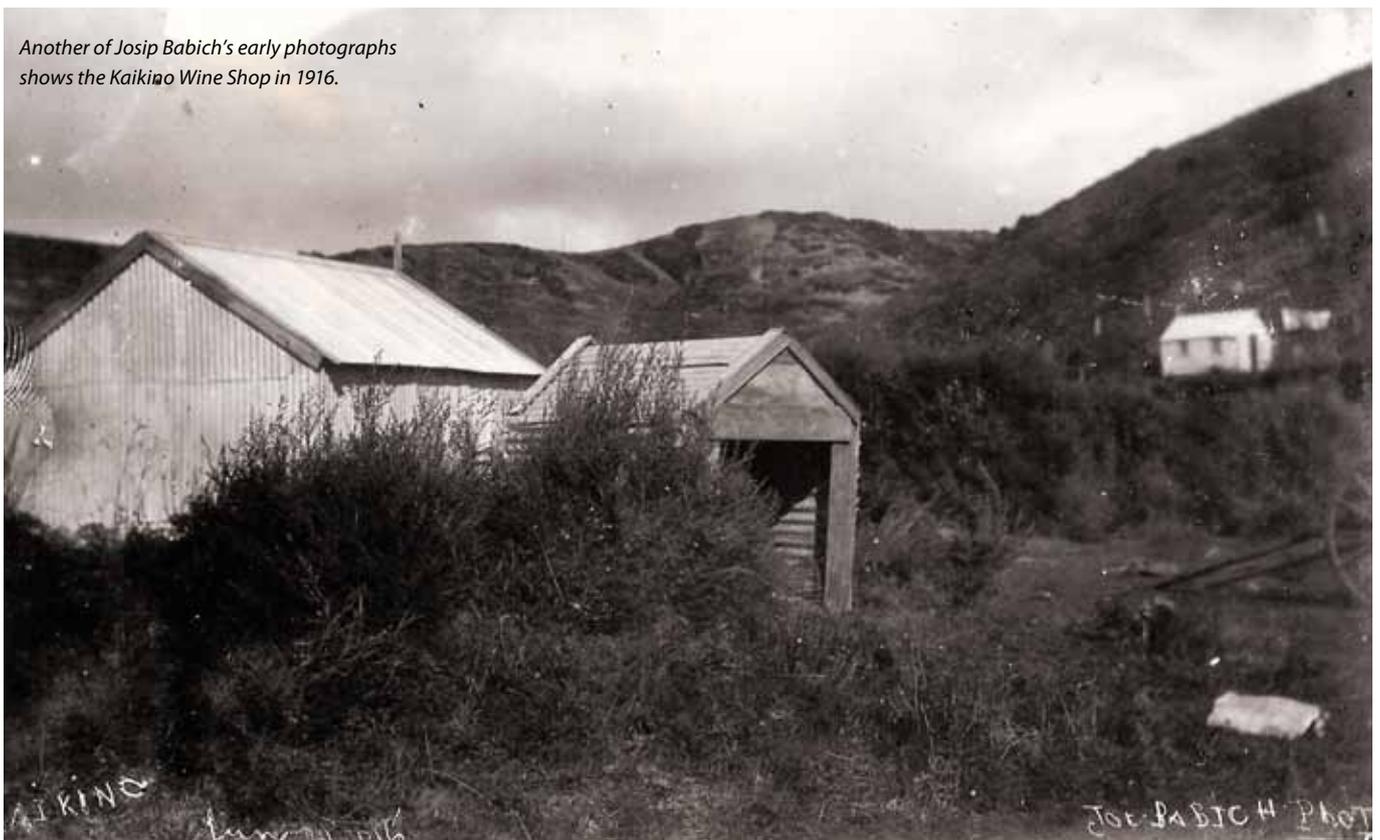
Adriatic Sea some 80km away, met Ivan Vela, who had been to New Zealand and told him that there that there was a good living to be made on the kauri gumfields of New Zealand. Sensing a glimmer of hope for a better future for his boys and, perhaps, the family, he decided to send his first-born to New Zealand. Jakov left home in 1904; brothers Mate and Ivan followed him in 1906 and 1908 respectively, and Josip and Stipan in 1910.

While these departures would have been heart-wrenching for the parents, they also would have been cause for pride and

excitement in a village where few, if any, had travelled beyond the village, let alone to the other side of the world. In the villagers’ eyes these boys were heroes - brave men embarking on an unknown, exotic adventure.

However, reading from the notes written by Milan Kostanich from an interview with Josip in around 1980, this was no adventure for the fainthearted. “We travelled on foot from Runović to Makarska. My father and Nikola went with us to Makarska. Two horses carried the luggage. Stayed three of four days in Makarska ... ▶

Another of Josip Babich's early photographs shows the Kaikīno Wine Shop in 1916.





Early days in rural west Auckland. This is probably the first photograph of Josip Babich's Henderson homestead and winery, taken in the 1930s.

“We went on the boat “Bosna” to Trieste [northern Italy], stayed overnight at Trieste, and then went to Naples. We stayed six hours at Rome station and got to Naples at midnight. Took us a day and bit to get to Rome. Then took the “Orsova” of the Orion Line next day on its maiden voyage – Port Said, through Suez Canal, Colombo and then Fremantle. From Colombo to Fremantle, 10 days and then to Sydney – stayed overnight on boat. Next day, in the morning, went by “Maheno” to Auckland – took 4 days.”

There was no turning back now – the two boys from an impoverished background in a remote mountain village and with no

knowledge of English had to face life in the new country.

They stayed in Auckland for a few days, where they were met by Jakov, one of the three older brothers already toiling on the gumfields near Awanui, about 7 km north of Kaitaia, in the far North, and then began their long journey by boat and overland to join their other brothers Mate and Ivan. There Josip began his working life as an errand boy and cook at a Dalmatian gumfields camp before becoming a gum digger himself.

However, according to his daughter, Maureen Babich, he hated gum digging, and

in 1912 planted his first grapes, a pocket-sized vineyard at Kaikino, north of Awanui, and in 1916 produced the first wine. Jakov had returned to Dalmatia in 1914, was conscripted into the Austrian army, was wounded and died in Zagreb hospital in 1915, leaving a young widow and baby.

Josip's other interests included bee keeping and photography. Three surviving glass negatives provide an insight into the humble beginnings of what is now an award-winning, internationally recognised wine label. The glass negatives, with “Kaikino Wineshop 1916” scratched on the plates, show a tin shed near the Babich homestead. Inside are a stack of barrels with the word “Babich” chalked on their heads, copper jugs, siphon tubing, a funnel, bottles and worn bottle-cleaning brush.

However, selling wine in early 20th century New Zealand was no road to quick riches, and certainly not in remote Northland. For a £1 sale, Josip would sometimes make an 80-mile (127km) delivery trip on horseback, a dozen bottles of port slung over his saddle.

Also unhelpful was the law which stipulated the minimum quantity of wine per sale had to be two gallons (approx 9



Now; this photograph of Babich Wines was taken in February 2011, from the same place and angle as the 1930s image.

litres). Josip was once prosecuted for allegedly selling two bottles of wine to a customer, but the case was dismissed when the police witness's evidence proved inconsistent. His lawyer, H H Ostler, however, urged Josip to "get away from this place. There's no future for a winemaker up here."

In 1919 he and his three brothers moved closer to Auckland, onto land they had bought earlier at Henderson. Described as a "wilderness" the brothers farmed the rough land jointly. To generate an immediate income, they milked cows, grew vegetables, planted fruit trees – and, taking a longer term view, planted a vineyard.

Josip's dream of establishing another vineyard and making wine was realised when, in the 1920s, wine-making resumed. This time, Josip was hawking his port and sherry in bottles, half-gallon jars and clay jero-boams of varying sizes around the streets of Auckland. His mode of transport was a horse and cart.

Some years later, when Josip and Stipan married, the property was divided with Stipan continuing with milking cows and fruit-growing and Josip with the vineyard and winemaking. One brother, Ivan, had previously died of pneumonia and the other brother Mate, pursued his own contracting business in Whangarei.

Over time, the company's name evolved from New Era Orchard and Vineyard to Pinot Vineyards, Northern Vineyards and finally Babich Wines – the label which now graces some of the finest dining tables of the world.

On 31 July 1929, Josip married Mara Grgić, another Dalmatian immigrant. Like Josip earlier, Mara did not speak English when she set foot on New Zealand, and her arrival in Auckland did not go according to plan, causing her much distress. She was to be met by her sister who lived in the far North, but when Mara stepped off the boat the sister was not there. Distraught, Mara returned to the ship where a Dalmatian-speaking officer took pity on her and took her to a boarding house in Federal Street, Auckland. Maureen Babich says her mother, all alone in a strange land and city, with little money and unable to communicate, had no idea what to do. In time, Mara learnt the cause of her stressful situation - her sister's husband had taken ill



Photograph Erika Currie

and was in hospital. Mara was to find her own way north by train.

Josip and Mara had three daughters and two sons, but for many years Mara felt desperately homesick.

By the late 1930s most of Babich's income was derived from wine-making. Along with a five acre orchard, he owned seven acres of mixed vines and each year about 3,000 gallons of wine were sold directly from the winery or delivered to customers throughout Auckland. World War II and the influx of American military personnel proved good for Josip and his fledgling business. The Americans had money and increased demand for wine allowed him to sell any previously unsold vintages and repay some debts.

The post-war years saw sons Peter (in 1948) and 10 years later Joseph (Joe) join the business. Wine was slowly becoming more popular and sales of Babich Dry White, Dry Red and Palomino Sherry gradually increased, allowing for the expansion of the winery and vineyards during the 1960s and 70s.

A highlight in Josip Babich's winemaking career was in 1980 with the first exports to Europe. It must have been an immensely proud moment to see wine produced by his own hand being shipped to Europe whence he came from as an impoverished boy 70 years earlier.

Since then Babich Wines have won many national and international awards and competitions, and export sales to more than 20 countries now exceed domestic wine sales. The company now has vineyards in Hawke's Bay and Marlborough, but the foundation stone for Babich Wines remains at the original, picturesque Henderson



Embroidered cushion showing the Babich crest. Irongate and The Patriarch are the names of two wine ranges; the latter being a premium red wine made in honour of the company's founder and wine industry pioneer Josip Babich.

Photograph Erika Currie

site, where part of the original vineyard site remains. The winery, however, is a thoroughly modern operation - and Babich Wines is still a family business.

Josip Babich died at Henderson on 22 August 1983. After leaving Dalmatia in 1910 he saw his homeland only once more, in 1954. With his passion for wine making, his strong beliefs in providing good service and good value for money, fostering of family and community values and his contribution to the wine industry he helped establish he has left his adoptive country a rich legacy.

His wife Mara died in 1994, at the age of 91. □

Further info: www.babichwines.co.nz/

Further reading: Tarara – Croats and Maori in New Zealand - Memory, Belonging, Identity (reviewed in Heritage Matters Issue 16, Spring 2008)