New Zealand

7 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: New World wines with crisp fruity acids and intense flavours.

Main grapes: Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Gris (white); Pinot Noir, Merlot (red).

The New Zealand wine industry, which produces a fraction of one per cent of the world's wine, has a real problem. Like the country itself, it is so small and vulnerable that navigating a safe course across the treacherous waters of the international wine market can be extremely difficult. One strong economic wind and a pronounced list to starboard can threaten to capsize the craft altogether.

In 1986, fearing over-production, the government encouraged growers to pull out a quarter of the country's vines. Just seven years later (thanks to short vintages, and damage done by the phylloxera louse) there was such a desperate shortage of grapes that there simply wasn't enough wine to mount a serious export effort.

However, the results of fast and furious plantings in the mid 1990s helped to introduce more and more wine drinkers to the unique character of wines from these Pacific islands three hours' flying time south east of Australia. Demand continues to outstrip supply, keeping the average price of New Zealand extremely high and encouraging continued planting fever. In the last 10 years, the number of wineries has doubled and the area under vine has more then trebled. However, uneven harvests mean that production is still a roller-coaster ride for growers.

New Zealand wines combine the well-preserved pure fruit flavours of New World winemaking with the natural grape acidity associated with northern Europe. This crispness, sometimes piercing and a characteristic of New Zealand reds as well as whites, is a feature markedly lacking in the great majority of New World wines, including most of those still made in Australia, which is why a number of Australian producers buy wine and even grapes from New Zealand (especially Sauvignon Blanc and ingredients for sparkling wine blends). In Europe vines tend to planted on poor soils, so yields are low and the grapes can ripen fairly well despite the high acidity, but New Zealand's soils can be very fertile so New Zealanders have had to devise ways of manipulating their vines, stripping leaves, and making every ray of sunshine contribute towards the ripening process. (New Zealand is the home of canopy management) New Zealand wine producers are allowed to make an unusually wide range of adjustments to the basic wine recipe: irrigation, chaptalisation, acidification and deacidification are all sanctioned in recognition of the country's extremely variable climate.

Wine drinkers outside New Zealand who have experienced New Zealand wines tend to regard the country's distinctively pungent, fruity way with the razor-sharp Sauvignon Blanc as the country's hallmark wine, but the dominance of this aromatic variety is a very recent phenomenon – the first Sauvignon Blanc vines were planted in the 1970s. Whatever the vicissitudes of fashion, it is clear that New Zealand is likely to remain a predominantly white wine producer and the growing interest in other aromatic varieties such as Pinot Gris and Riesling is reflected in increased plantings. Crisp, fresh, occasionally over-oaked Chardonnay, for some time the second string to Sauvignon Blanc, has now been eclipsed by the country’s highly successful, impressively fruity Pinot Noirs. Intensely flavoured yet elegant wines have been produced in a variety of different regions, notably Martinborough on the North Island and Central Otago in the south of the South Island, although the temptation to use too much new oak has not always been resisted. Some particularly well-favoured vineyard sites, especially around Hawke’s Bay on the North Island, can yield concentrated Cabernet/Merlot blends but these varieties sometimes struggle to ripen, yielding wines with marked herbaceous flavours.

The country's three biggest wine regions by far are Marlborough, Hawke’s Bay and Gisborne, with the first way out ahead of the rest in terms of the volume of wine produced. There are still hundreds of farmers producing grapes, typically just one of several agricultural activities, for one of the country's big bottlers such as Montana (now owned by drinks giant Pernod Ricard), Nobilo, Delegats, or the Villa Maria/Vidal/Esk Valley group, which consistently produces more fine red wine than any other New Zealand operation.

NORTH ISLAND

From north to south.

Auckland

At one time most of the country's wine producers were based in the suburbs of its largest city, particularly in Henderson. Today vine growing is focused on cooler areas but some of the bigger producers such as Montana still have their headquarters in Auckland and bottle their wines here. The family operation Kumeu River continues to pursue French-inspired techniques with grapes ripened in the Auckland suburb of Kumeu, producing especially fine single-vineyard Chardonnays. A short ferry ride from the city, Waiheke Island is drier than the mainland and is a focus for the 'boutique' or 'lifestyle' winery phenomenon, with Stonyridge's Cabernets setting a standard.

Waikato/Bay of Plenty

Between Auckland and Gisborne this dual-named region houses several successful wineries, of which Morton Estate is the best known.

Gisborne/Poverty Bay

The North Island's self-styled Chardonnay garden was ravaged by phylloxera in the late 1980s but is now on course to provide creamy, rather tropical fruit flavoured grapes, mainly as raw material for the larger producers. It has also produced the country's best Gewurztraminer (notably from the Gewurz specialist Nick Nobilo at Vinoptima), which can be very good indeed in some years, as well as intense Semillon and Chenin Blanc. The estate bottler of most note is Millton Estate, which preached the gospel of biodynamism years before Burgundy's top producers had even heard of it.

Hawke's Bay

South of Gisborne on the east coast of the North Island, Hawke's Bay is New Zealand's most varied wine region. Parts of it are quite warm and well drained enough to produce fine Cabernet and Merlot, particularly in the area known as Gimblett Gravels just north of Hastings, but also in the limestone hills of Havelock North, where John Buck established a reputation for the region's red wines at Te Mata estate. His Bullnose Syrah was one of the first to show the potential for this variety, now being enthusiastically planted on some of Hawke's Bay's poorest soils. . Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc are also produced here, with the former having overtaken Merlot as the most widely planted variety in an area that is probably New Zealand's most interesting for barrel salesmen.

Some favourite producers: Alpha Domus, Craggy Range, Kim Crawford, Esk Valley, Ngatarawa, C J Pask, Stonecroft, Te Awa, Te Mata, Trinity Hill, Unison, Vidal.

Martinborough

This region in the south east of the North Island is known as Wairarapa or Martinborough, although officially the latter is a subregion of the former. Temperatures are lower and autumns reliably drier than in other North Island regions and it produces some stunning Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Pinot Gris is the latest fashion. Unlike most other regions, wines tend to be made by those who grow the grapes here.

Some favourite producers: Ata Rangi, Dry River, Escarpment, Martinborough Vineyard, Palliser.

SOUTH ISLAND

From north to south.

Nelson

In the north west of the South Island, Neudorf is the star of Nelson, for rich Chardonnay and ageworthy Pinot Noir.

Marlborough

The wide, flat, vine-covered expanse of the Wairau Valley and the sharply etched mountains around it may now be New Zealand's most photographed wine region but in 1973 the entire South Island was terra incognita to the country's wine industry. The Marlborough region at the island's north-eastern tip was created by the Montana winery, which bought up sheep-farming land almost by stealth, gambling on its assessment of the region's potential to produce wines that would be as attractive to consumers as to their producers.

Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc seduced the imagination and palates of thousands of wine drinkers outside New Zealand in the mid 1980s when the first releases of Cloudy Bay trickled on to the British, American and Australian markets. At that stage, Cloudy Bay was just a clever name, label and concept dreamt up by Western Australian winemaker David Hohnen of Cape Mentelle, but the distinctively lush tropical flavours he and winemaker Kevin Judd coaxed from this sometimes austere variety were sufficient to put Marlborough Sauvignon on the international wine map. Others such as Hunter's established an early reputation for their Sauvignon and Chardonnay, too, while subsequent increases in grape prices encouraged all manner of investors, gamblers and local farmers to chance their arm at vine growing. Although most of them sell their grapes to the bigger companies, many of them also sell some wine under their own label, many of them made at contract wineries.

Marlborough Chardonnays can be attractively lean and refreshing - the ripest of them benefiting imperceptibly from some barrel fermentation and maturation, the lightest making an increasing contribution to some fine traditional-method sparkling wines. There has also been talk here, as elsewhere in the world, of a Riesling renaissance, although Pinot Gris, often made in a gently floral, off-dry style unlike either Alsace Pinot Gris or Italian Pinot Grigio, has now overtaken Riesling in terms of quantity. Red wines, mainly Pinot Noir, are steadily gaining more flesh with some of the most convincing examples coming from the Swiss-owned Fromm winery and Vavasour (second label Dashwood), which has pioneered the Awatere Valley to the south. It is generally drier, cooler and windier than the Wairau Valley, with more marked day–night temperature variation, but summers are long and hot, so that Merlot and Cabernet ripen fully. Pinot Noir is grown both for sparkling wine and still reds, the latter sometimes sweet and rather simple.

Some favourite producers: Clifford Bay, Cloudy Bay, Delta, Fromm, Hunter’s, Jackson Estate, Isabel Estate, Mud House, Saint Clair, Seresin, Vavasour, Villa Maria, Wither Hills.

Canterbury

Further south on the South Island, the climate can be so variable that few wineries can promise top quality year in and year out. But in the Canterbury region round Christchurch, some inspiring wines have been made by Waipara Springs and St Helena. Pinot Noir and Chardonnay were the first varieties to show promise, as Mountford has shown, and the likes of Pegasus Bay are now also producing crisp, flinty Rieslings. Other particularly ambitious growers include Bell Hill and Pyramid Valley.

Central Otago

The world's most southerly wine region, where until recently viticulture was a truly marginal activity pursued with vigour and dedication by Rippon, Gibbston Valley and Felton Road. The growing season is short and the vineyard area is small but it has grown fivefold in the last 10 years. The focus here is intensely fruity Pinot Noir, much of it the produce of young vines and some wines are still seriously overoaked. However, as the vines age and producers show greater experience and restraint, the wines are becoming finer and more elegant.

The new region of Waitaki in north-east Otago boasts limestone and seems to be the next area ripe for development.

Some favourite producers: Felton Road, Gibbston Valley, Mount Difficulty, Mount Edward, Rippon.

See New Zealand Wine for more information on wine in this region.