

## New Zealand's glut to be drained?

17 Feb 2012 by Richard Hemming & Alastair Maling MW

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The UK's thirst for Sauvignon Blanc remains apparently unslaked, for earlier this month it was announced that Sauvignon Blanc has joined Chardonnay and Pinot Grigio as the joint best-selling white variety. Chardonnay, for years the top seller (despite the [ABC](#) protestations of the proletariat), is in fact declining, while Pinot Grigio is racing away, with sales growing 16% a year.

The growth of Sauvignon Blanc is thanks almost entirely to New Zealand, which increased its retail sales volume by 11% last year. Good job too, since there has been an awful lot of it to sell. There has been a glut of the stuff in recent years, leading to the so-called 'Savalanche' of wine that poured from New Zealand into important export markets such as Australia, the UK and, more recently, China.

With lower yields likely in 2012, plus these improved sales figures, the ever-optimistic Kiwis are predicting parity of supply and demand this year.

A detailed look at the 2012 season, compiled by Alastair Maling MW, group winemaker for Villa Maria, follows.

### MARLBOROUGH

Marlborough has had a cooler spring and beginning of summer than usual. As of last week, growing degree days stood at 612, approximately 10% behind the long-term average of 667 for the same time period. It is the latest the season has been tracking for four years, with thoughts being that phenologically we are 10 to 14 days behind.

As well as being cooler, there have been low levels of sunshine and regular rainfall events throughout December, which have resulted in an extended flowering period across all varieties, leading to variation within the blocks and a high incidence of hen and chicken [abnormal fruit set, also known as *millerandage*], especially in the Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and some Sauvignon Blanc. Although flowering began in the early varieties (Pinot Noir, Pinot Grigio) in the first week of December, it was drawn out, with Sauvignon Blanc in the cooler sub-regions only starting close to Christmas and completing into the second week of the new year.

The cool flowering temperatures have meant that fruit set is variable across the entire region. The general feeling is that yields are going to be down on previous years, and a number of blocks may not reach target yields. There are blocks that have flowered well and will require some yield management, though much less than previous years.

Canopy growth has been slow, with most sites only just finishing the first trim on the Sauvignon Blanc in the second week of January. Leaf-plucking operations are almost completed where required, with pre-bunch closure sprays to be applied over the next week. Many blocks applied two botrytis cover sprays over the flowering period due to the wet and extended conditions. There were several significant botrytis events over the flowering period, however most blocks had protection on before the events occurred.

Very little additional irrigation has been required due to the regular rainfall. However, with the vines now at full canopy and more settled weather, moisture levels are being closely watched.

### WAIPARA

Currently Waipara growing conditions are very similar to Marlborough, with a cooler flowering situation and lower crop potential.

### HAWKE'S BAY

The growing season commenced slightly early in spring, which made us nervous of spring frosts. As it turned out we had a couple of nights' frost protecting, but overall the spring was not too cold.

The season to date has not been remarkable. From spring through to the end of December temperatures were generally below average. An extended period of cool weather from November through December slowed spring growth. Flowering was delayed but also affected by cooler weather, which has resulted in more open, lighter bunches across most varieties. The naturally lighter yields should hopefully allow for a more normal ripening period, and of course high quality fruit at harvest.

Heavy rainfall late in December and early January has meant there has been no shortage of soil moisture, and canopies have continued to grow until now. Since then we have had a great run of very sunny, warm weather. This has seen blocks develop more quickly and most varieties are in veraison. A lot of additional leaf plucking and canopy work has the vines looking very good for a fine season ahead.

## **GISBORNE**

So far the growing season in Gisborne has been a little slow. The weather was cooler and cloudier than normal before Christmas and quite dry. Comments from many growers are that the canopies have not filled out as much as usual and tucking and trimming have been done later than normal.

I thought the weather at flowering was pretty good, mostly dry with very high winds at times. However, pollination has been pretty ordinary; Chardonnay has been affected the most with most clones setting very loose bunches with few chickens.

Pinot Gris also has looser bunches; there are some big crops of Gewürztraminer and Viognier out there and some more thinning may be required after we do pre-veraison weighing to get a better picture of crop levels.

Many growers have used sheep to do the leaf plucking this year with great results. They do a better job than a machine and are lot cheaper than getting a gang in to hand pluck. Veraison won't be far away in some of the early blocks so thinning needs to be done before the nets go on. There are no pest or disease issues at this stage and there has not been any sign of early botrytis despite some very severe infection periods after New Year.

In summary, the loose bunches with few chickens and well leaf-plucked low vigour canopies are a good start to a successful vintage.

## **AUCKLAND**

The Auckland vineyard has had 116 mm of rain for December and 113 mm of rain for January. Pre-Christmas the vineyard was leaf plucked so it has been great to have the canopy well open.

The later part of January has seen some excellent hot weather. No more rain will be great from now on!