



A taste of things to come



*A three-week sojourn through New Zealand's wine regions
uncovers new stars waiting to join the ranks of exports already
turning heads around the world.*

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It is hard to believe that just a few decades ago, no one would have suggested that New Zealand would produce world class wines. And yet in just a few years comes a new generation of wines that are challenging the classics of France – from Champagne to Burgundy, and from Bordeaux to Sancerre.

My three-week investigation of New Zealand wineries, with the unflinching assistance of co-pilot Rose Zgodzinski, took us from oldest to youngest, most northerly to southerly, highest to lowest, often where few wine writers have gone before. We discovered the incredible variety of flavours created in a small, sparsely populated country of just under four million, a place that one might easily dismiss as insignificant. After all, in terms of total world wine exports, New Zealand accounts for only two bottles in a thousand.

Today, 10 wine regions with 460 wineries, consisting of four large and 34 medium-sized operations, are spread over two islands – north and south. The climate, soil, growing conditions and types of grapes being grown vary incredibly. Our exploration begins in the most northerly vineyards moving south, highlighting producers who have captured my palate and/or imagination – a taste of things to come.

NORTH ISLAND – NORTHLAND

The North Island is known for its active volcanic mountains, earthquakes, hot springs, indigenous Maori (still 18 per cent of the population) and, its most populated city, Auckland. Northland is the smallest region and, until recently, only had five wineries accounting for less than 0.1 per cent of total production. This remote area north of Auckland was the birthplace of the grape growing industry in 1819, but it wasn't until 1833 that the grapes were used to make wine. The climate is warm, verging on tropical, with lots of rain and high humidity, which can create havoc (i.e., mold and dilution) during the critical ripening period.

It requires an arduous six-hour drive north of Auckland to visit a remarkable

new winery on the breathtaking Karikari Peninsula. On this remote finger of land jutting out into the sea on New Zealand's northeastern tip sits Karikari Estate with some 40 hectares of newly planted vineyards (currently being doubled). It is exciting to discover a region, where grapes have never been grown before, that may well be on the way to producing some of the country's finest wine.

The winery was conceived by the owners of a luxury resort known as the Carrington Club. We toured the winery with property manager Ben Haig, a world champion skeet/trap shooter. Highlights were a juicy, black cherry-driven Karikari Estate 2003 Merlot (merlot makes up half their plantings), as well as the bright, red cherry flavoured 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon. Syrah, pinotage and malbec are also being made, along with some whites, including chardonnay.

AUCKLAND REGION

Journeying south is the sprawling Auckland region, which can be subdivided into another five distinctive sub-regions. This once-major wine centre has seen its position erode as viticultural efforts shifted south to less expensive, drier regions. Nevertheless, most major producers are still here, including Montana, Villa Maria, Nobilo, Matua Valley, Coopers Creek, and Babich. Of the 93 wineries here, many source a portion of their grapes from vineyards they own and/or contract growers

in the south, especially Marlborough and Hawkes Bay.

Auckland appears to be back on a roll as the number of vineyards has more than doubled over the past decade. One new region called Matakana, which was only planted 20 years ago, now has 13 wineries and shows great potential.

About an hour north of Auckland is the largest winery, Matakana Estates. The immaculate 16.3-hectare hillside vine-



Dean Shaw, Central Octago Wine

yard is planted on unusual, free-draining, granulated clay soils in a protected valley surrounded by a spectacular coast. Owner Patricia Vegar-Fitzgerald, who pioneered the site, was inspired by the winemaking efforts of her Croatian grandfather, Luká Lunjevich. Her son Peter Vegar organized the tasting in the beautiful modern wine centre.

In terms of reds, the chocolaty, dense yet balanced Matakana 1998 Estate Cabernet, reminiscent of classic Bordeaux, was stunning. The 1998 has been replaced by a ripe cherry-driven 2000. Another

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highlight is the honeysuckle-ruby grapefruit-flavoured Matakana 2003 Estate Semillon, which was made from low yielding vines and hand-picked in three stages.

Vegar explains that each part is handled differently – one in stainless steel to maintain fruit, another with lees-aging for complexity and a final portion barrel-fermented and matured in French oak.

Like many wineries, Matakana has vineyards on several sites. This spreads risk

associated with a single site microclimate and it enables them to achieve a more harmonious style reflecting the attributes of grapes grown in different terroir. The downside is that style can change from one year to the next.

Moving south past Auckland's urban sprawl, we discovered New Zealand's most fascinating producer, Vin Alto. Located high in the Clevedon Hills region, the 12-year-old vineyard sits on a very steep, north-facing slope. On our visit, the new wine centre was still under construction.

Owner/winemaker Enzo Bettio is a man on a mission to produce Italian classics. He pioneered numerous Italian varieties and even developed a grape drying shed designed for New Zealand's first "Amarone." Unfortunately, growing Italian grapes has not been easy – most of the nebbiolo has been pulled out, while sangiovese has been overly prolific, with only montepulciano behaving properly.

The tasting, orchestrated by Enzo's wife Margaret, featured one of the highest scoring reds of the trip – Vino Alto 1996 Retico with a whopping 15.2 per cent alcohol. Like Amarone, it is made from totally dried grapes, which lose 40 per cent of their weight as bunches dry on racks. The rich, leathery, chocolate-cherry, sundried tomato and ripe plum flavours were a revelation. Who could have guessed that they were made from cabernet franc and merlot? Only the 1998, which still needs more time to evolve, is still available.

HAWKES BAY – NEW ZEALAND'S SECOND LARGEST VINEYARD REGION

Continuing south through the small Waikato/Bay of Plenty region, past the much larger Gisborne region (focusing on white grapes, principally chardonnay), one arrives in Napier, the art deco capital of the Hawkes Bay region. It has the largest plantings on the North Island and is only second in vineyard numbers to the South Island's Marlborough region.

In Hawkes Bay, terroir is king. Some 60 wineries sit on 22 categories of soil types,

from total stones to hard pans to heavy silts. Ripening dates can vary by more than a month between the lower altitude hot Gimblett Road area, to the higher altitude vineyards of central Hawkes Bay.

Perhaps the country's most opulent

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and visually beautiful operation is the state-of-the-art Craggy Range winery complex, complete with its stunning restaurant, Terroir. It opened in 2002, under the guidance of Master of Wine Steve Smith. In addition to some 100 hectares of vineyards planted on the Gimblett Gravels, another 120 hectares are located in Martinborough to the south (mostly pinot noir and sauvignon blanc).



Queenstown, New Zealand at night



Craggy Range's highly regarded cabernet sauvignon-based reds are very concentrated and still somewhat tight.

There are all too many wines worthy of a detour. Certainly the Bordeaux-inspired 1991 Te Mata Estate Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot was a standout and one of the revelations of the trip. Also worth searching out are the new outstanding special reserve syrah, especially from Matariki and Craggy Range. Also unforgettable was the Sileni Estate 2002 The Lodge Chardonnay, made by winemaker Grant Edmonds.

WAIRARAPA – PINOT NOIR

Just 40 kilometres east of New Zealand's capital city of Wellington is Wairarapa – North Island's most southerly wine region with 52 wineries. To get there, you have to cross a small mountain range – a perilous

drive over terrifying, foggy, twisting, narrow, mountainous roads. It is worth the effort, especially if the sun is shining, because around the small town of Martinborough are the region's oldest vineyards planted only 26 years ago.

It is most famous for pinot noir and is home to a number of excellent producers. Of course, like elsewhere, vintages can be variable. A 1998 to 2003 pinot noir vertical at the highly regarded Ata Rangi winery demonstrated huge qualitative swings

from year to year, although most scored over 90 points. In first place, the very Burgundian 1999 tied with the classic 2001; the lighter, elegant 2000 topped the tangy, cherry stone flavoured 2002 (now in screwcap); the promising, silky 2003 showed some sweet fruit; while the concentrated 1998 showed some maturity and yet still had some tannic notes. Certainly other varieties excel, especially the outstanding fruit-driven sauvignon blanc at Palliser Estate.

SOUTH ISLAND – MARLBOROUGH REGION

Although only planted in 1973, Marlborough is New Zealand's largest grape growing area and home for many well-known wineries, such as Cloudy Bay, Villa Maria and Montana. It is the distinctive pungency and zesty fruit flavours of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, which accounts for over half the vineyards, that has attracted world attention. Climate is the key – it is the sunniest part of New Zealand and has low autumn rainfall.

Visiting five wineries in a day was not an easy task. Indeed, our first stop at Cellier Le Brun had us worried about excessive crop yields combined with 0.45

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micron sterile filtration, as some of the wines seemed thin and diluted.

At Herzog, by contrast, the focus is on estate-grown, unfiltered reds made from very low-yielding, high-density plantings. The results are very impressive: delicious, slightly smoky, cherry-berry flavoured pinot noir demonstrating that there is more to Marlborough than great whites. Ditto at Konrad whose 2001 Pinot Noir displayed terrific charm. As well, their head-turning, succulent, sweet Konrad 2002 Sigrun Noble Riesling demonstrated that there is a lot more to Marlborough than just great Sauvignon Blanc.

CANTERBURY

The Canterbury vineyards are concentrated in two areas: the plains around the city of Christchurch and the newer undulating Waipara valley. It is the fifth largest wine region with 49 wineries focusing on chardonnay and pinot noir (60 per cent combined), followed up by riesling and sauvignon blanc.

Waipara producers are doing great things with their reserve pinot noir, especially Daniel Schuster (Omihia Hills Vineyard Selection Pinot Noir), Muddy Water and Waipara Springs.

At Pegasus Bay, winemaker Matt Donaldson and his wife, Lynette Hudson, who makes the whites, chronicled problems with ever-changing climate. We were impressed with the 2001 pinot noir, both the regular and a reserve called Prima Donna, which were showing well.

OTAGO - WINES WITH ALTITUDE

Of all New Zealand wine regions, Otago with 76 wineries is the fastest growing – a 14-fold increase over the past decade. This spectacularly beautiful, high mountain region has four major distinct grape growing districts – the cooler, southerly small Gibbston valley (20 per cent of the region's vineyards), the much larger Cromwell basin (70 per cent) to the east, Wanaka (three per cent) to the north (home to the organic Rippon Vineyard), and finally, the world's most southerly region of Alexandria (seven per cent).

With hot summers and icy-cold winters, there are often great differences between summer highs and night time

lows – up to 30 C. This region has a great reputation for its pinot noir (now 80 per cent of the plantings), followed by chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and riesling.

The first wines were produced by Jean Desire Féraud, a French gold miner, who came to this region during the 1862 gold rush. He recognized the region's potential and in 1964 planted a vineyard producing a variety of wines, some of which were competition prize winners in far away Sydney.

Driving southwest from Christchurch (in Canterbury), one passes Mt. Cook and New Zealand's highest vineyard, Clay

Quartz Reef, winemaker/owner Rudi Bauer has managed to produce the best New Zealand sparkle: the rich 1998 Chauvet Méthode Traditionelle.

Meanwhile, at New Zealand's most westerly winery, the spectacular new Amisfield Vineyards situated on picturesque Lake Hayes, we discovered a juicy, ripe melon-flavoured 2003 Rocky Knoll Riesling. It was only outdone by their luscious 2003 Noble Riesling, where the fully botrytized grapes were left on the vine to dehydrate. In the words of winemaker Jeff Sinnott, "trying to press bunches that resemble dead rats is rather like trying to get juice out of sawdust – it tends to ooze."

Close by, just past the bungee jump from hell, is New Zealand's most-visited winery, Gibbston Valley. Highlights from the tasting with winemaker Grant Taylor included a juicy ripe black cherry flavoured 2002 Pinot Noir and the excellent Gibbston Valley 2003 Pinot Gris. Remember that the adjacent cheesery produces the not-to-be-missed pyramid-shaped Hokonui cheese.

It is a three-hour drive to our final destination, Margaret John, the world's most southerly vineyard. To say that this tiny outpost is unknown is an understatement. We were



Margaret an d'Enzo Bettio

They started here in 1994 only to have all their pinot noir die because over-zealous governmental horticulturists had inadvertently poisoned their cuttings.

Cliffs Estate, which stands alone at 440 metres. Owners Judy Gilbert and her husband Brian, the local sheriff, who run the café/tasting bar have extended this tiny outpost to some four hectares. Tasting their totally unknown, but delicious 2003 Pinot Gris made me realize that New Zealand really is a land of discovery.

There were many highlights among the outstanding 2002 pinot noirs tasted, including Chard Farm, Felton Road, Mt. Difficulty and Carrick, just to name a few. One of the more interesting stops was at the Central Otago Wine Company, where winemaker Dean Shaw produces wines from a number of well-known small estates. Highlights included a brilliant Two Paddocks 2002 Pinot Gris and Nevis Bluffs 2001 Pinot Noir. And just across the way at

the first "foreign" wine writers to visit – not too surprising considering that only some 250 cases are made. They started here in 1994 only to have all their pinot noir die because over-zealous governmental horticulturists had inadvertently poisoned their cuttings.

A gold prospector at heart, John still combs the hills panning for the motherload. The ripe cherry-black raspberry-flavoured 2001 Pinot Noir was a highlight, although the floral 2002 Gewurztraminer was no shrinking violet. "Only 15 cases of the Pinot are left," John says adding, "who knows maybe we'll plant more next year." With all the electrifying changes in New Zealand's wine industry, who knows indeed?

*Written by Michael Vaughan
with the assistance of Rose Zgodzinski*