

Stirling Wines: New Zealand - Life Beyond Sauvignon Blanc

Trevor Stirling (Senior Analyst) • trevor.stirling@bernstein.com • +44-207-170-5087

Introduction

The stereotypical image of New Zealand wine is Sauvignon Blanc from the Marlborough area - and there is some truth to the stereotype - this one grape makes up 28% of the total crop. However, there is much more to New Zealand than this one variety. Over the course of the next few years, expect to hear a lot more about Kiwi wine, as the potential diversity and complexity of the country's wines starts to be realized.

A bit of background

New Zealand grows the world's most southerly grapes. Although nearly all its land mass is close to the ocean, its regional climates are heavily influenced by latitude. If New Zealand were in the northern hemisphere, the country would stretch from North Africa to Paris. However, NW Europe benefits from the warming influence of the Gulf Stream. So probably the best analogy is to think of the tip of North Island NZ as close to S France, Hawkes Bay as close to Bordeaux and South Island as close to Burgundy.

Although grapes were first planted in 1819, the wine industry really started to take shape at the start of the 20th Century. The driving force behind the industry was Croatian immigration from the Dalmatian coast. NZ's three biggest wine companies were all founded by Croatian families: Montana (Yukich), Villa Maria (Fistonich) and Nobilo.

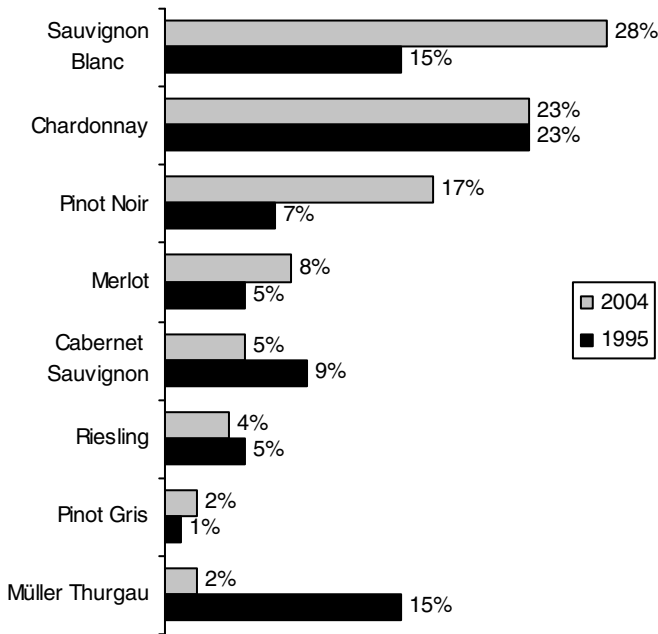
For most of the century, wine production was relatively unsophisticated, focused on high yields from the warmer, more fertile North Island and destined for local consumption. The industry was initially centred on the warmer North of NZ and its biggest city Auckland. It was not until 1973 that the first grapes were planted in the now famous Marlborough region on the South Island.

Flatland production (often irrigated) was the industry norm and it is only recently that the industry has started to explore the hill-side plantings that are typical of many high-quality European regions.

The grape varieties were equally unsophisticated. In 1960, an American vine, nicknamed Albany Surprise, was NZ's most widely planted grape variety. Even as recently as 1995, the high yielding Müller Thurgau grape (much beloved of Liebfraumilch producers) accounted for 15% of plantings (see below). However, Sauvignon Blanc is now the country's most planted variety, with Chardonnay second.



NZ Grape Plantings



Pinot Noir overtook Cabernet Sauvignon in 1997 to become the country's most planted red variety, although a significant percentage of the Pinot Noir crop is destined for sparkling wine production.

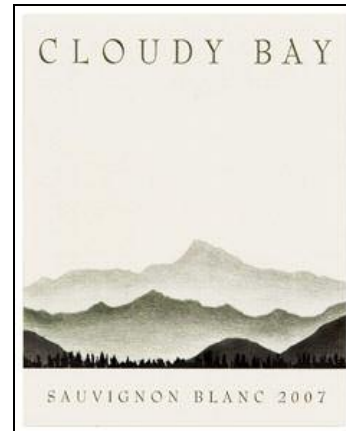
A notable feature of the modern NZ wine industry is its technical sophistication. NZ has been at the forefront of canopy management, essentially managing the grape-growing process to maximize ripeness but still retain acidity. The industry has also been central in the development of alternative closures to avoid cork-taint. In 2001, a number of winemakers adopted the screw cap as a closure instead of traditional cork. Four years later, more than two-thirds of all New Zealand wine bottles were sealed with a screw cap.

Finally, a word on industry structure. Probably NZ's most famous winery is Cloudy Bay which was founded by an Australian (David Hohnen) in the mid-80's and was bought out by Veuve Clicquot, which later became part of LVMH. The largest company by far is Montana, which accounts for approx 50% of all of NZ's wine production. Montana was bought by Allied Domecq in 2001 and subsequently became part of Pernod Ricard. So it is very ironic that both NZ's most famous winery and its biggest company are owned by French companies. The second largest company Villa Maria is still controlled by the Fistonich family; but the third largest Nobile is owned by Constellation.

Sauvignon Blanc

It's impossible to write about NZ without mentioning Sauvignon Blanc. Now, I have to confess that I am not a big fan of typical Sauvignon. I tend to prefer it when it is toned down, either through a bit of judicious barrel fermentation or a slug of Semillon. However, NZ wines, especially from the Marlborough region, are essence of Sauvignon Blanc. If the grape's signature aroma can be described as "cat's pee on a gooseberry bush", these are pungent wines that blend tropical fruit flavours with gooseberry, grassiness and green pepper.

Today, Marlborough is the biggest NZ's wine region; although it was only 1973 when Montana planted the first vines in Marlborough. If Montana was first, it was Cloudy Bay which became the international flag bearer.



Cloudy Bay is undoubtedly a very well-made wine: clean, crisp and full of focused flavours. However, it is a little expensive for what it is (arguably in common with most of MH's wines). A wine that has a similar flavour profile but I think offers more sophistication and better value for money is Villa Maria's Cellar Selection.

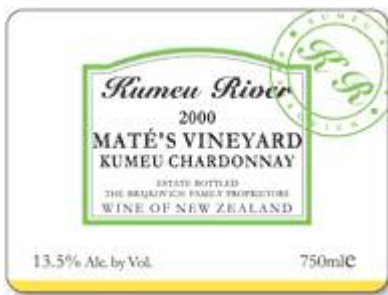


In the wake of the industry leaders have come a raft of smaller wineries. For my money, Hunter's and Wither Hills are also in the top rank, as is Seresin, founded by the NZ cinematographer for *Midnight Express* and *Harry Potter & the Prisoner of Azkaban*.



Chardonnay

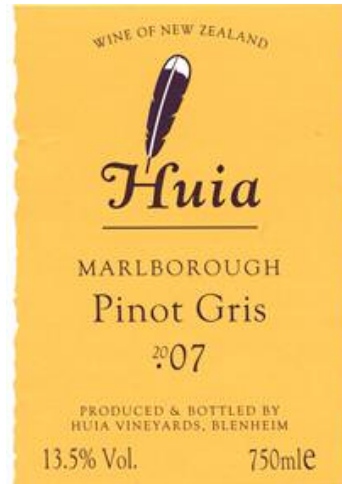
Chardonnay is NZ's second most planted grape. Much is made in a crowd-pleasing: fruity and over-oaked. Another portion goes into the production of sparkling wine (see below). However, there are some smaller producers making world-class Chardonnay in the Burgundian style, that give Meursault a run for its money at half the price. A personal favourite comes from Kumeu River, near Auckland. This winery is run by the Brajkovich family of Croatian descent; and Michael Brajkovich was the first New Zealander to complete the Master of Wine exams.



Pinot Gris

Probably my favourite NZ white wine is Pinot Gris, note not Italian style Pinot Grigio. I have tasted too many wines recently which have jumped on the Pinot Grigio bandwagon. They tend to come from suspiciously warm regions of Italy and have a distinct after-taste of tartaric acid that has been added in the winery, not from the grape. In contrast, most NZ Pinot Gris is made in an Alsace style: big, ripe, flavour-filled wines, with balancing natural acidity. They are brilliant food wines, especially with spicy Asian food - Indian or Thai.

Many wineries are making delicious Pinot Gris. Two personal favourites are Huia (which is run by a former employee of Cloudy Bay)...



...and Staete Landt. This estate is run by Dutch immigrants who named their winery after the original name given to NZ by Abel Tasman (after whom Tasmania is named) when he became the first European explorer to discover NZ in 1642. Their Pinot Gris is described as 'muscular, concentrated, peachy and smooth'. I agree.



Riesling & Gewürztraminer

Finally, New Zealand is also producing increasingly high quality Rieslings and Gewürztraminers. As is the case for Pinot Gris, they tend to be quite Alsatian in style and go very well with Asian food.

Pinot Noir

Pinot Noir has risen rapidly to become the country's third most popular grape and the most widely planted red grape. As is the case with Sauvignon Blanc, a portion of the production is high-volume, made in an easy-to-drink style, that could be unkindly described as alcoholic fruit juice. However, just as was the case for Chardonnay, there are an increasing number of

producers who are making wines that rival all but the best Burgundy. There are two areas that have emerged as notable sources of Pinot Noir. The first of these is Wairarapa (not to be confused with Waipara or the Wairau Valley!), which includes the Martinborough region, at the southern end of the North Island, near NZ's capital Wellington. This area is the source of some of the crowd-pleasers that I mentioned above but also superb wineries such as Dry River or Ata Rangī, which has three times won the Pinot Noir trophy at the International Wine and Spirits Competition.



The second area is on the South Island. Central Otago grows New Zealand's, and the world's, most southerly grapevines, some of them cultivated south of the 45th parallel. It is New Zealand's only wine region with a continental climate. Bannockburn is regarded as the most successful district. These Pinots have been described as voluptuous and intensely fruity - think ripe, luscious, Gevrey Chambertin or Nuits St Georges rather than Côtes de Beaune. But there is much more to these wines than fruit; they have solid tannins and balanced acidity which makes them worthy of at ideally 5 years cellaring.

Two personal favourites are Mount Difficulty which was set up by four different grape-growers, who pooled their resources to create a single brand, and....



.....Felton Road. This was founded by Stuart Elms (hence the elm on the label) who passed it on to the outspoken Nigel Greening. These Pinots regularly get 90+ points from American critics. They also do very stylish unoaked chardonnays and probably NZ's best Riesling.



Bordeaux Blends

Those of you who have been to one of my tutored tastings will know that I prefer my Cabernet Sauvignon as part of a Bordeaux blend rather than straight-up, and so do the Kiwis. I mentioned that Hawkes Bay has a very similar climate to Bordeaux. Well, it also has an area of gravel soil similar to that which makes the Médoc so famous - 800 ha of deep shingle soils known as the Gimblett Gravels - a name that now appears on some of Hawkes Bay's better red wines.

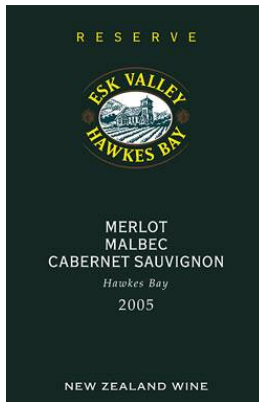
Perhaps the most famous of these is the Coleraine wine from Te Mata Estate. The wine is named after Coleraine in Northern Ireland, the birthplace of one of the owner's ancestors. (It also happens to be 4 miles from my late father's birthplace but I promise that I am not biased.) Originally a single vineyard wine, it is now an assemblage of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc from thirty plots within Te Mata Estate's nine Hawke's Bay vineyards. This is serious stuff and will improve in bottle for 15-20 years from harvest.



In a similar style but from a different part of New Zealand is Stonyridge's Larose. This is made on Waiheke Island, a 45min ferry ride from Auckland. Produced from organic grapes and aged in French oak, this wine is also made for the long haul and will in bottle for 15-20 years from harvest



Returning to Hawkes Bay, at a more sensible price point, more readily approachable and much more widely available are the Esk Valley wines from Villa Maria. They do a very tasty, merlot-driven Bordeaux Blend for approx £15/bottle. One to watch out for on restaurant wine lists that will not break the bank.



Syrah

Although Bordeaux grapes have been the mainstay of the Hawkes Bay area, Syrah from the Northern Rhône is rapidly making a name for itself. These wines are made in a more restrained French style and are labelled Syrah, compared to the more OTT style of many Australian Shirazes. In the last decade, Syrah plantings have grown over 400%, from 62 hectares to 264 hectares. Three-quarters of this is in Hawke's Bay, with smaller pockets elsewhere. These wines are getting great reviews, especially from Australian critics who are tired of having their sense assaulted by a river of boutique blockbusters. Some producers are also experimenting with co-fermentation with Viognier, to make a wine similar to the Rhône's Côte-Rôtie. The oldest vines in NZ are to be found on the Stonecroft estate, who make the grand daddy of NZ syrahs.



Sparklers

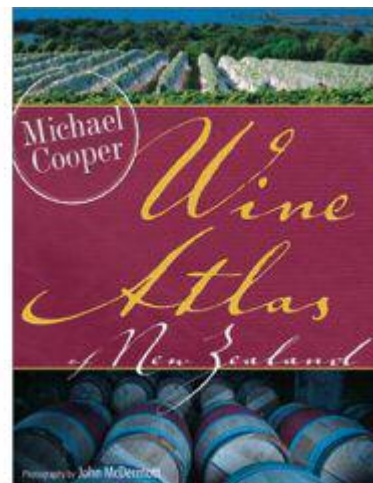
Finally, it's also worth pointing out that New Zealand makes some high-quality sparkling wines in the champagne style from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, sometimes with a slug of Chenin Blanc thrown in. The most famous of these is Pelorus which is made by Cloudy Bay (using the latest know-how from LVMH!). There is both a vintage dated version which is kept in bottle for 3 years (same as normal champagne) and a fresher NV.



Pernod Ricard/Montana make sparkling wine under the Deutz name and Lindauer which is very good value-for-money and a great base for making buck's fizz.

Further reading

For anyone looking for exhaustive detail, I heartily recommend the Wine Atlas of New Zealand by Michael Cooper.



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