

MAJESTIC MARTINBOROUGH

Refined and self-confident, low-profile Martinborough produces some of New Zealand's best wines, writes John Hawkesby.

Balloons over
Tirohana Estate





In an overcast late afternoon on a quiet Monday there's not even enough breeze to rustle the leaves of the trees on the green that defines the quaint town of Martinborough.

Looking at the historic two-storey Peppers Martinborough Hotel you'd be excused for thinking you'd stumbled onto the set of *High Noon* or *Three Men to Yuma*.

There's a sense of being in another place at another time. No sign, however, of Gary Cooper, John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart or even Russell Crowe. Although there's something slightly western about the town, the only thing wild is the muffled belch from the exhaust of a flat-top truck as a lean man, singleted and gumbooted, leaps from a casually parked, mud-strewn vehicle.

No locking this ute; in fact the keys are left in the ignition as he heads into the corner bar. You can spot a Martinborough winemaker from 500 metres: casual, relaxed, friendly and incredibly focused.

It's focus that has given Martinborough a reputation which belies its sometimes overlooked status as a premier wine-producing region. Not large, it is dwarfed by the vastness of Marlborough, the versatility of Hawke's Bay and the enthusiasm of Central Otago.

Martinborough does not swagger down the main street like a gunslinger looking for a fight, does not kick doors down like an outlaw about to rob a bank and does not slink around back alleys like a vigilante about to make a hit. Martinborough is more refined and restrained. It exudes a quiet confidence that is ultimately found in its wines.

Whilst not exactly the sheriff – that would be too boring, too one-dimensional – Martinborough has a sense of knowing its place; understanding the rules and how to maximise what it does best.

And what it does best is produce, without fuss or over-hyped fanfare, some of New Zealand's best wines.

Whilst Pinot Noir may be their calling card, the region known as Wairarapa (which includes Gladstone and Masterton as well as Martinborough) is responsible for a raft of quite exquisite varieties.

On top of that, some of the country's most experienced, revered and innovative winemakers come from this area about 75 minutes' drive over the Rimutaka Hill from Wellington.

So what makes the region unique and so suited to growing grapes? Dr Neil McCullum, highly respected chief winemaker of iconic producer Dry River, puts it simply: "Our wines express their distinctive terroir. They're an earthier style with subtle fruit flavours rather than being big, brash, showy and forward."

The terrain, along with the climate, is the key. Although the region's vines are relatively young their genesis is ancient.

For over 20,000 years the Ruamahanga River and its contributing waterways have carved out dramatic cliffs and escarpments to expose stony sub-soils, built up layers of alluvial river

terraces and cast its silty river loam across the landscape.

Long, hot, dry summers, cool nights and crisp, frosty winters heated and cracked the stones, releasing their minerals and creating free-draining gravels.

The climate is semi-maritime, influenced by the long coastline to the east and south. Average rainfall is around 600-700mm a year, mostly falling in winter and spring, making the Wairarapa the driest place in the North Island.

With warm sunshine-filled days, conditions are good for flowering and ripening grapes, and invigorating winds help eliminate potential disease and ensure healthy growing conditions.

A rain shadow effect created by the lofty Rimutaka Ranges keeps the region dry, with low humidity, especially through sunny autumn ripening – perfect conditions for grapes.

Twenty-something years ago, Martinborough was a kind of backwater; a sleepy colonial town which today has been transformed into a wine village of renown.

Walk in any direction from the town square and very soon you will come across a Vineyard.

Invariably small, usually immaculate, these are the often independently- or family-owned holdings of intelligent, passionate winemakers who are more concerned with quality than quantity.

The Wairarapa is responsible for only about 2 percent of New Zealand's wine production – a drop in a national barrel. But the local winemakers are determined to make every drop count.

"Great wines think alike" is the mantra, and the region's t-shirt slogan might well be "Cool, Calm, Collected".

There's no doubt that Martinborough's flagship wine is Pinot Noir: subtle but strong, flavoursome and friendly with a nod to a Burgundian style that leans more towards bramble and forest floor rather than ripe berry fruits and exploding bright flavours. Martinborough's muscular Pinots can be very concentrated and have good cellaring potential.

Sauvignon Blanc shows its hand, usually in a highly scented, intense, fruity style; Riesling, Chardonnay and Pinot Gris are well represented; more recently Syrah is taking great strides; and that underrated white, Gewurztraminer, does astonishingly

well despite some problems.

"It can be temperamental and extremely difficult to get even, regular vintages... It's very haphazard and has a mind of its own, especially around flowering," says Dry River's McCullum, who – along with superb Pinot Noir – makes one of the Country's best Gewurztraminers.

If Sauvignon Blanc has thus far been New Zealand's headline wine internationally, our Pinot Noir has been jostling for position to become "the next big thing".

Despite a lot of noise and attention, however New Zealand Pinot Noir has met with mixed results: politeness, perhaps, rather than extravagant embrace.

If our Pinot Noir is ever going to make a genuine impact on the world wine stage, it is likely to be wines from Martinborough that will make the genuine breakthrough.

This is not necessarily because Pinot Noir from here is technically better than from anywhere else, but rather because its style is more European and that is what old-world Burgundy (Pinot) wine drinkers know, expect and like.

To the winemakers and grape growers of Martinborough this comes as no surprise.

The area reminded the French wife of early settler William Beetham of her native Burgundy, prompting her to plant some 3,000 vines in the late 1880s and to produce the region's first Pinot Noir vintage in 1897. Sadly, the vines were a casualty of prohibition in 1905.

But Mrs Beetham was onto something. A hundred years later soil scientists discovered a direct connection to France's Burgundy.

An almost identical mix of free-draining river gravels, temperatures and rainfall to Beaune (the hub of the Burgundy region) prompted the vision of cool-climate wines from Martinborough.

Those vines, planted in 1980, have revolutionised this quiet rural district into an internationally acclaimed wine-producing region.

Martinborough may not yet be the fear of France, but as the vines develop age and the winemakers hone their considerable skills, the blow-torch will no doubt be applied to the belly of Burgundy. 🍷

Opposite page, left to right: Wines from Escarpment, created by the King of Pinot, Larry McKenna; Cellar door at the majestic Ata Rangi vineyard. Above left to right: View from the vines. Martinborough Vineyard; one of Martinborough's founding four vineyards, and a pioneer of New Zealand pinot noir.



Best Pinot Noir producers from Martinborough

Ata Rangi

At the top of the totem pole for New Zealand Pinot Noir. Combining power, balance and finesse, Ata Rangi has an enviable reputation for consistency and class. The first vines were planted in 1980, so the vineyard brings a level of maturity that finds its ultimate expression in the bottle. Not cheap, but worth every cent (quality comes at a price).

Dry River

Genuine cult producer which has developed a fervent following for majestic, immaculate, intensely-flavoured wines. Hand-crafted and made to age, Dry River Pinot Noir brings a level of sophistication rarely found in New World red wines. They're hard to find, however, as most of the annual production is snapped up by dedicated disciples who cling tenaciously to a mailing list which, if you're on it, is almost akin to winning Lotto.

Escarpment Vineyard

Pinot pioneer Larry McKenna, who developed an extraordinary reputation for Pinot production during a lengthy spell at Martinborough Vineyard, founded Escarpment as recently as 1998 but has lost no time in putting his mana and mark on his venture. Kupe by Escarpment is the flagship wine: brooding, big flavours with wonderful texture.

Martinborough Vineyard

Arguably one of the country's most consistent and versatile producers. An array of excellent whites accompany a striking mid-priced Pinot Noir. Look for deep, dense, plum, cherry and spice flavours with big, breezy aromas and fresh flavours. An early pioneer in the Wairarapa region, this vineyard helped put Martinborough firmly in the spotlight.

Palliser Estate

Living Proof that you can be both big and beautiful, the largest winery in the Wairarapa manages to keep a close eye on quality at all levels. Superb Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling complement outstanding Pinot Noir. Look for richness, roundness and harmony in all their well-crafted wines. Headed by one of the industry's great characters, Richard Riddiford, who grew up in the area.