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Top of the range from down under



In just three decades New Zealand has moved into the forefront of wine producers. What's the secret?

WORDS **WILL LYONS** LOUIS ROEDERER UK REGIONAL WINE WRITER OF THE YEAR 2008

THE RISE and rise of New Zealand sauvignon blanc is nothing short of remarkable. Such is its success that in many circles it is regarded as a brand in its own right. There can't be a wine drinker in the land who hasn't been seduced by its super-ripe gooseberry fruit, mouthwatering, tingling acidity and fresh, lively character. Its secret lies in the proximity of the Marlborough region to the sea.

Marlborough, which lies just at the northern tip of the South Island, is the driver of New Zealand sauvignon. The cool breeze that blows in from the sea and the sunny climate allows the sauvignon grape to ripen to near perfect levels, thus achieving that familiar, concentrated, intense, tropical nose.

But New Zealand is so much more than sauvignon blanc. Such is the success of its wines – 30 years ago the country was producing hardly anything of note – that it now boasts the highest average selling price of any producing country. In no small part this is down to other varieties such as pinot noir, pinot gris and syrah. Outside of Marlborough the regions of Martinborough, Hawkes Bay and Central Otago are all making a name for themselves. With this in mind, I thought it was a good time to explore what else the country had to offer so I trundled off to a New Zealand tasting with the sole purpose of trying everything except sauvignon.

One region that immediately stands out is Martinborough, at the southern end of the North Island. A relative newcomer to the stage – its first vines were only planted in 1979 – it now boasts a trio of outstanding wineries such as Ata Rangi, Dry River and Palliser. The region stands out for its

chardonnay, riesling and pinot noir. In fact, the pinot noir I have tasted from Ata Rangi and Dry River can stand alongside any of those found in Burgundy. They possess a ripe, plummy fruit character with an appealing savoury component that puts to shame many of the one-dimensional fruit bombs found elsewhere.

Hawkes Bay on the east coast of the North Island is fast making a name for itself on the strength of its syrah. Here the grape, native to the slopes of France's Rhône Valley, takes on an elegant, refined character crammed with plum and savoury black-pepper notes. Such is the variety of the soil – there are 22 categories of soil types in one area alone – that it is difficult to generalise. Craggy Range, Kim Crawford, Trinity Hill, Stonecroft, Te Mata and Woodthorpe are all worth looking out for.

Central Otago, in the middle of the South Island, is the world's most southerly wine region. The climate is continental, with extremes of temperatures. Riesling has potential here but the real star of the show is pinot noir, which accounts for around 70 per cent of plantings.

The pinot grape has a more forward expression here, with notes of strawberry, raspberry, fresh herbs and spice. In its warmer areas it takes a fuller, more tannic, dark cherry character. Black Ridge, Felton Road, Two Paddocks and Wild Earth are welcome in my cellar any day.

2007 Craighall Chardonnay, 13.5 per cent, Ata Rangi, Martinborough, New Zealand, £24.99

An absolutely outstanding wine. Rich butter on the nose with a slight green bean tinge, great weight, with a wonderful mouthfeel and pleasing acidity. Sublime.

2007 Kim Crawford Pinot Noir, 13 per cent, Marlborough, New Zealand, £10.99

Packed with oodles of dark berry fruit, reminiscent of autumnal, home-made jam, but this is not to say it is one-dimensional – there is a perfumed freshness and an attractive lift which makes this very appealing indeed.

2008 Yealands Estate Riesling, 12 per cent, Marlborough, New Zealand, £9.99

Strong tropical notes of lemon, lime and apple on the nose give way to a tantalising, flickering acidity. With a mouth-filling, refreshing acidity.

Stockists: Liberty Wines (020 7720 5350, www.libertywines.co.uk); Lockett Brothers, North Berwick (01620 890799, www.lockettbros.co.uk); Luvians of Fife (01334 477752, www.luvians.com); Villeneuve Wines (01721 722500, www.villeneuvewines.com)

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