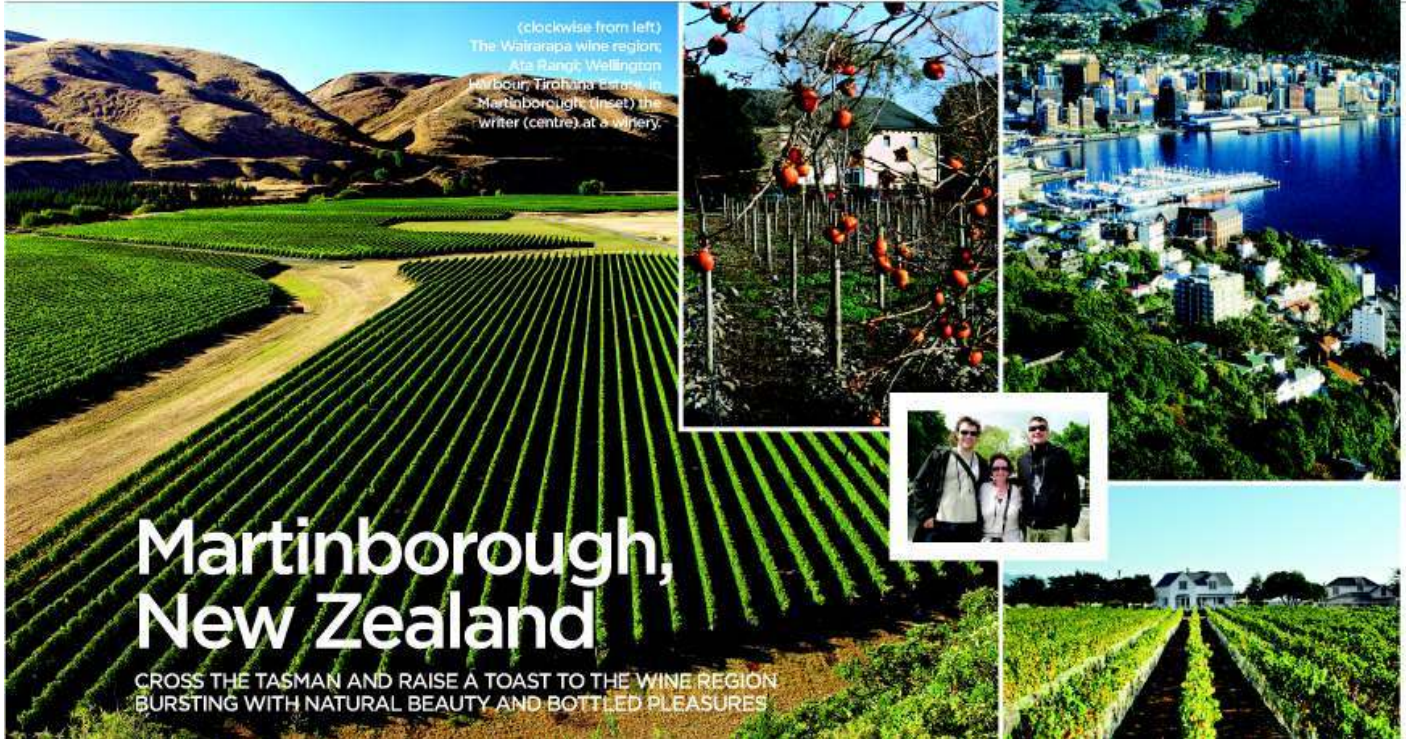




TRAVEL



Martinborough, New Zealand

CROSS THE TASMAN AND RAISE A TOAST TO THE WINE REGION BURSTING WITH NATURAL BEAUTY AND BOTTLED PLEASURES

(clockwise from left) The Wairarapa wine regions, Ata Rangio, Wellington Harbour, Tirohanga Estate, in Martinborough (inset), the writer (centre) at a winery.

Australians and New Zealanders tend to share a symbiotic, if not relaxed, relationship. There's a bit of the chip-on-the-shoulder attitude from our friends across the ditch about being the second cousin of a bigger nation. Then, of course, there's rugby union – a topic best left for another day. And let's not go near the Kiwi roots of Stan Walker, the seventh winner of *Australian Idol*.

Lately, though, a more vexing issue has popped up: Who does wine better? Australia has long had the upper hand, especially if you consider that, in 2005, we were the world's fifth biggest wine producer. But, more recently, those quirky Kiwis have been flooding our market with their world-renowned sauvignon blancs.

Being a home-grown-wine snob with a penchant for full-bodied Margaret River and Hunter Valley chardys, I decide to head across the Tasman to see what all the fuss is about.

I arrive in Wellington near the witching hour of midnight. Not to worry; my pre-booked taxi is waiting and, in no time, I'm welcomed at the funky Museum Hotel in the Courtenay district.

The next day begins with a personalised guided city expedition. Jennifer Looman, a vivacious redhead from Wild About Wellington tours, meets me at the fabulous Floriditas Cafe on famed Cuba Street before leading me to – horror of horrors – a trolleybus. She assures me this is the quickest and cheapest way to get around Wellington, and she's right.

The tour proper begins at Parliament House a magnificently mad triumvirate of buildings from different eras, the newest being beehive-shaped and housing the PM's office. I'm not usually a guided-tour type, but what Looman doesn't know about the city isn't worth knowing.

Hers are tailor-made excursions and when told of my weekend wine-tasting mission to Martinborough (a district in the Wairarapa region, an hour north of Wellington, that's fast becoming known for its pinot noir), she instantly diverts to the St Johns Heineken Hotel for lunch. There we pop the cork on a Martinborough Vineyard Manu riesling to go with our chicken schnitzel and arancini. Let the games begin.

Further tastings of Kiwi wines put me in the mood for the 80km adventure north-east. At Martinborough, I check into The Old Manse – a gorgeous B&B with amazing breakfasts – and make a reservation at the stunning Parihua country club for dinner by acclaimed chef Kent Baddeley. Then I wander into town for today's screening of *Vintner's Choice*, a 45-minute film



introducing Wairarapa and its vineyards. Thus armed with the inside scoop, I'm off.

The beauty of Martinborough is that most of the wineries are within walking distance of the town square and the scenery is truly pretty. I pack in nine of about 30, starting at Ata Rangi, where the 2008 Craighall chardonnay

gives my Hunter Valley regular a run for its money. The 2007 Célèbre – a blend of merlot, syrah and cabernet – is another triumph and I become concerned, however slightly, for my well-loved wines back home.

The favourites rack up. Muirlea Rise is a picturesque boutique winery that isn't always open because its wines can sell out in advance, while the quaint Te Kairanga produces a cheeky 2008 sauvignon blanc.

There's plenty to do in the area, but my mission is grape-driven, so I skip a quad bike ride, sidestep a walk along the stunning coastline and miss visiting a seal colony, all of which are highly recommended.

As to the question of which nation does wine better, it's too close to call. But put it this way, my order is en route. **SANDRA LEE**

Fact file

HOW TO GET THERE Air New Zealand flies to Wellington daily ex Melbourne and Sydney.
WHERE TO STAY Rooms at the Museum Hotel start at \$130 per night (visit www.museumhotel.co.nz). B&B at The Olde Manse starts at \$130 per night (www.oldmanse.co.nz).
WHEN TO GO Anytime, but connoisseurs can plan a visit to coincide with the Toast Martinborough food and wine festival in November.
FOR MORE INFORMATION Visit www.wellingtonnz.com.