

NEW ZEALAND BROADENS ITS RANGE

STALWART SAUVIGNON BLANC AND CROWD-PLEASING PINOT NOIR ARE YIELDING SOME GROUND TO OTHER FOOD-FRIENDLY VARIETALS // BY MARYANN WOROBIEC



CRISP, AROMATIC AND DELICIOUS, Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc helped introduce New Zealand to the wine-drinking world, while Pinot Noir solidified this idyllic country's reputation for refreshing wines that match well with food. Now, New Zealand is experiencing success >>



Villa Maria winery in the Marlborough grapegrowing district of New Zealand's South Island makes a range of high quality Chardonnays, Pinot Noirs and Sauvignon Blancs.

with a number of other varietals that are at home on the table, starting with Chardonnay but increasingly branching out to include Merlot, Syrah, Pinot Gris and Riesling.

Fans of New Zealand's signature white need not worry, however. Though the country's wine landscape is evolving, Sauvignon Blanc continues to dominate, still accounting for more than half of the vineyard acres planted in New Zealand and more than 80 percent of the total volume of wine exported by the country. (The United States is its third largest export market, behind Australia and the United Kingdom.)

Sauvignon Blanc's success stands out. Since our last summary ("New Zealand's Surge," June 15, 2010), I've blind-tasted 275 New Zealand wines in our Napa office, with Sauvignon Blanc representing nearly half of the wines reviewed and the vast majority of them scoring 85 points or higher on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/063011.)

Since their introduction in the late-1980s, New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs have evolved to show a wider spectrum of flavors and aromas than their pungent, gooseberry-scented ancestors. Most versions don't see any oak, preserving the variety's aromatics and acidity. As a result, the wines have a zingy, juicy quality, with fresh lime, grapefruit, passion fruit and melon flavors, often with distinctive grassy or mineral details.

The highest-scoring Sauvignon Blancs have a nice range of flavors, with that signature bright acidity and enticing aromatics. At the top of this year's list is perhaps the most iconic of all New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc brands, Cloudy Bay, whose Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2010 (92 points, \$25) has plenty of floral and



mineral notes. Just a step behind are the Tablelands Sauvignon Blanc Martinborough 2009 (91, \$13), which has a more tropical, honeysuckle side, and the intense yet silky Saint Clair Marlborough Pioneer Block 2 Swamp Block (91, \$24), the best of seven 2010 Sauvignon Blancs I reviewed from this top producer.

Sauvignon Blanc also leads the way for value, with 50 examples in this report scoring 85 points or higher for \$15 a bottle or less. Among them are many that are imported in consumer-friendly volumes of 10,000 cases or more, such as the Villa Maria Sauvignon

Blanc Marlborough Private Bin 2010 (90, \$15), the Nobilo Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough Regional Collection 2010 (89, \$14) and the Tohu Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009 (89, \$15).

But New Zealand is no longer relying on a single variety, with Pinot Noir the leading example of this evolution. Since 2004, Pinot Noir exports have tripled, and that's especially good news considering the high quality of what's arriving. Fruit flavors of cherry, plum and berry are characteristically fresh, thanks to natural acidity. The best bottles have a lively tannic structure, with sometimes peppery, mineral notes.

Nearly half of the wines rated 90 points or higher are Pinot Noirs, including this report's top-scorers. There are four stunning examples from producer Felton Road alone, its Pinot Noir Central Otago Cornish Point 2009 (95, \$63), Pinot Noir Central Otago Block 3 2009 (93, \$79), Pinot Noir Central Otago Block 5 2009 (93, \$79) and Pinot Noir Central Otago Bannockburn 2009 (92, \$53). Also of note are the Rippon Pinot Noir Central Otago Lake Wanaka 2008 (93, \$47) and Villa Maria Pinot Noir Marlborough Reserve 2007 (92, \$40).

As with the best Pinot Noirs from elsewhere in the world, most of New Zealand's prestige Pinots are not widely available. But there are plenty of solid choices imported in quantities large enough to suggest they'll be easier to find. In the \$30-and-less category, these include the Spy Valley Pinot Noir Marlborough 2010 (92, \$28), Saint Clair Pinot Noir Marlborough Vicar's Choice 2010 (89, \$18) and Over The Edge Pinot Noir Martinborough 2009 (86, \$15).

Chardonnay is the country's third most-planted variety, and its success can be traced to the 1940s, when the Brajkovich family first planted grapes in the Auckland region of Kumeu on New Zealand's North Island. Since then, Kumeu River has been the reigning Chardonnay producer, making distinctive Burgundy-style wines. This year is no exception, with four Kumeu River Chardonnay bottlings topping the charts: the Coddington 2008 (92, \$42), Hunting Hill 2008 (92, \$42), Estate 2008 (92, \$35) and Maté's Vineyard 2008 (90, \$47). Other Chardonnays to look for include the Mountford Waipara 2007 (90, \$29), Marisco Marlborough The King's Bastard Wairau 2009 (90, \$18) and Dog Point Marlborough 2008 (90, \$35).

Aromatic whites such as Pinot Gris, Riesling and Gewürztraminer are picking up steam in terms of plantings, exports and quality. Like New Zealand's Sauvignons and Chardonnays, the acidities in these whites tend to be naturally high, meaning mostly light-bodied, juicy wines. My favorites in terms of both quality and value are the Spy Valley Gewürztraminer Marlborough 2010 (89, \$20), Giesen Riesling Marlborough 2010 (88, \$11) and Over The Edge Pinot Gris Martinborough 2009 (86, \$13).

Red varietals other than Pinot Noir are also gaining ground, especially in Hawkes Bay. Syrahs from this North Island region are particularly aromatic and peppery, and the area's Merlot-based wines are supple and polished, with juicy tannins. The number of

these wines currently available in the United States remains small, but among the wines I've tasted there's plenty to recommend. Of particular note are the Paritua Syrah Hawkes Bay 2007 (91, \$30), Mills Reef Merlot-Malbec Hawkes Bay Gimblett Gravels Reserve 2009 (90, \$20), Trinity Hill Syrah Hawkes Bay Gimblett Gravels 2008 (90, \$26) and the Merlot-based Craggy Range Te Kahu Gimblett Gravels Vineyard Hawkes Bay 2009 (89, \$22).

In terms of overall vintage quality, the news is good as well. The 2010s are hitting the market, and the big story is that yields were down for the second year in a row. A cool spring was partly responsible for the drop, but the low yields were also the result of planning. In 2008, volumes exceeded expectations, resulting in a surplus of grapes. Since then, growers have pruned more aggressively and vintners have been more attentive to thinning. The ensuing lower yields have resulted in more concentration and richer aromatics in the wines.

Kiwi vintners also remain faithful to their trendsetting commitment to sustainability. New Zealand will be the first country to have



Winemakers Hamish Clark and Matt Thomson of Saint Clair crafted a handful of high quality Sauvignon Blancs in 2010.

a 100 percent certified sustainable wine industry by 2012. Along with that has come an increased interest in organic farming, as the number of organically certified wineries has tripled in the past three years. In addition, New Zealand vintners have long been leaders when it comes to employing screw-cap closures. Frustrated with cork taint and cork inconsistency, twist-off closures first appeared on the country's wines 10 years ago; this year, more than 90 percent of the wines we reviewed were sealed that way.

This progressive group of winegrowers has plenty to be proud about. Despite difficult economic conditions, the country's presence in the wine world has been steadily growing, with annual exports at more than NZ\$1 billion (about US\$800 million). Their story began with Sauvignon Blanc, expanded to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, and is now poised for new chapters featuring yet more varietals. With the continued promise of quality and value, wine lovers can look to New Zealand with confidence.

Senior tasting coordinator MaryAnn Worobiec has been with Wine Spectator since 1997.

MaryAnn Worobiec's Recommended Wines From New Zealand

More than 250 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/063011. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
FELTON ROAD Pinot Noir Central Otago Cornish Point 2009 Immense and powerful, yet still extremely refreshing, this exhibits a gorgeous mélange of wild blackberry, huckleberry and boysenberry pie. Not only wonderfully generous, but also extremely aromatic.	95	\$63
FELTON ROAD Pinot Noir Central Otago Block 5 2009 Ripe, vibrant black cherry flavors really pop, displaying a luscious acidity, smooth texture and plenty of spice, mineral and floral details.	93	\$79
FELTON ROAD Pinot Noir Central Otago Block 3 2009 Elegant, crisp, aromatic and complex, with dried lavender, sandalwood and rose petal notes that give way to ripe, silky black cherry, plum, clove and tobacco flavors.	93	\$79
RIPPON Pinot Noir Central Otago Lake Wanaka 2008 Delivers lovely aromatics, with sandalwood, Asian spice, white pepper, crushed stone and dried floral notes. Strawberry and cherry flavors stay fresh and lively.	93	\$47
CLOUDY BAY Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2010 Tangerine, mango and citrus flavors are pure, focused and refreshing, with peach, Key lime pie, mineral and floral elements.	92	\$25
FELTON ROAD Pinot Noir Central Otago Bannockburn 2009 Earthy, loamy notes crescendo, giving way to intense black cherry, ripe plum and an array of mineral notes. Gutsy and powerful.	92	\$53
KUMEU RIVER Chardonnay Kumeu Hunting Hill 2008 Toasted chestnut flavors emphasize the rich, round notes of lemon, nectarine and ripe pear, with a crushed stone minerality.	92	\$42
KUMEU RIVER Chardonnay Kumeu Estate 2008 A wonderful balance between crisp notes of citrus, pear and green apple and complex floral, lime peel and tobacco details.	92	\$35
KUMEU RIVER Chardonnay Kumeu Coddington 2008 Delivers depth and purity to lemon curd, yellow apple and apricot flavors. Aromatic, with lanolin, honeycomb and floral notes.	92	\$42
PEGASUS BAY Pinot Noir Waipara Valley 2008 Complex and generous, exhibiting flavors of ripe black cherry, plum and pomegranate. Powerful yet elegant.	92	\$43
SERESIN Pinot Noir Marlborough Leah 2008 Wild strawberry and raspberry flavors are delicate in this stunning red, which shows spice, herb and floral details.	92	\$35
SPY VALLEY Pinot Noir Marlborough 2010 Digs deep into the spicebox, with nutmeg, clove and allspice flavors that frame the ripe black cherry and raspberry notes.	92	\$28
VILLA MARIA Pinot Noir Marlborough Reserve 2007 A beautiful red, displaying fresh wild berry, black cherry, plum and Asian spice notes that are ripe and plush.	92	\$40
Craggy Range Pinot Noir Martinborough Te Muna Road Vineyard 2009 There's a plush texture to the ripe cherry, raspberry and cranberry flavors, with delicate mineral, spice and floral details.	91	\$41
MOUNTFORD Pinot Noir Waipara Liaison 2007 Smooth, rich and robust in flavor, with ripe plum, mineral and roasted beet notes that are fresh and balanced.	91	\$33
PARITUA Syrah Hawkes Bay 2007 Intense, with peppery beef jerky notes that give way to ripe, soft blackberry, blueberry and dark plum flavors.	91	\$30

TOP WINES (continued)

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
SAINT CLAIR Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough Pioneer Block 2 Swamp Block 2010 Fresh, ripe pineapple flavors sing out with bright, juicy acidity, as a chorus of tropical flavors follow right behind.	91	\$24
SPY VALLEY Riesling Marlborough Envoy 2008 A fleshy core of peach and apricot flavors are terrific, ripe and juicy, with intense floral aromatics and whiffs of petrol.	91	\$34
VILLA MARIA Pinot Noir Marlborough Cellar Selection 2009 Stunning pepper and plumeria aromatics kick into rich, ripe black cherry and plum flavors that have a great fleshy quality.	91	\$30

TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
TABLELANDS Sauvignon Blanc Martinborough 2009 Wonderfully aromatic, with honeysuckle notes giving way to lush flavors of apricot, mango and pineapple. Ripe and spicy.	91	\$13
COOPERS CREEK Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009 Softly juicy, with elegant flavors of ripe pear, nectarine and citrus.	90	\$17
DRYLANDS Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2010 Shows juicy pineapple, passion fruit, melon and citrus flavors.	90	\$16
MOMO Pinot Noir Marlborough 2009 A classy expression of ripe red fruit character. Very harmonious.	90	\$20
STARBOROUGH Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009 Power yet elegant, with bright lemon-lime and green apple flavors.	90	\$15
TABLELANDS Sauvignon Blanc Martinborough Single Vineyard 2010 Bright and refreshing, with citrus, pear and apple flavors.	90	\$15
VILLA MARIA Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough Private Bin 2010 Offers a lovely mix of ripe pineapple, citrus and passion fruit notes.	90	\$15
WITHER HILLS Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009 Fleshy, with ripe, lush peach, apple, nectarine and citrus flavors.	90	\$15
THE CROSSINGS Sauvignon Blanc Awatere Valley 2010 Very juicy, with Key lime, melon, passion fruit and grapefruit notes.	89	\$15
DASHWOOD Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2010 Lip-smacking, with pineapple, melon, peach and mango character.	89	\$14
KONO Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2010 As close as it gets to biting into a perfectly juicy Granny Smith apple.	89	\$8
NOBILO Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough Regional Collection 2010 Vibrant, delivering flavors of lemon, lime, grapefruit and apricot.	89	\$14
SAINT CLAIR Pinot Noir Marlborough Vicar's Choice 2010 Raspberry flavors are ripe and ever so slightly candied in this red.	89	\$18
SAUVIGNON REPUBLIC Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009 Light-bodied and refreshing, featuring a core of lemon-lime flavors.	89	\$10
TOHU Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009 Fragrant, ripe and juicy, with apricot, peach and nectarine.	89	\$15
GOLDSCHMIDT Pinot Noir Marlborough Nick Goldschmidt Boulder Bank 2009 Cranberry, plum and cherry notes show details of clove and nutmeg.	88	\$18