

Hello Visitor! | [Log In](#) or [Register](#)[About Us](#) [Advertise](#) [Subscribe](#) [RSS](#)
 SEARCH
[Home](#)

## The Wine Gods Shine on South Island

ARTICLE | FEBRUARY 15, 2011 | BY PAUL WHITE

### The Wine Gods SHINE on South Island



*Cloudy Bay's Mustang Vineyard in Brancott Valley*

New Zealand's South Island is as close as the Southern Hemisphere gets to Burgundy, the Loire, Champagne, Alsace, and Germany. Alternatively, think all of California's Coastal Regions, Oregon, and eastern Washington crammed into one long, thin island. Between the southern sun, which delivers 30 percent more UV radiation, and the surrounding Antarctic-influenced seas, Marlborough, Nelson, Waipara, and Central Otago zigzag between hot sunny days and cool summer nights.

The payoff is vibrantly ripened fruit kissed by zingy, natural acidity.

#### Fast-Forward History

The history of winemaking in the South Island is brief but interesting. French colonists planted grapes at Akaroa in the 1840s and then left when the country went English. Germans established vines on poor land in Nelson during the 1840s, gave up, and moved off to found Australia's Barossa Valley. Finally, Central Otago's gold miners had a go in the 1860s, although it's probable more wine was made from fermenting old boots than grapes. Prohibition came, and grape growing went quiet.

The modern industry didn't take off until 1973, when Austrian winemaker Hermann Seifried planted Nelson with Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, and Pinot Noir. Fortuitously, while the rest of the country fumbled around with second-rate hybrids like Müller-Thurgau, Seifried proved that first-rate vinifera grapes could ripen in South Island's cooler climates. Soon after, Montana (now Brancott Estates) planted vines in what would become the country's largest producing region, Marlborough. In the late 1980s the Brits tasted and embraced the Sauvignon Blanc, and New Zealand hasn't looked back since.

#### Marlborough

Clearly Sauvignon has found a sweet spot in Marlborough (approximately 70 wineries; 22,000 acres). The region's success---and, by extension, the country's---has been driven by a commercial formula that lays endless golden eggs. Brancott Estate viticulturalist Mike Insley explains why: "Climate has to be the main influence---warm and dry enough to fully ripen commercial yields but cool enough to retain acidity and flavor precursors (methoxypyrazines, thiols, etc.) usually 'blown off' in warmer climates. Our

longer grape development phase compared to warmer climates may play a part, too; where the French often talk about 100 days between flowering and harvest, Marlborough may push 120 to 130.”

Thirty years ago vines encroached on a virgin landscape. Today almost every inch of the Wairau Valley is covered in grapes. The region’s highly pronounced, sweaty, herblike aromatics, juxtaposed against exotic, ultraripe, tropical fruits, are driven by cobblestone-riddled alluvial soils atop the free-draining gravels of ancient river beds. In outlying clay-driven subregions (Brancott, Omaka, and Wither Hills) Sauvignons express ever richer, oilier textures and increasingly pungent characters.

Further out, the cooler, drier, and windier Awatere Valley forces vines to struggle toward ripeness, pushing Sauvignon toward nettley, tomato-plant-leaf aromas, denser palate weights, and sharper acidity.

Large- and medium-sized producers such as Vavasour, Grove Mill, Hunter’s, Wither Hills, Villa Maria, Forrest Estate, Sacred Hill, Stoneleigh, Allan Scott, Mount Riley, Matua Valley, Lawson’s Dry Hills, Nautilus, Selaks, Wairau River, Babich, Highfield, Jackson Estate, Gravitas, Saint Clair, Te Whare Ra, Tohu, and Spy Valley consistently deliver Marlborough’s signature Sauvignon style year in and year out. Others, like Dog Point, Huia, Astrolabe, Seresin, Churton, Cloudy Bay, Clos Henri, Domaine Georges Michel, and Isabel Estate have successfully elevated low-yield Sauvignon to much higher levels.

Beyond Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough is also prime sparkling-wine country. All bottlings are high-quality Pinot Noir/Chardonnay--based, *méthode champenoise*, from Brancott’s excellent value Lindauer up to such premium cuvées as Cloudy Bay’s *Pelorus*, Hunter’s *Miru Miru*, and No. 1 Family’s *Cuvée No. 1*.

Chardonnays are crisply fruited, low oaked, and great with food. European-like, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris, and Riesling all deliver true cool-climate aromatics and sharply defined structures.

Marlborough is playing catch-up with Pinot Noir, focusing primarily on inexpensive, volume production--everyman’s Pinot, bless them. These tend to be straightforward and fruity but at least show genuine varietal characters. On the other hand, the low-yield, gently handled, more seriously made Pinots of Fromm, TerraVin, and Seresin are up with New Zealand’s most age worthy.

## Nelson

Nelson (21 wineries, approximately 1,500 acres) is New Zealand’s center of art and counterculture, and while soil and climate are important factors, it is human input that makes Nelson’s wines different. All share a distinctive, self-restrained tastefulness that’s hard to pin down. Winemakers strive for drinkability and balance, which is shaped by Nelson’s thriving café culture, with its al fresco dining and brilliant fresh seafood.

Nelson’s reputation rests primarily on small, family-run wineries focused on Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Riesling. Climatically similar to Marlborough, its Sauvignon Blancs are closely allied stylistically, but often better and cheaper. Grüner Veltliner, Albariño, and Gros Manseng (a highly aromatic variety grown in France’s Jura) are under trial and suggest huge potential.

Two distinct subregional, terroir-derived characters exist. In Upper Moutere’s clay soils, wines tend to be richer and fuller bodied, spicier, and more minerally and savory. Hope and Waimea Plains wines, grown on free-draining soils, show more florals; brighter, more translucent fruit; and linear structures.

Standout producer Neudorf’s highly complex, beautifully structured, age worthy (10 to 20 years) Montrachet-like Chardonnays are among Australasia’s finest. Firmly structured and condensed, Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Sauvignon Blanc, and Riesling are produced in pairs to illustrate Nelson’s prevailing soil types.

Andrew Greenhough of Greenhough Vineyards seeks “less obvious, less big” styles. He wants his Pinot Noirs to be “ethereal, as opposed to deep and brooding” and his complex, lees-driven Chardonnays to show “fruit over visible oaking.” Greenhough’s Pinot Blancs are delicate, fresh, and peachy, and his off-

---

dry Riesling is exquisitely balanced and succulent. His carefully considered ideals are common among Nelson's growers.

Knowledge Environments

Space precludes detailing other such quality producers as Te Mania, Kaimira, Tasman Bay, Rimu Grove, and Woollaston; all deserve much more US restaurant exposure. Volume producers Seifried and Waimea Estate are particularly strong on sharply priced aromatic varieties. Nelson is easily New Zealand's most underrated region.

#### Waipara(Canterbury)

The first grapes were planted near Christchurch in Canterbury, the region, but Waipara's warmer, more consistent climate and soils are better suited to wine grapes. Today, over 90 percent of Canterbury's wine production is based in the Waipara subregion (17 wineries, approximately 1,300 acres). Sitting in a protective bowl of foothills, Waipara, which means "muddywater" in Maori, is more continentally driven than Marlborough but more coastally influenced than Central Otago. This climatic "in-between-ness" plays out in richer, spicier Pinot Noirs and Rieslings---regional specialties---and tighter, more finely grained, more minerally Sauvignon Blancs compared to Marlborough's. Chardonnay gathers an added sweet-corn element that doesn't appear elsewhere.

A couple of years ago, industry giant Brancott Estates recognized these distinctions and reaffirmed Waipara's potential by planting 1,000 acres of Pinot Noir and Riesling. Brancott's marketing pull is raising the overseas profile of neighboring small- and medium-sized producers such as Fiddler's Green, Canterbury House, Mountford, Floating Mountain, Sherwood Estate, Torlesse, Mount Cass, Alan McCorkindale, and Waipara Springs.

Waipara's strongest player, Pegasus Bay, builds layers of complexity into their Pinot Noir and Chardonnay styles, downplaying obvious fruit and heavy oak. Its lees-driven, age worthy, Graves-like Sauvignon Blanc/Sémillon is a stunner, and the winery's range of crisply etched, low-alcohol, semisweet, and late-harvest Rieslings is superb. The bargain-priced, regionally driven, second-label Main Divide can be as good as regular Pegasus Bay.

Belinda Gould's noninterventionist winemaking philosophies are expressed in Muddy Water's Pinot Noir, Syrah, Pinotage, Chardonnay, and Riesling. All are highly aromatic, finely structured, and full of back-palate complexity.

Further north and higher up, Austrian-born Daniel Schuster planted his Omihi Hill's Pinot Noir and Chardonnay on limestone-laden soils at high-density vine spacing in 1986. His racy, minerally flavored Chardonnays and delicately fruited, silky Pinots have been compared favorably to Burgundy.

Twenty miles out of Waipara, youthful newcomers Bell Hill Vineyard and biodynamic-driven Pyramid Valley have crowded 4,000 to 5,000 Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vines per acre into limestone-rich, supersteep slopes that would keep a billy goat happy. Emerging styles, sinewy and laser focused, are evidence that this is a hot new region to watch.

#### Central Otago

Youthful and dynamic, Central Otago (50 wineries, approximately 2,300 acres) is very much focused on low-yield, gently handled Pinot Noir. Sharing the psychology of Oregon and Burgundy, grounded in a climate similar to eastern Washington, increasingly, producers seek out and exploit distinct terroir through single-vineyard wines. Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer, and Riesling are characteristically floral and often show European-like structures. Chardonnays are crisp and Chablis-esque, and Sauvignon quite Sancerre-like.

Otago's coolest, most variable subregion, Gibbston Valley, produces highly perfumed, finely structured, linear wine styles. Leading old-guard wineries Gibbston Valley and Chard Farm have vine age to deliver consistent depth of flavor and complexity to their Pinot Noir, Riesling, and Pinot Gris. Newer, smallish producers such as Mount Edward, viticulturally obsessed Amisfield, actor Sam Neill's Two Paddocks, former Oregonian (Archery Summit) Gary Andrus's Gypsy Dancer, organic Kawarau, Nevis Bluff, and medium-sized Peregrine are consistently delivering pretty Pinots with lifted aromas,

concentrated flavors, and fine-grained structures. Regional Rieslings and Pinot Gris can be especially delicate, purely focused, and floral. Peregrine and Amisfield have made praiseworthy Sancerre-like Sauvignon Blanc.

Wanaka is the second coolest region, where biodynamically managed Rippon demonstrates consistent abilities to produce long-lived, delicately perfumed Pinots and Rieslings. Nearby Mount Maude is showing promise with aromatics as well.

Styles change abruptly in Otago's most consistent region, the greater "Cromwell Basin." This ultrasunny, mountainous, bowl-shaped mesoclimate delivers intense summer heat and extended hang time. Pinot styles show broader aromas, richer textures, riper fruit, and higher alcohols. Akarua, Carrick, Mt. Difficulty, Pisa Range, and Central Otago Wine Co. (winemakers to a dozen local microproducers) are solid performers.

Felton Road's impeccably balanced, terroir-based Pinots; subtle, fine-grained Chardonnays; and carefully conceived, off-dry and unashamedly sweet Rieslings have reached cult status. The region's senior winemaker, Quartz Reef's Austrian-born Rudi Bauer, produces aromatic, full-bodied Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris and a crackerjack Auslese-like Riesling. Bauer's Pinot Noir/Chardonnay--based sparkler is about as close as Kiwis get to real Champagne.

Southeast of Cromwell, Alexandra is hotter and drier in summer, colder in winter. Dry Gully, William Hill, and Black Ridge are respectable performers, the latter notable for dynamiting its vineyard out of solid mica. As one would imagine, Black Ridge makes very minerally Gewürztraminer, Riesling, and Pinot Noir.

Great expectations are held for newly planted vineyards farther east in the limestone hills surrounding the Waitaki Valley.

### **What Is a South Island Wine?**

#### General Characteristics

Ripe, ultrapure, concentrated fruit, outlined by crisp natural acidity, defines all regions. Uniquely flamboyant Sauvignon styles speak for themselves. Chardonnays, fermented in old neutral oak with lees-driven complexity, are fruit focused and refreshing. Crisp Pinot Gris resembles the best Pinot Grigios.

Increasingly, Riesling producers drop alcohol levels to between 9 and 11 percent, which allows residual sweetness and acidity to find a natural balance and results in a fresher, more food-friendly style.

Pinot Noir clearly illustrates regional difference and is often deeply perfumed with clearly defined varietal characters and refined tannic structure.

#### **Aging**

Always drink Sauvignon Blancs and Gewürztraminers young. Chardonnays are best from two to five years but can age 10 to 15. Riesling and Pinot Gris are structured to age ten-plus years. Pinot Noir and sparkling wine drink well up to seven years; the more seriously constructed, 10 to 15.

#### **Kiwis on the List**

Not all American restaurant guests have been introduced to the crisp, fruity wines from New Zealand, but those who have are probably well disposed to continue their exploration. For restaurant wine buyers, this is a win-win for both patrons and the program.

The kiwi wines that Americans know best are Sauvignon Blancs, and the most renowned come from Marlborough on South Island. But the mention of Marlborough or South Island may not register in the minds of most restaurant patrons. Besides world-class Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough, South Island is becoming known for wines made with cool-climate varieties: Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Pinot

Gris, and Pinot Noir. Whatever the variety, most wines are made in a style that emphasizes bright fruit and acidity. These are food-friendly wines, easy to pair with a variety of menu items.

***About the Author »***

---

***Paul White***

**RELATED TERMS:** Wine Agriculture California wine Central Otago Wine Co. Chardonnay Entertainment Montana Wines New Zealand wine New Zealand wine Oregon wine Person Attributes Person Career Pinot blanc Pinot gris Pinot noir Riesling Sauvignon blanc South Island Technology Washington Washington wine Wine

LATEST NEWS | BLOGS | RESOURCES | EVENTS | POLLS | 

[Subscribe](#) [Advertise](#) [About Us](#) [Site Map](#) [Terms of Use](#) [Privacy Policy](#)