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New Zealand: Taking it to the Next Level **Lisa Perrotti-Brown, MW**

One New Zealand has emerged in the last couple of decades as one of the leading producers in the world of Sauvignon Blanc and more recently Pinot Noir. Perhaps not in terms of sheer volumes but when we consider how much wine the country produces (1% of global production) compared to how much it exports (the world's 10th largest exporter in terms of value), the popularity of this country's 8th most important export commodity is right there in black and white. But consumers don't need the figures to be aware of the impact that New Zealand has had on driving global demand for Sauvignon and fueling the desire for Pinot Noir. The wines have a clear visible presence on retailer shelves and on restaurant wine lists throughout the major wine importing nations. So why are wines from these NZ grapes so successful? Simply because they are what they are - consistently, reliably, affordably so. Consumers now know precisely what they're getting when they buy a NZ Sauvignon or a Pinot and they're willing to pay a little more for that reassurance and dare I say predictability. Sighs of relief are virtually expelled from guests at restaurant tables around the world when the host orders a NZ Sauvignon or Pinot because they know they're not going to be disappointed. Problem is...they're too often not expecting to be overly excited either. New Zealand Sauvignons and Pinots are good and sometimes very good, but when are they occasionally going to be legs-a-quiver, heart-thumpingly great?

In the pursuit of greatness, Sauvignon Blanc is at a bit of a loss to begin with. I can assure you this has nothing to do with the snobbery of reviewers - I happen to love the grape. But compared to some other grapes such as Riesling, Syrah or big brother Cabernet, it doesn't easily yield a whole lot of aroma/flavor layers or complexity. When it's young, Sauvignon can produce wonderfully intense and concentrated aromas and flavors, but they're rather few in number and simple by nature. Often no oak or malo-lactic is employed in order to retain freshness, crispness and purity. But oak and MLF can instill complimentary layers of complexity. Also the "green" grape-derived compounds that Sauvignon wines often contain, methoxypyrazines, can be important to its style in youth (and generally part and parcel of higher yielding vineyards), but don't tend to develop well in bottle. They can evolve into a rotten vegetable or tinned pea character that isn't appealing and detracts from the wine as it ages and fades. Don't get me wrong, there are some truly great and age-worthy dry Sauvignon Blancs in the world - Pavillon Blanc du Chateau Margaux is one of my desert island wines. But this grape needs a lot of work in the vineyard and winery in order to build complexity and ageability. Fortunately for lovers of this style (like me) we're just starting to see some movements in NZ amongst a few producers towards forging truly great Sauvignons that can cellar. During my tastings for this report, I highlighted a few top examples for readers who are interested in experiencing NZ Sauvignon at that next level:

"Next Level" New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs for the cellar:

Dog Point 2010 Section 94
Cloudy Bay 2009 Te Koko



Mission Estate 2011 Reserve Sauvignon Blanc
Greywacke 2010 Wild Ferment Sauvignon Blanc
Matahiwi 2011 Holly Sauvignon Blanc
Foxes Island 2010 Belsham Awatere Estate "Lapine" Sauvignon Blanc
Astrolabe 2011 Taihou Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc
Martinborough Vineyard 2012 Burnt Spur Sauvignon Blanc
Auntsfield 2011 South Oaks Barrel Fermented Sauvignon Blanc
Spy Valley 2010 Envoy Sauvignon Blanc
Tohu 2011 "Mugwi" Reserve Sauvignon Blanc

Now let's consider New Zealand Pinot Noir for a moment. It is potentially NZ's most valuable wine asset, if we take into account how few wine regions on the globe are actually capable of producing a decent Pinot. And yet NZ Pinot seems to faltering in a few major export markets at the moment. Why? I keep hearing wine buyers/consumers chanting about competition from cheaper examples from the USA, Australia and Chile. Here's the deal: you aren't going to get a whole lot of Pinosity at under US\$20 / NZ\$25. The grape simply doesn't like to be brand-handled. Without lower yields and artisanal handling it turns into a tutti-frutti number that lacks any definition. What's the point? In my book bargain wine hunters are far better off looking to grapes such as Shiraz and Grenache, which at the lower end of the price spectrum can offer incredible bang for your buck. But if consumers really want to buy a cheap Pinot that is for all intents and purposes simply a Pinot by name, then they may as well buy it from a region that has no business growing the grape anyway and can pump it out at bargain basement prices. I get nervous when I see NZ producers that have resorted to servicing gate-keeper demands for cheaper versions. Too much of this will destroy their burgeoning image for quality. If anything, I would like to see producers aiming the other way, getting a little more ambitious with their tannins and making Pinots that may look backwards, tight-knit, firm and closed in their youths, but will blossom into jaw-dropping stunners after 5-7+ years in bottle. That's the next level. So for this report I've also highlighted some great Pinots that are built for cellaring and should reward collectors in a few years' time...with dividends:

"Next Level" New Zealand Pinot Noirs for the cellar:

Escarpment 2010 Te Rehua
Kusuda 2010 Pinot Noir
Fromm 2010 Clayvin Vineyard Pinot Noir
Quartz Reef 2011 Bendigo Estate Pinot Noir
Seresin 2009 Sun and Moon Pinot Noir
Churton 2011 Abyss Pinot Noir
Rippon 2010 Tinker's Field Pinot Noir
Felton Road 2011 Block 3 Pinot Noir
Schubert 2010 Block B Pinot Noir
Bell Hill 2009 Pinot Noir
Greenhough 2010 Hope Vineyard Pinot Noir
Mount Edward 2010 Morrison Vineyard Pinot Noir
Neudorf 2010 Moutere Home Vineyard Pinot Noir
Craggy Range 2011 Aroha Te Muna Road Vineyard
Spy Valley Envoy 2010 Spy Valley Envoy Outpost Pinot Noir



Vintages:

The 2010 vintage produced excellent wines throughout New Zealand. Of course this was suggested in the figures in terms of rainfall, sunshine, crop levels, etc., but the proof is at the end of the day always in the glass. The 2010 wines that I tasted for this report looked very impressive across the board, from regions north of Auckland on down to Otago. Alluvial winemakers Kate Galloway and David Ramonteu in Hawkes Bay commented, “2010 was very different from 2009. A much longer, cooler ripening period produced wines with more fragrance, length and finesse than 2009 which resulted in warm, ripe bold wines.” And Sean Spratt of Destiny Bay on Waiheke Island said, “The warm and dry weather of this amazing season, combined with the poor fruit set caused by the unusual weather in November and December, meant that the demands for fruit thinning were minimal. In addition, disease pressure was uncharacteristically low. These two factors, more than anything else, contributed to the creation of small, concentrated berries in virtually disease free bunches that simply had to be clipped from the vine.”

At record-setting crop levels, 2011 was a little more challenging. Damien Yvon, winemaker at Clos Henri in Marlborough commented: “2011 was a year which proved you can’t make terroir driven wines from recipe. Each season is different and the wines need to be handled so. The 2010/2011 season was fresher and slightly wetter than usual, leading to delayed maturity which pushed harvest back two weeks. It was a challenging season, one where we had to put a lot of work in in the vineyard, shoot thinning and bunch thinning to achieve desired crop levels.” Indeed some of the Marlborough 2011 Sauvignon Blancs I tasted were a little leaner than the 2010s, but the best producers didn’t miss a beat here and still managed to make very good wines. Towards the North (Hawkes Bay, Gisborne and Auckland) and to the far South (Central Otago) things were notably damper and cooler than in the middle of the country and the wines from these areas are a bit patchier in terms of quality. In Central Otago while the spring was promisingly dry and hot, the second half of the season turned notably cooler and wetter than average, which demanded a lot of vigilance in the vineyards. And in some cases the extra attention in the vineyards and extended season was not a bad thing – I’ve tasted some absolutely lovely 2011 Central Otago Pinots possessing great elegance and very fine, fully resolved tannins. In short, though it is by no means a bad or even in most cases sub-average year, the relative excellence of the 2011 vintage is best considered on a winery by winery basis.

The 2012 vintage saw yields down significantly on 2011 – 18% overall. This was largely down to a very cool spring and poor fruit set in Marlborough. It was a generally cooler yet reasonably dry vintage there, which is promising for relative concentration and flavor development. I tasted a few 2012 Sauvignon Blancs that had just been bottled in time for this report and they certainly had the flavor volume turned up a notch or two! However in the North Island the 2012 reds and slow-poke Chardonnays (harvested later than average due to the cooler vintage towards the North) could well be another story altogether due to rains and ensuing rot at harvest time plaguing vineyards and with Hawkes Bay producers in particular lamenting the trials, tribulations and ultimate losses. Pinot Noir from the South Island (especially Central Otago) does not however appear to have been affected with producers talking up the vintage, although the ultimate proof will - as always - be what is revealed once the wines have been bottled next year.