

# NELSON

## boutique diversity

On a world scale, wine production New Zealand is a pretty boutique operation and we account for just a few percentage points of the planet's output. More than 80% of our wineries produce fewer than 20,000 cases of wine; a tiny amount even when compared to mid sized producers in, say, France, Spain, Australia or Italy.



Early morning in Nelson's Redwood Valley.



**B**ut by and large we're pretty good at it and the 'boutique' descriptor is something we cherish. It implies careful husbandry and personal attention to detail and the fashioning of a product that is individual and expressive of the people and the place; just how we would like people to see us.

So of course you would expect some of our smaller wine regions to exemplify those very traits, and when it comes to boutique wine operations the Nelson region is a prime example.

The region holds just 2% of our national vineyard and just 38 of the 698 wineries registered with New Zealand Winegrowers.

Certainly boutique! But it produces some of the country's most distinctive Chardonnay, elegant Pinot Noir, textural Sauvignon Blanc, and most importantly, some of our finest examples from the aromatic varieties.

Indeed it is with the aromatic varieties of Riesling and Gewürztraminer that the region recently came to the attention of a world-wide audience when Nelson Wineart, the wine marketing organisation for the region, conducted comparative tastings with American and Italian examples during the hosting of teams from those two countries during

the Rugby World Cup last year.

Five examples of Pinot Gris, Riesling and Gewürztraminer from each country were blind tasted by a panel of judges, one from each country, with Australia's Ralph Kyte-Powell as referee.

While Nelson held its own in the assessment of Pinot Gris and to a lesser extent with Gewürztraminer (Italy dominated), they swept the pool with the Riesling class taking four of the five top places. It was the most successful region, by a small margin, in the overall results.

Mike Brown, the Chairperson of the Nelson Winegrowers Association reports that the importance of the event lay not just in the ensuing accolades. "It provided a stamp of authority on the region's claim to New Zealand's aromatic crown. And the fact that the competition received world-wide coverage as a part of the Rugby World Cup event was definitely a bonus."

Nelson has more sunshine than any other New Zealand wine region and has both free draining soils in the plains around Richmond as well as clay based sites in the Moutere Hills. The sea breezes mitigate disease pressure and provide an ideal variation between day and night temperatures. Surely an ideal template for viticultural success?





Greg and Amanda Day at Kahurangi Estate.

So where are the large-scale vineyards of Marlborough and Hawke's Bay? And where are the international conglomerates that make their presence known in most other wine regions?

The answer lies in the geography and history of the region.

Nelson's back-story is with fruit and market gardening. When Hermann Seifried first came to the area in 1971 it was to make wine from apples and pears. That was what the region did best. And indeed it was the quality of the pip fruit that brought such as Patrick Stowe of Rimu Grove to the area in the first place. "We visited as tourists and could not believe the intensity of the pip fruit we came across".

So unlike Marlborough and large parts of Hawke's Bay there were no large tracts of 'worthless' land waiting for viticulture to invade and Nelson remains the domain of smaller, family owned vineyards, who by and large aim at the premium end of the market. Only three of them, Seifried Estate, Spencer Hill and Waimea Wine Estates, are classified as 'medium' wineries according to New Zealand Winegrowers ratings, where a yearly output of 22,000 cases is required. All three are still family owned.



Lars Jensen and Max of Richmond Plains.

**On the face of it Nelson is easy to understand. There are the flat plains around Richmond and Appleby where a mixture of stones and silt has been deposited by the Waimea River over hundreds of years, and there are the Moutere Hills that rise in the north-west that are ancient, glacial, clay based soils. Obviously each area will produce wines with their own distinctive character.**

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Well, yes and no.

Nearly every winemaker you speak to will tell you that there are often discernable differences between the wines from the two areas. Shane Munn, the winemaker at Woollaston Estate, with Riesling vineyards in both areas shows us an example from each site. That from the plains has purity and elegance while the wine from the nearby Moutere site has more structure and a slight oiliness. Shane demonstrates the difference between the soil types with a couple of stones he has collected, one from each vineyard. The Moutere example is angular and fractured and had been embedded in clay, the one from the plains was round and smooth from river actions over centuries and had lain in silt.



Mt Arthur from the Rimu Grove Vineyard.

Shane adds that their Pinot Noir from the plains vineyards are stronger while more savoury and textural characters are evident in the Moutere versions. "Both get very similar treatment in the winery so the differences are easily recognisable."

Patrick Stowe of Rimu Grove, a site looking out over the estuary and backed by the hills comments that, like apples and pears he tasted all those years ago, "The hills always provide amazing concentration."

John Kavanagh, winemaker for Neudorf, one of the first to establish in the region in the late 70s, says that you can certainly see the difference between the two areas. "We have vineyards here, at our Moutere Winery but we also have a site in Brightwater. We make a Pinot Gris from each and they are quite different. The one from 'Maggies Block' in Brightwater provides more pear and quince characters while that from the home block emphasises nashi and white peach flavours."

But it is not as clearcut as that.

Jenny Wheeler of Greenhough Vineyards comments that the Pinots they get from the two areas are not as dissimilar as you would expect. "I think we need to recognise the importance of winemaking influence and winemaking philosophy in the differences we see."

It's a concept that is echoed by Lars Jensen, the owner of Richmond Plains organic vineyards and winery on the plains around Appleby. "The plains definitely give more fruity and citrus characters while that from the hills is more restrained. But in fact the decisions made by the winemaker are as important in determining style and structure."

Hermann Seifried notes that one of the biggest differences is in terms of consistency rather than just fruit profiles. "The hills are very consistent whereas the plains can be quite variable."





Blackenbrook Vineyard.

And that's something Ben Bolitho of Waimea can confirm. With a number of sites on the plains Ben comments that the home block around the winery is more consistent than their Landsdowne site nearer Hope, "that gives us more variation but better flavours and more complexity."

Ian Miller of Kaimira agrees. "There's huge difference just within the plains," he says. "Where we are in Brightwater, quite a bit inland, in what we call the lower plains, the soils are really bony and provide a definite minerality. Those vineyards on the upper plains nearer the sea have more silt in the mix."

But whatever the conclusion, it is one which the Nelson wine making community is going to have to grapple with over the next few months. The 2013 Pinot Noir conference to be held in Wellington in January is concentrating on aspects of regionality from all parts of the country. Each region will be able to promote and demonstrate regional and sub-regional differences in the wines they make. "We will need to think hard about what makes us different," says Jenny Wheeler.

There can be no doubt that the region can excel at the aromatic varieties as the results of the recent taste-off confirmed. Stephen Spurrier, consultant editor for Decanter magazine and organiser of the famous 'Judgement of Paris' that was the subject of the film *Bottleshock*, has labelled Nelson as 'the home to New Zealand's finest aromatics' and has compared the region to the Alsace.

But what of the other varieties? Is there a danger in nailing your region's reputation to the one wine style? You might think so but the general consensus is that the aromatic label is not as limiting as it might appear.

"We are pretty good at most things," says Ian Miller. And Ursula Schwarzenbach of Blackenbrook, the winner of the aromatic RWC competition, says that they can do most things well. "But we are a small region and anything that profiles the area has to be good. We are all family sized businesses without the market budgets that larger companies can muster. It ties in well with the Aromatic Symposium that Nelson will host in February following the Pinot Noir conference."

"We definitely have strength with the aromatics here," says Hermann. "It makes sense to promote the region in this way. We have the ability to make world class Riesling and Gewürztraminer despite the fact that they are both suffering from the Pinot Gris explosion."

Lars sees it as a gateway to the world not only for the aromatics but for all Nelson wines. "We make great wines from non-aromatic varieties. Our Pinots can be sublime but in a less ripe style and if we can get a focus on the region it will lead to an understanding of all our wines."

Certainly the aromatic title seems to be gaining some traction. Patrick reports that people are asking for the Rieslings at cellar door and the interest seems to derive from word of mouth and personal recommendations. Greenhough sells more Riesling at cellar door than they do Sauvignon Blanc. Ben comments that their cellar door has noticed an increase in Riesling interest and adds that they have already made wine from the Austrian aromatic variety Grüner Veltliner and have Alborino and Sauvignon Gris planted.

But any look at Nelson needs to take in the fact that there

are increased plantings a little out of the recognised areas that are attracting attention.

Phil Jones' Spencer Hill Estate has a 5.5ha 'Coastal Ridge' vineyard North East of Nelson on soils that he says are quite similar to his Moutere sites. "They provide similar depth and concentration but result in slightly different flavours."

At the other end of the region Motueka has the most advanced sites with Anchorage Wines planting their own 20ha vineyard in 2000 as well as having a similar sized site in the Moutere Hills. They have since contracted more fruit from the area and built a contract winemaking facility. The back-story of the region, with hops and fruit giving way to viticulture is certainly familiar in these parts.

In Tasman there are a number of new ventures and leading the charge is the Sea Level vineyard planted by Whitehaven's Sam Smail and his parents, that looks out over the Tasman Bay in what must be one of the most spectacular vineyard vistas in the country.

Further along the coast, at Golden Bay, a number of very small, family run vineyards have been established, encouraged by Dave Harraud of Waiwera Estate who pioneered the viticulture in this neck of the woods.

Not surprisingly the vineyards at Motueka, Tasman and Golden Bay all share the two things that make Nelson wine unique – the long hours of sunshine and the cool sea breezes.



Cellar door at Woollaston Estate.

At the end of the day Nelson must not only take the crown for the country's predominant aromatic producer, it must also rate as the country's most dramatic in terms of beauty and landscape. The snow capped peaks of the Mount Arthur range frame both the plains and the hills and the spectacular beaches of Tasman Bay and the Able Tasman National Park are not far away.

The family orientated nature of the wineries in this region means that not only do the hand-crafted wines have individuality and presence, they are presented in an environment that is truly stunning.

Boutique indeed!

**MG**

*Seifried*

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