

Good Living

Marlborough 2.0

Marlborough New Zealand is well known as a region that produces stellar sauvignon blancs. But it's not really just one region, as **Michael Franco** finds out.



Southern Valley Marlborough

If you're a wine lover, chances are you're already familiar with the characteristics of sauvignon blanc grown in New Zealand's Marlborough region – citrusy aromas with a crisp, clean palate that's often infused with passion fruit and grapefruit notes.

But would you be able to single out a Marlborough sauvignon blanc that had flavour influences from the sub-region of Kekerengu? Or one that was produced by a single vineyard in the Southern Valleys, without any blending from outside regions?

If your answer is no, you're not alone – there aren't too many people that could pinpoint from which sub-region of Marlborough a wine hails.

According to Simon Waghorn of Astrolabe Wines, "Some of those drinkers that love Marlborough now will want to take it a bit further. One day, instead having any old Marlborough, they will say 'Today I feel like a Kekerengu, tomorrow I feel like an Awatere, or, next I feel like a wine from the Southern Valleys.'

Before that happens, though, Ben Cowley who owns Auntsfield Estate in the Southern Valleys with his brother Luc, says that more wineries located in regions outside Marlborough's main valley must begin making wines with grapes exclusively from their own land, rather than blending fruit from the various sub-regions.

Cowley is currently producing a single-vineyard sauvignon blanc in the sub-region known as the Southern Valleys, and he's doing it in wooden barrels – a rarity in Marlborough where steel casks are the norm. He says this makes the wine unique in that it can pair with a wide range of food, especially Asian cuisine.

In addition to the Cowley brothers, Waghorn is also blazing the trail into sub-regional, single-vineyard wines from Marlborough,

Waghorn has an interesting take on why the different regions of Marlborough have been steadily rising in importance and public opinion. He says: "We were trying to find interesting blending material by exploring new areas and also trying to spread our risk against things like frost and hail storms; we wanted to make sure



Picking grapes on Hawk Hill at Auntsfield Estate

that our fruit was not all localized in too tight an area.”

“The results have been promising with frost control, wind machines and sprinkle irrigation – things that can mitigate some of the agricultural risks of growing in these areas. Whether because of a shortage of land, hedging bets against Mother Nature, or a desire to broaden the flavour toolkit from which to blend better and better sauvignon blancs, the majority of winemakers in the region agree that a focus sub-regionally is where the wine-making future of Marlborough lies.

Kekerengu is unique because it is fairly far down the coast and it’s very close to the Pacific Ocean: it has a maritime feel to it. During the growing season, the onshore sea breezes start to come and actually slow down the ripening process, giving it an extremely long growing season by Marlborough standards.

But then you lay on top of that the climactic conditions that are here – we’re generally hotter during the day and cooler at night.

As for pinot noir, one of the types of soil we have here is called loess which produces a pinot noir typified by dark fruit flavours with plummy savoury characteristics”.



SUBREGIONS 101

A quick primer on a few of Marlborough’s most prominent subregions from three of New Zealand’s most accomplished wine makers.

Simon Waghorn/Astrolabe Wines Awatere



Liquid Gold - Astrolabe

Where we get our fruit in the Awatere, there’s a fair bit of clay in the soil and it’s usually cooler with a later harvest. Wines here are typically less driven by the really strong passion fruit and sweet characters you see in some of the wines from the Wairau and are more Sancerre-like with a textural, mineral palate quality that lends it a fair bit of sophistication and makes it a bit more European.

Kekerengu

Unusually for Marlborough, there’s a bit of limestone through the soils. The limestone tends to affect the wine’s chemical makeup with a higher pH and a lower acidity. This gives us the ability to make a wine that’s a little drier than we normally present without it looking too austere. So you can get quite an approachable wine at a lower sugar level. The wines tend to have almost a saline, salty quality that seems to speak of the proximity to

the sea and also makes them the perfect wines for presenting with a lot of shellfish (oysters in particular).

Jules Taylor/Jules Taylor Wines Lower Wairau

We’re a valley, we’re pretty small. Basically during our growing season, the prevailing wind is from the northwest but in the Awatere valley and lower Wairau it’s moderated by more of an easterly breeze so that defines what happens in terms of temperature. That combined with the different soil types gives us different flavour profiles for the various sauvignon blancs. The Wairau Valley is basically a big river and flood plain with quite varied soil that ranges from more stony to deeper alluvial deposits. We are getting more tropical, more grapefruit, more gooseberry flavours. The lower Wairau has much heavier soils so you’re getting more intensity in the fruit and you’re getting a lot more passion fruit flavour down there.

Ben Cowley/Auntsfield Estate The Southern Valleys

Within this region there is a mix of all the soils in Marlborough. So we have Awatere-like very old grey wacke rock, we have very old clay soils and we have the very new alluvial free-draining valley floor as well. It really has a mix. So the sauvignon blancs can really gain quite a lot of character depending on the actual soil they are grown in. But then you lay on top of that the climactic conditions that are here, we’re

generally hotter during the day and cooler at night. Then we have an earlier bud burst but a later pick, so it’s a longer growing season. Generally the Southern Valleys produce riper, more tropical, styles of sauvignon blanc with more texture.



Ben and Luc Cowley, Auntsfield Estate