

NEW ZEALAND WINE: It's Time to Question Expectations

BY CATHY HUYGHE

Traveling through New Zealand conjures up near-fairytale associations. It's a land far, far away. It's home to Maori spirits, mythical ancestors, and larger-than-life personalities from the Age of Exploration. On the map it seems to cling to the edge of the earth, and from the air, its landscapes seem carved by gods.

These are the associations that last for travelers, even long after we've returned home. New Zealand is a place dense with context - of geography, community, and regionality - and each of them adds layers of nuance and meaning to our experience there.

So why is it that, despite an intense appreciation for the diversity that defines New Zealand, our appreciation for its wine is limited to just a few, under-nuanced generalities? Why is it that we need to be reminded of Central Otago's Pinot Noir; or the sparkling wine from Central and other regions; or for that matter, the range of other varieties from Riesling to Chardonnay to Malbec? Certainly New Zealand has long hung its hat on Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc (and for good reason), but why do we need to be reminded of even Sauvignon's nuance, variety of soils, and ability to age? Why have we settled into a set of expectations about New Zealand wine, and simply stayed there, uncurious and unquestioning?

We may have settled into those expectations, but let me tell you, New Zealand's winemakers and viticulturists have not. They have been experimenting. They have been growing grapes because they like them and they want to grow them, not because they are necessarily an easy sell on the market. These winemakers have been traveling and working elsewhere, honing their craft and their own opinions, before returning home to exert those opinions in the vineyard and in the glass.

I think it's time to celebrate exactly what's UN-expected about New Zealand wine. It's time to extend our appreciation for New Zealand's diversity to the diversity of its wines. What's beautiful about New Zealand is what's beautiful everywhere in New Zealand, including in the vineyard and in the winery. It's time to celebrate that beauty, and its nuances, and taste the wines that we simply don't get to taste (or ask to taste) often enough.

Here are a few suggestions of categories and regions to seek out, based on my recent visit to the country.

Sauvignon Blanc

Dedicated fans of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc have demonstrated that its popularity and demand have not wavered since it first burst onto the international scene. We have witnessed this stateside by the reported 26% increase in exports to the US last year alone. Valued for its consistency of palate and aroma, this variety is also praised for its quality and an enticing price point; but that doesn't mean it's content to rest on its laurels. From my recent experience at the International Sauvignon Blanc Celebration in Marlborough, it's very clear that New Zealand Sauvignon is evolving. To keep up, we need to understand the stylistic nuances of this signature region's varied landscapes and its winemakers. Two wines I found demonstrating the diversity were the 2008 Dog Point Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc and the 2014 Seresin Sauvignon Blanc.

Pinot Noir

As New Zealand Pinot Noir continues to make strides in the US market, Central Otago has become a region celebrated for its cultivation. Since the landscape doesn't enable large-scale production, vineyard parcels and their yields are smaller; however, the dedicated efforts of winemakers to aspire to greatness remain large. Though many Central wines are enjoyed within several years of production, I found from the samples I enjoyed that their personality is most pronounced and diverse with age. Two examples that impressed my palate included the 2014 Valli Bannockburn Vineyard Pinot Noir and the 2014 Burn Cottage Cashburn Pinot Noir.

Sparkling Wine

This may be the part of New Zealand wine that we know the least about, which is exactly what makes it the most eye-opening. Sparkling wine's history in New Zealand dates back for generations, and its production reaches from one end of the country's wine regions to the other, including Central Otago, Auckland, Gisborne, Hawke's Bay, Wairarapa, Marlborough, Nelson, and Waipara. My wine recommendations include the current US release of the NV Quartz Reef Méthode Traditionnelle (especially the rosé) and the NV Sophora Sparkling Cuvée.



Central Otago Méthode & Rosé,
North Canterbury Rosé, and Kaikoura Crayfish

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