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Sommelier Selects – By Julian Hitner –  
~ New Zealand Wine Fair: always moving forward ~  
Saturday, June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010

**New Zealand Wine Fair – The Design Exchange (April 29<sup>th</sup>)**

**More than Sauvignon Blanc:**

As most sommeliers will tell you, the most important grape in New Zealand is Sauvignon Blanc, representing a staggering 63% all the grapes grown in the country as of 2009. And why should this surprise anyone? After all, what



other winegrowing nation on Earth can match the Kiwis' singular ability (particularly those situated in Marlborough) to bring out the most grass, the most gooseberries, the most white grapefruit, the most lemon citrus, the most cat's pee, in short the most zesty exhilarance out of this extraordinary grape?

This being said, most sommeliers have now realized that there is far more to the vinous landscape of New Zealand than this one varietal, as illustrated by my latest visit to the annual **New Zealand Wine Fair**, held on April 29<sup>th</sup> at **The Design Exchange (234 Bay Street)** in downtown Toronto. On this occasion, the wines I opted for examination were remarkably varied in type, from premium cool-climate Chardonnay to sumptuous Pinot Noir, Bordeaux blends, and Syrah. As a wine writer, I can always taste plenty of great Sauvignon Blanc in the lab ...

**Chardonnay -- a grape in the shadow:**

Without question, Chardonnay -- forever in the shadow of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc -- has been met with considerable success in New Zealand, with some experts even comparing the finest examples to the likes of their Burgundian counterparts; and while this might seem like a stretch, the results speak for themselves. As of 2009, plantings of Chardonnay (which can be found all over New Zealand) numbered 3,915 hectares, representing 12% of the nation's total output. On this occasion, my favourite was the **Carrick 2007, Central Otago (90/100, \$33.00)**: toasty, with beautiful nitted pears, quince, lemon, apricots, white peaches, and a hint of green



apples and lime; impressively complex, minerally, and fresh -- **offered by Lifford Wine Agency (416.440.4101)**. Another favourite was the **Alti Rangi 2008 'Petrie', Martinborough (89/100,**

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**\$25.99):** toasty, with lovely fresh quince, pears, lemon, apricots, nectarines, and just a hint of vanilla; beautifully fresh and balanced -- also offered by Lifford. With Chardonnays like these (and more affordable ones at lower prices), restaurant sommeliers should really add a few of them to their lists. After all, not all lesser known wines remain 'hand-sells' forever, a case in point being how popular premium New Zealand Pinot Noir has become over the past several years.

**Pinot Noir -- right at home in Middle Earth:**

Speaking of Pinot, by far New Zealand's most important red grape (representing 10% of total output), there is no question that the more premium examples are fast becoming more decidedly sumptuous, especially those from Central Otago (though the growers of Martinborough -- perhaps even Marlborough -- might have a thing or two to say about that). During my time at the fair, my favourite was definitely the **Felton Road 2008, Central Otago (91++/100, \$66.95)**: toasty, with very Burgundian (almost Vosne-Romanée-like) aromas of black cherries, violet plums, dark raspberries, a trickle of dusted earth, and a beautiful hint of vanilla and Asian spice; skilfully silky, polished, and sumptuous -- another offering by Lifford and the perfect premium Pinot to sample against the finer examples of Burgundy. However, for more wallet-conscious diners like myself, I would strongly recommend the **Neudorf Vineyards 2008 'Tom's Block', Nelson (89+/100, \$27.00)**: toasty (and slightly cedary), with lovely scents of fresh cherries, plums, violets, licorice, and spice; delightfully complex, balanced, and flavourful -- offered by **Rubaiyat Wine and Spirit Merchants (416.462.1577)**.



**Bordeaux Blends -- not to be missed:**

Having 'dispensed' with the Pinots (always a difficult task), a look at New Zealand's burgeoning premium Bordeaux blends now seems in order. In large part, Cabernet Sauvignon has never had an easy time of it in New Zealand, comprising a paltry 1% of the nation's total output. Put simply,

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the overall temperatures in many parts of this paradise-like nation are often not high enough for this grape to achieve optimum ripeness. As a result, most NZ Bordeaux blends -- grown principally in Hawkes Bay (particularly the Gimblett Gravels), Auckland, and Waiheke Island -- are commonly crafted from Merlot (comprising 4% of total output), routinely supported by the likes of Cabernet Franc, Malbec, and (of course) Cabernet Sauvignon. On this occasion, my top pick was the **Craggy Range 2007 'Sophia', Hawkes Bay (91+/100, \$66.95)**, comprising 81% Merlot, 10% Cabernet Franc, 7% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 2% Malbec: toasty, with tempting aromas of violet mocha-espresso, giving way to currants, plums, blackberries, graphite, vanilla, and spice; complex, well-structured, and downright delicious -- another offering by Lifford, as well as a serious contender to go up against the finest Merlot-based blends of Washington State. Another great hit was the **Ngatarawa 2007 'Alwyn Winemakers Reserve', Hawkes Bay (90/100, \$49.95)**, a blend of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon: toasty, with remarkable notes of brownies and mocha, giving way to fragrant baked plums and currants, earth, light tobacco, roasted meat, and a hint of vanilla and spice; complex, balanced, and generous -- offered (on private order) by **Whitehall Agencies (905.625.9463)**.

**Syrah -- advancing fast onto the scene:**

Finally, we come to Syrah, one of New Zealand's most up-and-coming red grape varieties. Though comprising just 293 hectares (ha) as of 2009 (albeit surpassing that of Cabernet Franc, which logs in at just 163 ha), many sommeliers have come to regard New Zealand Syrah in a very favourable light, the best examples usually hailing from Auckland, Waiheke Island, and especially the poor(er) soils of Hawkes Bay. With each passing vintage, such wines seem to be getting better and better, losing their vegetal, excessively peppery flavours as the older vines age. During my time at the fair, my favourite was the **Elephant Hill 2009 'Reserve' Hawkes Bay, (89+/100, \$34.95)**: toasty, with beautiful white peppery plums, currants, leather, and a hint of tar, vanilla, and spice; lovely complexity and varietal purity -- offered by **HHD Imports (519.884.7600)** and



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well worth suggesting to more adventurous guests. Another highlight was the **Villa Maria 2008** 'Cellar Selection, Hawkes Bay (89++/100, \$37.95): toasty, with tempting scents of white peppery plums, switching to violets, black mocha, fresh leather, and a hint of vanilla and spice; decidedly complex, smooth, and polished -- offered by **PMA Canada (905.257.2116)**.

**Always moving forward:**

Ultimately then, there is far more to New Zealand winemaking than the ubiquitous Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, the best examples being gems in their own right ... but not the only gems. From outstanding cool-climate Chardonnay to first-rate Pinot Noir, Bordeaux blends, and Syrah, the diversity of New Zealand winemaking has become greater than ever before; and with the right type(s) of restaurant sommeliers selecting the most appropriate wines for their lists (such as the ones so graciously mentioned here), there will always be no shortage of quality Kiwi wines for eager guests to enjoy.