

# NEW ZEALAND'S Surge

Pinot Noir keeps pace with Sauvignon Blanc as quality rises across the board

BY HARVEY STEIMAN AND  
MARYANN WOROBIEC



New Zealand continues to power ahead, delivering highly regarded Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir while also showing a consistent track record of outstanding Chardonnay. There are even some promising new Syrahs on the horizon. And the good news for value-conscious consumers is that most of the country's best bottles cost \$25 or less.

In the past 10 years, New Zealand's vineyard acreage has tripled, the number of wineries has doubled and exports have increased tenfold, topping NZ\$1 billion (about US\$700 million) in sales last year. American consumers have been a strong component of that growth. Today, the United States is New Zealand's third largest export market.

In addition, going green is taken very seriously in this young winegrowing region. A country whose largest industry is agriculture, New Zealand will be the first nation on the planet to boast a 100 percent certified sustainable wine industry by 2012. It's an impressive performance from a wine region that really only arrived on the scene a few decades ago.

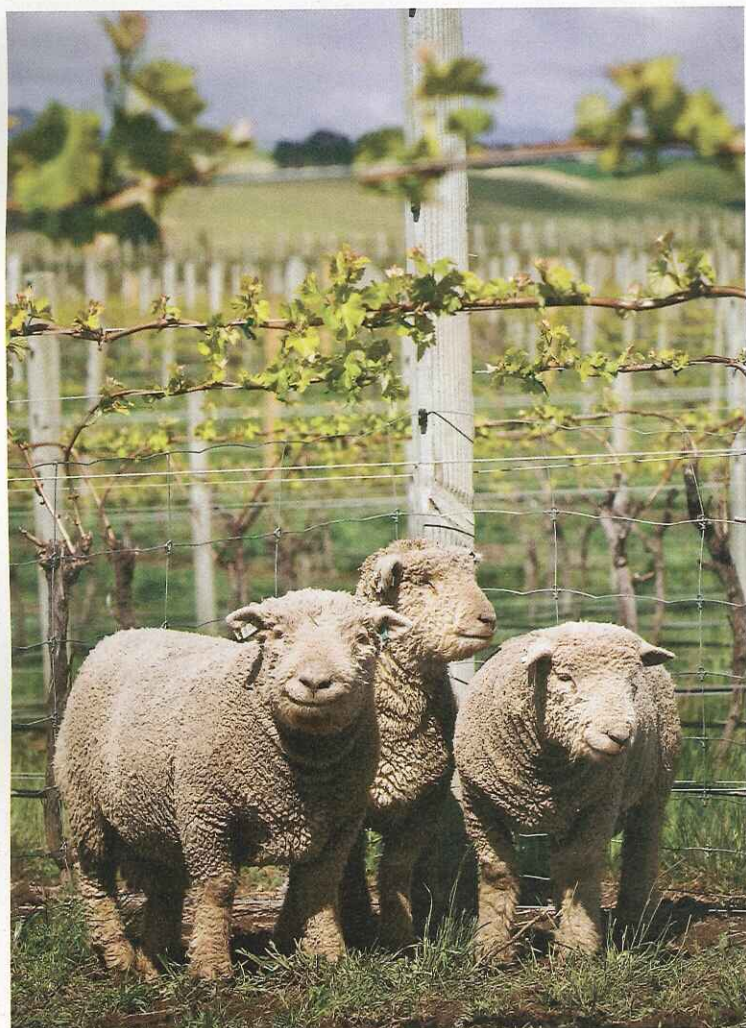
This report is based on the nearly 250 New Zealand wines blind-tasted in *Wine Spectator's* Napa office since our last report ("New Zealand Rebounds," June 15, 2009). Nearly half of the wines reviewed are Sauvignon Blancs, and this white continues to be the country's strength, with more than 55 wines scoring 88 points or higher on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale. Not surprisingly, the grape also represents about half of the vineyard acres planted in the country.

The South Island's Marlborough region produces many of New Zealand's finest wines, including those of Villa Maria, whose Taylors Pass Vineyard lies along the Awatere River.





In the cool climate of Central Otago, Amisfield winemaker Claire Mulholland (left) and general manager Fleur Caulton crafted one of this report's highest-rated Pinot Noirs.



As part of its commitment to sustainable winemaking at its Marlborough estate, outstanding producer Yealands uses sheep to graze in its vineyards.

New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs are known for their crisp, aromatic profiles, displaying lime and grapefruit flavors with pleasant grassy and minerally notes. In warmer vintages—such as 2009, which is hitting the market now—the wines lean toward more tropical, ripe peach and apricot flavors.

Winemakers know how to showcase these characteristics, largely choosing to ferment the wines in stainless-steel tanks to preserve their vibrancy. Some of the top examples this year include the Villa Maria Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough Cellar Selection 2009 (93 points, \$22) and the Kotare Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009 (92, \$15). (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at [www.winespectator.com/061510](http://www.winespectator.com/061510).)

Most people associate New Zealand wine with Marlborough—and for good reason. Marlborough produces the highest number of outstanding wines, and it's the country's largest wine region, accounting for half of the total acreage of grapes grown. (Grapes were first planted there in 1973.) Located on the northeastern end of the South Island, Marlborough also has an increasing presence on Pinot Noir labels.

Chardonnay is New Zealand's other white wine strength, distinguished by fresh fruit flavors, a prominent acidity and, in the best examples, a judicious use of oak. Perennial standout **Kumeu River** contributed a lineup of four outstanding Chardonnays this year from its estate above Auckland on the North Island, where the winemaking recipe includes wild yeast and barrel fermentation. Its Chardonnay **Kumeu Hunting Hill** 2007 (93, \$42) and Chardonnay **Kumeu Maté's Vineyard** 2007 (93, \$47) both brim with fresh citrus and tropical fruit flavors that show elegant details.

Among other whites exported to the States, you'll find a smattering of Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer and Riesling. These can range in style from juicy and dry to a touch sweet. Unfortunately, the labeling on these aromatic whites doesn't always provide clues as to how sweet the wine is, so choose carefully. This report includes a number of high-scoring whites outside the main categories of Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, such as the crisp, light and fragrant Villa Maria Riesling Marlborough Private Bin 2008 (91, \$18) and the spicy Spy Valley Gewürztraminer Marlborough 2009 (90, \$21), which is more off-dry in style.

Red wines from New Zealand have had their ups and downs. The prevailing cool climate used to mean a fair share of thin, herbal and vegetal wines, as grapes were difficult to ripen except in a few spots. Pinot Noir's foothold as the signature red grape has become even more pronounced as successful sites and clones have been earmarked, and the wines are of increasingly high quality.

The best Pinot Noirs have a vibrant acidity, with taut tannins and bright red fruit flavors that show mineral and spice details. When they miss the mark, it's because they're too weak, without enough flavor to justify their prices. The best versions this year come from distinct regions: Central Otago (the world's southernmost winegrowing region, on the South Island); Martinborough, on the south end of the North Island; and Marlborough.

The Amisfield Pinot Noir Central Otago 2008 (93, \$40) and the Craggy Range Pinot Noir Martinborough Te Muna Road Vineyard 2008 (93, \$39) rate among this report's top Pinots; both offer smooth and vibrant expressions. However, like the best Pinot Noirs from other regions around the world, they are not widely available; it's unusual, in fact, to find more than a few hundred cases imported of



any of the highest-scorers. The Oyster Bay Pinot Noir Marlborough 2008 (91, \$20), with 7,000 cases imported, is a better bet to find.

Other reds can disappoint, but there are a few bright spots. Syrah, for one, continues to show promise, with the best versions, such as Craggy Range's Le Sol Gimblett Gravels Hawkes Bay 2007 (93, \$90), offering a delightfully peppery personality. Gimblett Gravels is a Hawkes Bay subregion that's grabbed our attention for red wine. Its vines are planted on an old riverbed of rocks that retain heat, allowing the grapes to get riper, and may contribute to a noticeable minerality. In fact, we liked all four reds we tasted that carry the Gimblett Gravels name, including Craggy Range's Sophia Gimblett Gravels 2007 (90, \$50), a Merlot-based Bordeaux-style blend that ranks as high as any Merlot-based wine we've seen from New Zealand.

Still, it's the distinctive Syrahs that are most worth keeping an eye out for, such as the Te Awa Syrah Hawkes Bay 2007 (93, \$30), which adds a licorice nuance to its peppery notes. Not many Syrahs are making their way to the United States at present, but that may change as word gets out.

What makes all these wines even easier to recommend is how affordable they are, both on retail shelves and restaurant wine lists. Only a dozen of the wines reviewed cost more than \$50. And of the nearly 70 wines that scored 90 points or higher, two-thirds are priced at \$30 or less. White wines are the value leaders—Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc in particular. Most of the wines that rated more than 90 points and cost \$20 or less are Marlborough Sauvignon Blancs, demonstrating how good that area is at what it's doing.

Some of the best values (especially when combined with their large case-production figures) include the Yealands Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2008 (90, \$12) and the Kono Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009 (90, \$10). Reds don't challenge the dominance of whites in this category, but there are some bright spots, such as Yealand's Pinot Noir Marlborough 2008 (91, \$16).

Recent vintages have given vintners a few challenges, but for the most part have yielded ripe, balanced wines. The cool temperatures of the frost-shortened 2007 vintage resulted in naturally low yields and a higher concentration of flavors, while 2008 was an abundant harvest, showing few problems with rain or rot. 2009 was a relatively warm year with low yields; early indications for the white wines suggest riper, more tropical flavors. Initial reports on the 2010 vintage indicate a slightly smaller crop.

One of the twists with the New Zealand wine industry is its widespread use of screw-cap closures. Wine lovers frustrated with the inconsistency of corks and incidences of cork taint should take note: The country started using twist-off closures in 2001, and 90



Craggy Range's Steve Smith is proving that Gimblett Gravels vineyard in Hawkes Bay is fertile ground for red wines.



percent of the wines in this year's report are sealed this way.

New Zealand will continue to attract wine lovers in the United States as long as producers keep pursuing the country's signature style of fresh, vivid and fruit-driven wines. It's a powerful formula for quality and value. The future is bright.

*San Francisco-based editor at large Harvey Steiman and Napa Valley-based tasting coordinator MaryAnn Worobiec coauthored this report.*



# Harvey Steiman's Recommended Wines From New Zealand

Nearly 250 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at [www.winespectator.com/061510](http://www.winespectator.com/061510).

WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

## TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>AMISFIELD Pinot Noir Central Otago 2008</b> Lithe and inviting, a harmonious style that balances cherry, plum and fresh fig flavors against fine tannins.	93	\$40
<b>Craggy Range Le Sol Gimblett Gravels Hawkes Bay 2007</b> This red is full of personality, brimming with pepper-accented boysenberry and plum flavors accented with savory notes that linger against refined tannins. Lithe and harmonious. Syrah.	93	\$90
<b>Craggy Range Pinot Noir Martinborough Te Muna Road Vineyard 2008</b> Smooth and polished, weaving a hint of licorice into the huckleberry, raspberry and plum flavors. A wave of mineral adds to the depth on the long, refined finish.	93	\$39
<b>Kumeu River Chardonnay Kumeu Hunting Hill 2007</b> A bright, stylish white, showing lime-accented pineapple notes, with tobacco and star fruit hints weaving through the long, elegant finish.	93	\$42
<b>Kumeu River Chardonnay Kumeu Maté's Vineyard 2007</b> Zippy lime and grapefruit courses through the pear and pineapple fruit in this sleek white, lingering on the expressive finish with finesse.	93	\$47
<b>Te Awa Syrah Hawkes Bay 2007</b> A dynamic red, focused and elegant, spreading a blanket of black pepper over a core of blackberry, currant and licorice flavors that keep kicking through the long, vivid finish.	93	\$30
<b>Villa Maria Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough Cellar Selection 2009</b> Refreshing and vibrant, offering tangerine and lime-tinged nectarine and green apple flavors that sail through the generous, lively finish.	93	\$22
<b>Craggy Range Chardonnay Hawkes Bay C3 Single Vineyard Kidnappers Vineyard 2008</b> An elegant style, deftly balanced, exhibiting refined pear and lime on a satiny frame. Lingers effortlessly.	92	\$20
<b>Felton Road Pinot Noir Central Otago 2008</b> Light on its feet, this is harmonious and beautifully focused to show off its bright açai berry and blackberry flavors in a spotlight. The finish sails on, letting the fruit linger.	92	\$55
<b>Kotare Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009</b> Bright and open-textured, showing real transparency to the grapefruit, lime and green papaya flavors, with a hint of mineral.	92	\$15
<b>Kumeu River Chardonnay Kumeu Estate 2007</b> Tangy and elegant, this vibrant wine has grapefruit and pineapple flavors at the fore, picking up apple and spice.	92	\$35

## TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>Coopers Creek Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2008</b> Light and open-textured, playing its herb and lime character against green apple and pear fruit. Shows nice detail and finesse.	91	\$17
<b>Mount Nelson Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2008</b> Light and fragrant, this delivers a juicy mouthful of lemon-accented grapefruit and pear flavors.	91	\$17

## TOP VALUES (continued)

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>Oyster Bay Pinot Noir Marlborough 2008</b> Polished and highly perfumed, this light red has lavender and spice overtones to its currant and cherry flavors.	91	\$20
<b>Villa Maria Riesling Marlborough Private Bin 2008</b> Pretty lime, grapefruit and elder blossom aromas and flavors linger impressively on the extended finish in this fragrant white.	91	\$18
<b>Yealands Pinot Noir Marlborough 2008</b> Tight and beautifully focused, delivering a juicy mouthful of raspberry, wild strawberry and pomegranate flavors.	91	\$16
<b>Babich Chardonnay Hawkes Bay Unoaked 2008</b> Supple, silky and refined, showing lovely pear and honey character, with a touch of golden raisin, as the finish sails on.	90	\$13
<b>Kono Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009</b> Light and silky, with refreshing pineapple, peach and green apple flavors in tremendous focus, lingering elegantly.	90	\$10
<b>NOBILO Pinot Noir Marlborough Icon 2008</b> Bright and juicy, with fleshiness to the raspberry and cherry flavors, finishing with coffee and cream notes as this lingers.	90	\$22
<b>Sileni Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough Cellar Selection 2009</b> Light and tangy, on the tart side, but polished and refined, offering Asian pear, grapefruit and lime peel flavors.	90	\$13
<b>Yealands Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2008</b> This focused white delivers a lively mouthful of pear, grapefruit and floral aromas and flavors on a juicy frame.	90	\$12
<b>BRANCOTT Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009</b> Bright and refreshing, with lime, pear and mineral flavors that keep singing on the lively finish.	89	\$13
<b>Coopers Creek Chardonnay Gisborne Unoaked 2007</b> Smooth in texture, offering a tangy balance to the green apple, lemon and floral flavors, lingering on the finish.	89	\$17
<b>Sherwood Estate Pinot Noir Marlborough 2008</b> Beautifully structured, this bright red has a spicy edge to its currant and bacon flavors, which linger nicely.	89	\$18
<b>WITHER HILLS Sauvignon Blanc Wairau Valley 2008</b> Crisp and vibrant, this is lively with grapefruit, lemon and pineapple fruit, lingering on the racy finish.	89	\$15
<b>MOHUA Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009</b> Fresh pear and candied lemon aromas and flavors remain fresh and zingy through the finish in this lively white.	88	\$13
<b>Twin Islands Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009</b> Bright and refined, with clean lines to the pear, lime and grapefruit flavors, lingering on the lean, focused finish.	88	\$10
<b>DASHWOOD Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009</b> Silky, with green apple and melon flavors on a lively frame.	87	\$11
<b>MATUA Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2009</b> Bright and ripe, with a solid feel to the lime and pear flavors, lingering on the tangy finish.	87	\$12
<b>KONO Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2008</b> Light and floral, with pretty pear fruit on a lean frame.	85	\$9