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TASTING RESULTS ARE IN FROM NEW ZEALAND'S BIGGEST WINE SHOWS

ONCE A FAVOURITE HUNTING REGION, NOW PRODUCES AWARD WINNING WINE.

In 1973, in what is now acknowledged as a pivotal moment for the New Zealand wine industry, Montana's Frank Yukich planted the company's first vines in Marlborough's Wairau Valley. In the Croatian tradition the vine was accompanied with gold coin.

The Wairau Valley was an area hitherto dismissed as unsuitable for viticulture. Indeed the whole South Island was deemed a step too far in terms of wine production and any thoughts of plantings in places such as Otago were ridiculed.

Michael Cooper's note in his 'Wine Atlas of New Zealand' opines that the small crowd who watched Frank plant the vine, echoed the scepticism of the majority of industry pundits. Some may well have thought the gold coin worth more than the ground into which the vine was planted.

Surprisingly the first vines planted by Montana were of Müller-Thurgau and Cabernet but within a decade the suitability of Sauvignon Blanc for the region had emerged and the subsequent explosion of viticulture in the Wairau Valley followed the very particular characteristics that Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc was able to produce.

Wines of the mid eighties, especially such as the Cloudy Bay 1985 Sauvignon Blanc and Hunters Fumé Blanc 1985 (twice voted winner in London's prestigious 'Sunday Times Wine Competition') set the

scene aight. Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc had become an international wine sensation almost overnight.

But by the year 1997 there were already concerns that the demand for vineyard land was starting to out-pace supply.

In a piece I wrote for WineNZ in 1998 the headline read 'Marlborough is Full!'

And so it seemed at the time. The valley floor was covered with grapevines. Few farms remained for conversion and the upper reaches of the valley had severe frost concerns.

But unfilled orders from international buyers were pointy prods towards diversification as successful wineries looked for vineyard sites further afield.

David Babich of Babich Wines recalls that in that year they had export demand that well exceeded supply and like others they looked to areas outside the established region. The Awatere Valley to the south and the Waihopai Valley to the south west suddenly became attractive prospects for them as it did for many of the Wairau producers.

Babich bought their Awatere Wakefield vineyard in 1996 on terraces high above the valley floor. At around the same time Villa Maria planted their Clifford Bay vineyard and a group of smaller existing vineyards merged into a consortium under the brand of 'The Crossings'. Babich later extended their plantings in the Waihopai in 2002 where Spy Valley wines, who had been growing grapes for supply since

1993, had just begun producing their own wines.

Vineyard expansion in both the Marlborough valleys increased almost exponentially. By the end of the century overall production in the region had increased 400% and vineyard area had expanded threefold. Subsequent development has continued apace.



Wine Marlborough CEO Marcus Pickens says that although they collect no discreet data on the sub-regional origin of Marlborough grapes he estimates that today as much as 30% of the Marlborough vintage comes from the two valleys.

What was initially a search for more fruit to bolster the successes of the Wairau Valley morphed into sub-regional identities that

are now acknowledged with the establishment of two of New Zealand's most dramatic vineyard projects: Peter Yealands' 2002 creation of a 1200ha estate on Awatere's Seaview coast; Marisco Vineyards planting of The Ned's 260 ha estate on Waihopai's flatter ground. In more recent times this has been followed by the planting of 650ha subsumed from the Leefield

Station estate's 2500ha cattle and sheep station

As one winemaker commented, "While the two valleys provided the extra fruit required to fill the initial shortfall, it was quickly discovered that both valleys were capable of producing fine wines with distinctive differences; wines that could stand on their own merits as well as adding additional character to the



Photo courtesy of New Zealand Winegrowers.



The approach to Yealands winery and cellar door.

Wairau wines with which they were often blended.”

Both the Awatere and the Waihopai Valleys are stunningly beautiful places, but each reflects a different course to its existence.

In ancient times the Awatere Valley was lifted from the sea and the river began to make its winding path from the shoulders of Tapuae-O-Ueneku (the highest peak outside the southern alps) to the sea shore not far from the small town of Seddon.

It is a region treasured by the trampers and climbers of Marlborough who now have to share the beauty of the stunning landscape with the plethora of regimented vineyards set high on the river terraces.

By contrast the formation of the Waihopai was a result of glacial

action and unlike the Awatere its conclusion is at its confluence with the Wairau River not far from the wine town of Renwick, rather than the coast that lies more than 20km further along the Wairau Valley proper.

The Waihopai Valley also has a legacy of outdoor pursuits and Brent Marris of Marisco Vineyards well remembers earlier days of hunting in the hills of the upper reaches. The hunters of today now need to pass through manicured vineyards to access the rugged hills at the headwaters.

To reach the Awatere, the traveller from Blenheim, on route to see the whale-watching at Kaikoura, will cross over the river bridge just south of the town and will already be aware of the swathes of vines planted on

either side of the road as the valley has flattened on its course to the sea.

But to visit the valley itself the visitor must take the narrow road inland towards the ever present Tapuae-O-Ueneku in the distance. Here the valley becomes increasingly narrow and braided and the vines are planted on the old river terraces, many of them perched high above the riverbed.

Vineyard sites here are relatively constrained, unlike the wider areas closer to the sea which were pioneered by Peter Vavasour and Richard Bowling as far back as 1986.

Indeed these flatter areas are the ones that produced such wines as the award winning Vavasour Chardonnays of the 1990s; wines that revealed



the capabilities of the sub region to produce high quality, individualised wines.

It is here that the larger producers such as Delegats, Villa Maria and Yealands have extensive plantings with the ability to make Awatere wines in considerable quantity. Indeed until recently Delegats Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, their premium wine for this variety, was made exclusively from Awatere fruit.

By contrast, a visit the Waihopai Valley requires a traveller on their way from Renwick to the Nelson Lakes to take the Waihopai River Road, a sharp turn to the south, not far from the town. The winery of Grove Mill marks the beginning of the valley but in truth the real valley floor is not reached until it opens to the

relatively flat ground around Spy Valley wines and the domes of the electronic spy station.

Here the land is relatively flat. There are views of the river and while there is a scarcity of actual wineries, vineyards are maintained by some of the larger national players as well as some of the prominent Marlborough Wairau producers such as Lawsons Dry Hills. Marisco's 'The Ned' winery and their 250ha vineyard lie here alongside the river.

But as the valley narrows the ground becomes more variable. Vineyards such as those at Catalina Sounds have more rolling contours and as their viticulturist Fraser Brown comments. "The soils show quite distinct differences."

These are the differences that Brent Marris has exploited in his recent 650ha vineyard development within their purchase of Leefield Station's 2600ha farm. The new vines are planted in small identified parcels to matched to specific varieties.

Each of the valleys show distinctive differences in both climate, soils and topography and it is these differences that not only provide extra dimensions to the Wairau wines with which they are often blended but also the ability to craft premium wines in their own right.

The Awatere represents a clear difference in terms of climate to the Wairau just a few kms to the north through the Dashwood

Pass to Blenheim. For the most part it is essentially a coastal region and the lower parts of the valley are the most planted. But the higher reaches see smaller, but still considerable vineyards, perched on the higher terraces formed by the braided river.

"Wind is a constant feature here," says Stu Marfell, winemaker for Vavasour Wines. "It can be quite cold by comparison, especially when the wind comes from the south. And as you go higher up the valley you get diurnal difference on steroids!"

However, as Natalie Christensen of Yealands comments, the area is also quite a lot drier and as a result the wind helps with disease control, something that Glenn Thomas of Tupari also credits with a natural restriction of crop levels. "Being relatively frost free and having yields naturally restricted to quality levels means that vineyard management is a little easier and certainly the diurnal temperature range is great for the Pinot Noir."

Glenn also points out that the soils in the valley vary greatly. "The terraces lie on different levels. This is a braided river and the soils are not as homogenous as you might think."

"The fruit from our 'The Crossings' Medway vineyard has considerable differences to that from our more coastal Seaview situation," comments Natalie. "Seaview's rolling landscape provides pockets containing more clay and slightly heavier soils."



Yealands Chief Winemaker
Natalie Christensen