

# A FRESH DIMENSION

A river of the once universally loved New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc has led some to decry the wine as one-dimensional and bland. **JAMES LAWTHER MW** went to its heartland, Marlborough, in search of regional nuance

**C**onnoisseurs might pooh-pooh it but vibrant, zesty, pungent, fruity Sauvignon Blanc is the people's grape. Parisian bistros plying the steelier Loire version kept the secret for decades, but it was New Zealand – or, to be precise, Cloudy Bay and Marlborough – that took Sauvignon to the wider world in a full-throttle way.

The competition, though, has hotted up, with other countries (Chile and South Africa to name but two) muscling in. Consumer loyalty can be fickle, as the recent dampening in the love affair with Australia has shown. There's been sniping from critics as well: too samey, abuse of the name, dilution creeping in. New initiatives are welcome and perhaps a little order in the house to boot. But what are the Kiwis doing to re-emblazon the flag?

**Right: the setting sun, here lending a warm glow to the normally pale tones of an NZ Sauvignon, could be an apt metaphor for the wine's profile**

On my first visit to Marlborough in 1987 there were barely 500ha (hectares) planted. Cruising through by car last November, I was amazed to see a sea of vines. The stats I was given announced 23,600ha (hectares) under vine. Of these, 13,800ha were fruit-bearing in 2008 – 70% was Sauvignon Blanc.

Over the past decade, Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc (the region boasts 85% of the variety in New Zealand) has more than quadrupled its area of production to 9,650ha. In addition, rumour has it that the average regional yield hovers between 12–15 tonnes/ha or a whopping 85–105hl/ha (hectolitres/hectare). By comparison, in Bordeaux, most Sauvignon producers would limit themselves to 50–60hl/ha. The mantra of 'let's bung it in and crank it out' could perhaps benefit from a little more restraint.

'Intensity and texture without loss of vibrancy and aroma – this is what the better producers are now striving to achieve'



Right: Sub-regional and single-vineyard wines are bringing more interest to Marlborough Sauvignon, which has been criticised for producing samey wines



The expansion of the vineyard has led to a flood of Marlborough Sauvignon on the market – and accusations, from purists, of ‘sameyness’ – making the notion of sub-regional styles an attractive one to producers and consumers alike. But only providing they are recognisable, and sufficiently different. The bulk of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc still comes from the flat plains of the Wairau Valley, but planting has gathered pace in the perpendicular Southern Valleys and, south-east of Wairau, in the cooler, drier Awatere Valley. In reality, 85% of the production is still a regional blend, but these sub-regional denominations are beginning to find their way on to labels. The question is, what do they each offer?

### Defining styles

Awatere is a clearly identifiable style with justifiable sub-region status. If you like the more immediate, grassy, nettley, herbal, ‘tomato stalk’ (as New Zealand winemakers call it) spectrum of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, this is the one for you. Wairau Valley wines are gently pungent, with riper tropical fruit and citrus notes, a touch of blackcurrant leaf and a lush feel. Wines from the Southern Valleys are marked by greater weight, volume and texture on the palate, still with a tropical-citrus nuance. The line that distinguishes the last two is not always blindingly obvious.

The next step along is site-specific or single-vineyard wines. The Wairau Valley has a variety of soils of diverse fertility that give a varying nuance to the wines. Saint Clair has made a successful job of isolating a number of these into ‘blocks’ and bottling the wines separately under the Pioneer Block label. Much to the surprise of owner Neal Ibbotson and winemaker Matt Thomson, it has been the heavier soils of the lower Wairau Valley ➤



that have given the most intense flavours – passion fruit and gooseberry to the fore.

Craggy Range continues its overall policy of single-vineyard wines and, from stonier soils in the Wairau Valley, produces Old Renwick Vineyard and Avery Vineyard in an elegant, restrained style. In this respect there's a similarity with Clos Henri further up the valley. Sancerre-based Domaine Henri Bourgeois planted its first vines in 2001 and now has 34ha in a single block. The wine has the pungency of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc but the soils and lower yields (52hl/ha) add minerality and length on the palate.

Intensity, texture, length and complexity without loss of the vibrancy, aroma and zing – this is what most of the better producers are now striving to achieve. A number of factors contribute: soils, yields, method of vine cultivation, harvest date and even winemaking techniques. Looking back at my ancient tasting notes, I see that way back in 1986, Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc included a percentage of Semillon and barrel-fermented wine, which I noted helped to 'take off the hard edge and add depth and length on the palate'.

## Barrel-fermented

Estates such as Churton, Dog Point Vineyard and Seresin are focused on yields and cultivation; Dog Point is organic and converting to biodynamics. 'Quality can be improved tremendously,' says English former wine merchant Sam Weaver, now the owner of Churton. 'So far the region's got away with a lot of easy winemaking and viticulture.' He gave a small vertical of Churton Sauvignon Blanc back to 2003, the wines textured, poised and bone-dry.

The last piece in the jigsaw in terms of furthering Marlborough's reach and diversity is



**Above: a huge 2008 harvest gave large producers such as Villa Maria a surplus of wine to deal with**

barrel-fermented Sauvignon Blanc. It's not everyone's cup of tea as the tangy, 'bright fruit' aromatics, the essence of Marlborough Sauvignon, can be lost. Successfully accomplished, it adds another layer of complexity, texture and weight, but the wine cries out for food. I preferred the first vintage of the 50% barrel-fermented Reserve Sauvignon Blanc 2007 at Seresin to the fully fermented Marama for this very reason. The most harmonious and complex full-barrel ferments were Dog Point Section 94 2006 and Ram's Hill 2007, the new and limited offering from Italian investor Lodovico Antinori of Mount Nelson.

I liked what I tasted of the 2008s, though rain at the end of the harvest made it a less consistent vintage than 2007. But that avalanche of new fruit and a winemaking-by-numbers approach does make me worry about standardisation and quality in the long term. Sub-regions and single vineyards will hopefully lead the new charge – but so will growers that act responsibly in the vineyards. **D**



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## THE PRODUCERS' DILEMMA By Daniel Pilkington

**Reinforcing the quality** of Marlborough Sauvignon is the call from New Zealand producers after a record-breaking 2008 harvest that tested the trade's resolve.

The 2008 Marlborough vintage yielded a 61% increase on the previous year, with 79% of the 194,639 tonnes of grapes harvested being Sauvignon Blanc.

The increased supply has presented producers with a huge processing and sales challenge. But according to Villa Maria group winemaker Alastair Maling MW, it also provides a major opportunity.

After years of undersupply, 2008 was the first year Villa Maria, and many others, was able to fulfill all its market commitments across a three-tier price range. The downside is that a surplus of lower-quality wine also needed to be moved via the creation of new labels and, as well as in bulk. While this 'surplus' wine would occupy a lower

price point in the market and could be seen as a benefit in that new consumers are being exposed to New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, Maling says it is important for producers to resist the temptation to discount their top brands.

'The concern is the spiralling effect it can have – it can effectively take strong, recognised brands and drag them down in price, so the producer has little option but to reduce quality to stay competitive. It happened in Australia and we can't allow that to occur here. In these economic times, we have to over-deliver. The 2009 vintage will be about making sure the image of Marlborough and New Zealand is maintained and reinforced.'

Erica Crawford of Constellation NZ, said that while there were definitely top-quality parcels of fruit produced in 2008, the range of quality was broader than in previous years. This, combined with

increased volumes and a global recession, had forced many wineries to 'clear their tanks' to remain in operation, leading to a rise of less-sustainable practices.

'We've seen a lot of opportunistic entrants into the industry, and these people don't think like this. We need to ring-fence and protect our flagship brands. If we do this, then they will still be here in five to 10 years – but they might be a touch battered and bruised.'

The scenario New Zealand wine producers found themselves in after the 2008 harvest won't be repeated, says NZ Winegrowers CEO Philip Gegan. 'This is a temporary situation. We've had 20 years of Sauvignon shortage,' he says. 'But the future cannot be about volume, it has to be about quality. We can't compete with the [low] cost of production of other countries.'

What's more, there isn't the physical



**Above: Awatere Valley, arguably Marlborough's most distinctive subregion**

scope for bulk production, as the land in Marlborough is limited and the end of expansion is in sight, he says. 'There isn't the infrastructure to process a crop bigger than last year's. We just don't have the capacity to harvest, or the markets for sales – so why take more grapes in than you can sell?

'Quality is a big issue. If we can't be cheap, we have to be good. We're perceived as the world's leading Sauvignon producer, so we can't be complacent.'

With the 2009 harvest underway as this article went to press, yields were reported to be 'well in control,' said Malling. 'Growers seem to be working very closely with the wineries, such that actual yields are very close to expected yields, which bodes extremely well.'

*Daniel Pilkington is the editor of New Zealand wine trade title NZ Grapegrower*

**MARLBOROUGH SAUVIGNON: SPOT THE DIFFERENCE**

**AWATERE VALLEY**

**Astrolabe, Sauvignon Blanc, Awatere Valley 2008 ★★★**

Label established in 1996 and now making waves. Sub-regional to a T. Pungent, herbal, grassy aroma. Dry, mineral finish. Savoury in style. 2009–2010. **£13.61 (2007); EIL, NZH**



**Foxes Island, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough 2008 ★★★**

Marlborough pioneer John Belsham produces this from 75% hand-picked Awatere fruit. Crisp, herbal and grassy, but not green. Palate round and textured. Dry finish. 2009–2010. **£12.59; Ply**

**Vavasour, Sauvignon Blanc, Awatere Valley 2008 ★★★**

Grassy, nettle, blackcurrant leaf aroma and flavour. Good depth of fruit on the palate. Crisp and linear. Mouthwatering acidity. 2009–2010. **£10; HBJ**

**WAIRAU AND SOUTHERN VALLEYS**



**Churton, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough 2008 ★★★★★**

Pure and elegant in style. Concentrated aroma and flavour. Lemon and lime notes. Palate textured with a long, fresh, dry finish. Food friendly. 2009–2012. **£9.50 (2007); Far, Tan**



**Dog Point Vineyard, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough 2008 ★★★★★**

Zesty lime and passion fruit aromas. Lovely intensity of flavour. Superb depth of fruit. Palate fresh and precise. Long, lingering finish. 2009–2011. **£9.52 (2007); BBR, Div, WSo**

**Cloudy Bay, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough 2008 ★★★**

Lively and fresh with marked varietal aromatics and flavour. Lime, tropical fruit and blackcurrant leaf notes. Palate round, tangy and long. 2009–2011. **£15.61; BBR, Jer, WSo**

**Seresin, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough 2008 ★★★**

Subtle, clear-cut style. Fine citrus nose and flavour with a herbal, gooseberry edge. Mouthwatering acidity. Persistent and long. 2009–2011. **£11.95; WSo**

**SINGLE VINEYARD (WAIRAU VALLEY)**

**Saint Clair, Pioneer Block 18, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough 2008 ★★★★★**

There's no doubting the origin. Pungent, tangy passionfruit, gooseberry and blackcurrant leaf aromas and flavour. Has a concentrated but fresh finish. 2009–2011. **£12.32; Hal**



**Clos Henri, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough 2008 ★★★**

Marlborough meets Sancerre. Citrus, gooseberry aromas. Less upfront than some. Palate long, fresh and mineral. 2009–2012. **£15.99; CPJ**

**Craggy Range, Avery Vineyard, Marlborough 2008 ★★★**

Passion fruit, grapefruit spectrum of aroma. Textural, chalky, mineral palate. Quite a bit of fruit punch. Tangy acidity on the finish. 2009–2011. **£14.85; LLT**

**BARREL-FERMENTED (WAIRAU VALLEY) Dog Point, Section 94, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough 2008 ★★★★★**

Subtle, complex nose with zesty, citrus-grapefruit notes. Palate soft and round, creamy on attack but with a long, precise finish. Harmonious and fresh. 2009–2011. **£23; BBR, WSo**

**Mahi, Francis Vineyard, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough 2007 ★★★★★**

From a single vineyard in the Wairau Valley. Crisp, fresh, focused citrus and vanilla notes. Palate round, full and textured. Good fruit weight with just a lick of oak. 2009–2011. **£14; Nov**

**Ram's Hill, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough 2007 ★★★★★**

Just 3,000 bottles made. Subtle, complex but atypical for Marlborough. Mineral, orange zest and almond notes. Palate round, full and intense. Integrated oak. Long, precise finish. Needs food. 2009–2013. **£30; MMD**

*For full UK stockist details, see p107*