

Varietals are spice of NZ life

In part two of our New Zealand special, four independents put some some Kiwi varietals through their paces and consider how these less familiar wines can build upon the platform created by the mighty Sauvignon Blanc

New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc is such a juggernaut that its devotees could be forgiven for not realising the country also excels in other varieties.

Yes, Kiwi Pinot Noir has a huge following in the independent trade. But what about Pinot Gris, Syrah, Gewurztraminer and the rest? Are they destined to remain bit players, or could they ultimately claim a share of the limelight?

This was the question put to a small group of independents who attended a recent *Wine Merchant* lunch at The Providores in London, hosted in partnership with New Zealand Winegrowers. The event began with a tasting and discussion of Sauvignon Blanc (see November issue) and then widened its

scope to consider other varietals.

There was a consensus that consumers are looking to broaden their repertoires: as Wayne Blomfeld, of Park Vintners in Wimbledon Park put it, “there’s an element of boredom creeping in”. His customers are seeking out “Gruner and Albarino and a little bit of Falanghina”.

“I suspect that’s partly due to us giving them something not too far away from what they’re trying,” he suggested. “When they ask for something new, if you take them in big jumps, they don’t like it. If you take them in small steps, as it were, they quite like to go along.”

New Zealand might not (yet) offer vast quantities of Falanghina. But it does have a national image that resonates with the wine-buying public. “A lot of my customers

buy wine from New Zealand because they love the country,” said Rachel Gibson, of Wine Utopia in Hampshire. “They’re buying into the whole culture. They’ve either been to New Zealand or they love the idea of New Zealand. As a country they’re very good at marketing themselves.”

The country is seen as a source of fresh, clean, well-made wines, according to Ted Sandbach of The Oxford Wine Company. “It’s a very clever image,” he said. “A lot of the wine labels are very clean as well, reflecting that.”

PINOT NOIR WAS well represented at the tasting, reflecting its familiarity among consumers who buy from independents. “A lot of people are going for that ahead of Burgundy,” said Sandbach. It was a point echoed by Gibson: “Burgundy at £20 to £30 is quite hard work so where do you go? Well, you go to New Zealand.”

Sandbach continued: “I belong to a little Pinot Noir club which has a tasting on the last Friday of every month. About six of us come along and bring a bottle or sometimes two, all blind.

“Every single time an inexpensive French Pinot Noir just gets rubbished, and quite rightly.” The top performers, Sandbach reported, invariably come from further afield, and frequently from Martinborough and Central Otago.

Sandbach believes there is increasing consumer awareness about such regions. Blomfeld agrees: “As soon as you run out on the shelf, someone turns round and



Misha's Vineyard in Central Otago

says 'have you got any Central Otago Pinot Noir?'"

"I think there is a lot going on in New Zealand and New Zealand Pinot Noir is really, really exciting," added Sandbach. "There's masses of potential. Otago Pinot tends to be very different from Martinborough Pinot. Regionality is coming into it with Pinot Noir."

ALL FOUR GUESTS had their personal favourites from the tasting. Matt Ellis of The Smiling Grape in St Neots highlighted the Seifried Estate Gewurztraminer ("that was quite fun"). Gibson particularly enjoyed the Ma Maison Pinot Noir and the Richmond Plains Blanc de Noir. Sandbach was impressed by **Misha's Vineyard** Limelight Riesling – which sparked a debate over how much sweetness wine drinkers are looking for in their wines.

Ellis said that "some of my customers definitely want the slightly sweeter styles". Gibson suggested that "will maybe be the next thing. People are little bit more confident to admit liking the sweetness".

Blomfeld added: "I find the younger customers are more likely to admit to liking a bit of sweetness than the older customers."

"I think there's this arrogance in the wine trade that everything has got to be dry," said Sandbach. "If there's a little bit of sweetness, there's nothing wrong with that at all. It's an attractive thing. This **Misha's Vineyard** does have a bit of sweetness in it but it also has a lot of subtlety in it – and a limey, citrus length. It's a good wine."

SO WHAT DOES New Zealand have to do to ensure the breadth of its range is appreciated by UK wine drinkers? Gibson has built her business around her passion for New Zealand, but predicts that the going will get tougher as competition from other countries intensifies and consumers

make new discoveries. But she added: "I'm not worried about [New Zealand] because I think the quality is fantastic."

Sandbach argues that New Zealand has to continue to diversify. "The Sauvignon is good and it is interesting and there are different styles – not everybody recognises that," he said.

"I actually think there are some very good New Zealand Chardonnays around.

I like the acidity and some of them are actually stunning. Pinot Noir is strong ... and I think there's room for more. Gamay is bloody good – but not cheap. Some of the Syrahs are great.

"I think they've got to work hard to educate and diversify. Sauvignon Blanc is always going to be there but I think it's very important that New Zealand works hard on its other varietals."

A packed tasting table

- **Spinyback Riesling 2013**, Nelson, £9.99
- **Craggy Range Te Muna Riesling 2012**, Martinborough, £18.99
- **Framingham F-Series Old Vine Riesling 2012**, Martinborough, £22.50
- **Misha's Vineyard Limelight Riesling 2012**, Central Otago, £20.99
- **Pegasus Bay Riesling 2011**, Waipara, £17.75
- **Tiki Pinot Gris 2013**, Waipara, £11.50
- **Torrent Bay Pinot Gris 2013**, Nelson, £14.95
- **Greywacke Pinot Gris 2013**, Marlborough, £19.99
- **Kalex Pinot Gris 2011**, Central Otago, £18.99
- **Seifried Estate Gewurztraminer 2012**, Nelson, £12.99
- **Coopers Creek Select Vineyards Bell Ringer Albarino 2013**, Gisborne, £15.50
- **The Paddler Gruner Veltliner 2012**, Marlborough, £15.99
- **Bilancia La Colina Viognier 2010**, Hawke's Bay, £33.15
- **Bellbird Spring Home Block White 2013**, Waipara, £20
- **John Forrest Collection The White 2009**, Marlborough
- **Crossroads Milestone Series Chardonnay 2012**, Hawke's Bay, £12.50
- **Pask Declaration Chardonnay 2012**, Hawke's Bay, £19.99
- **Ata Rangi Craighall Chardonnay 2012**, Martinborough, £31.99
- **Nautilus Estate Chardonnay 2013**, Marlborough, £16.99
- **Domaine Rewa Chardonnay 2012**, Central Otago, £22
- **Richmond Plains Blanc de Noir 2013**, Nelson, £15
- **Julicher Estate 99 Rows Pinot Noir 2012**, Martinborough, £21.50
- **Ma Maison Pinot Noir 2011**, Martinborough, £24
- **Jackson Estate Gum Emperor Pinot Noir 2011**, Marlborough, £24.99
- **Surveyor Thomson Pinot Noir 2010**, Central Otago
- **Mission Estate Reserve Merlot 2013**, Hawke's Bay, £14.99
- **Crazy by Nature Cosmo Red 2012**, Gisborne, £16
- **Man O'War Warspite 2010**, Waiheke Island, £29.99
- **Te Mata Estate Vineyards Syrah 2012**, Hawke's Bay, £17.99
- **Trinity Hill Gimblett Gravels Syrah 2011**, Hawke's Bay, £19.99
- **Vidal Reserve Series Syrah 2011**, Hawke's Bay, £15.49
- **Cambridge Road Syrah 2011**, Martinborough, £41.50