

VINEPAIR



The Next Chapter for New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc Is Anything but Traditional

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Few wines have a stronger signature style than New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. Since the grape was first planted in 1975, it has become a sensation among U.S. wine drinkers — not only for its crisp character and zingy acidity, but for its sheer reliability. Even without cracking the screw cap, it's a safe bet that any given bottle of [Sauvignon Blanc](#) from New Zealand will be youthful and refreshing, with fresh citrus and grassy, herbaceous notes.

“Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc is truly unique and always identifiable in a lineup of Sauvignon Blancs from around the world,” says Jules Taylor, owner and winemaker of her [eponymous Marlborough winery](#). But, she says, “it is not all the same.” Today’s producers are increasingly intent on showcasing that there’s more to Sauvignon Blanc — and to New Zealand in general — than its stylistic stereotype. Untraditional vinification techniques like barrel aging and wild fermentation, offbeat sweet and [sparkling wines](#), and regional distinctions outside of

Marlborough are all proving that New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc has the potential to be an even more diverse category in the future.

PIONEERS OF EXPERIMENTATION

Over the 40 years since Sauvignon Blanc really took off in New Zealand's vineyards, winemakers have worked to understand the adopted variety. "Our treatment of Sauvignon Blanc has changed and evolved enormously, both in the vineyards and in the wineries," says Craig Anderson, the winemaker at [Hillersden Wines](#) in Marlborough, who has worked in the country's wine industry for 23 years. Today, most New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc is produced to highlight aromatics and acidity, using techniques like mechanical harvesting, fermentation at very low temperatures using commercial yeasts, and clarification and bottling as early as possible.

But this signature style also stems from the natural attributes of the grape's main production hub: Marlborough, home to nearly [89 percent](#) of the country's Sauvignon Blanc. Plentiful sunshine, cool temperatures, and moderating maritime influence shape the intensely aromatic, yet piercingly acid-driven style of the wines.

"For a long time, only the 'classic' style was being produced," says Taylor. "That fresh, vibrant, juicy-acidity style. [It's] the wine that put Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc on the world wine map." These wines garnered international attention for their unique and distinctive character — a zingy, fresh style unmatched elsewhere — and wineries worked to meet that demand.

Similarly, the rise in new styles of Sauvignon Blanc is partially in response to current market demands. "There's a thirst for more diversity and complexity from consumers, and also recognition from Marlborough winemakers that the style needs to continue to evolve." says Duncan Shouler, the chief winemaker for [Giesen Group](#) in Marlborough.

However, winemakers are curious by nature. With more than four decades working with the grape under their belts, New Zealand's vintners are increasingly willing to push the boundaries of what Sauvignon Blanc can be. "Now that producers are confident of their understanding of Sauvignon Blanc, they are naturally wanting to explore alternative expressions of the variety," says James Healy, the co-owner of [Dog Point Vineyard](#) in Marlborough. "Almost all serious producers of Sauvignon Blanc in New Zealand have at least two styles on sale."

Interestingly, experimentation with Sauvignon Blanc styles is not entirely new in New Zealand. Many point to [Cloudy Bay](#), one of Marlborough's first wineries, as the pioneer of experimental Sauvignon Blanc winemaking, using techniques like wild fermentation, malolactic fermentation, and barrel aging in the early 1990s. These early experiments resulted in some of the country's best-known — and more widely available — untraditional Sauvignon Blancs, notably Cloudy Bay's iconic Te Koko bottling, first created in the 1996 vintage.

Today, Te Koko showcases a different side of Sauvignon Blanc — a serious and complex version that contrasts the bright and clean Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc. The majority of the juice undergoes indigenous yeast fermentation followed by malolactic fermentation, and the wine is aged on its lees in a mix of old and new French barrels for 18 months. "This approach

builds far more richness, texture, and complexity in the wines,” says Jim White, Cloudy Bay’s technical director, “while the fruit-driven aromas become more complex and some savory, spicy notes start to show.” It is released as a three-year-old wine.

But the team behind Te Koko has also brought this experience to other wild, barrel-fermented and aged Sauvignon Blancs in New Zealand. Healy, who was one of the winemakers at Cloudy Bay from 1991 until the early 2000s, recognized the potential to craft a Sauvignon Blanc in this style from a specific parcel within the Dog Point Vineyard. “That particular vineyard ... produced wine with a distinct and concentrated citrus influence,” he says, “which, combined with these vinification techniques, made it an obvious choice to make in this way.”

Healy decided to stay away from new barriques, looking instead to other international, cool-climate Sauvignon Blanc regions. “The idea of fermentation in older seasoned barrels, as is done in parts of the Loire, appealed,” he says.

As much as Cloudy Bay’s early experiments informed the creation of Te Koko, they were also tied to the origin of the Wild Sauvignon bottling from [Greywacke](#); co-owner Kevin Judd was Cloudy Bay’s founding winemaker, and the fruit for Te Koko’s 1992 predecessor came from Greywacke Vineyard.

“When we had our first harvest in 2009, it was natural that we would continue the less-trodden path of Sauvignon and develop our own individual style of indigenous fermented Sauvignon Blanc,” says Kimberley Judd, Kevin’s wife and a co-owner of Greywacke. “[Kevin] preferred the richer, in-depth individuality that wild yeast brings to the finished wine.”

While the Wild Sauvignon is made from the same vineyard as Greywacke’s classic Sauvignon Blanc, the two are distinct. “The result is a more savory, herbal flavor profile in the wine, and a textural quality that builds on the structure and intensity of mouthfeel,” says Judd. “The hands-off process gives the wine some real personality and individuality.”

EXPLORING NEW STYLES AND REGIONS

Some winemakers are using the country’s signature variety to make wines that are neither still nor dry. “For me, the drive behind making alternative styles of the variety is to show wine buyers and consumers that Sauvignon Blanc as a variety is more diverse than it is given credit for,” says Taylor.

In addition to her classic Sauvignon Blanc and wild, barrel-fermented [OTQ](#), Taylor makes a late-harvest, sweet Sauvignon Blanc in vintages that encourage the development of botrytis, a beneficial mold that grows on grapes, dehydrates them, and concentrates flavors and sugars. The style has been produced in New Zealand in tiny quantities over past decades.

“In the right vintages with good botrytis, a great wine can be made,” says Shouler, who also makes late-harvest Sauvignon Blanc.

Others are experimenting with sparkling styles of Sauvignon Blanc. While many use the tank method to highlight the grape's intense aromatics, [Hunter's Wines](#) in Marlborough uses the ancestral method to create its Offshoot Pet-Nat. "This Pet-Nat provides a little glimpse at the type of wine our winemakers are used to tasting in the winery, before wines are prepared for bottling," the winery writes on its website.

Because Marlborough is the center of Sauvignon Blanc production in New Zealand, stereotypical "New Zealand" Sauvignon Blanc is really stereotypical "Marlborough" Sauvignon Blanc. But other regions work with the grape as well, though in markedly smaller quantities.

While nearby spots like Nelson on the upper South Island and Wairarapa on the lower North Island make similarly bright, mouthwatering Sauvignon Blancs, further areas are now defining their own regional styles. The warmer Hawke's Bay, for instance, has the second-highest numbers of Sauvignon Blanc vines in New Zealand after Marlborough and makes riper, rounder varietal wines. "In the warmer regions to the north, the wines tend to be more tropical and lower in acid, and further south, they are more delicate while retaining good acidity," says Taylor.

Even Central Otago, New Zealand's most southerly wine region, counts a handful of Sauvignon Blanc vines among its plantings. "I've always portrayed the region as 'officially too far south and too cold for Sauvignon Blanc,'" says Andy Wilkinson, the director of operations and sales for [Misha's Vineyard](#) in Central Otago. "However, with that said, if you have the right site — one that is exposed to lots of light, both direct and reflected — you can produce the most stunning style of Sauvignon Blanc."

The rocky soils, longer days of intense sunshine, and cool nights of Central Otago's continental climate combine to create a gentler Sauvignon Blanc with softer fruit and lifting but less sharp acidity. "The tough conditions that we expose the vines to encourage them to put more energy into the fruit, [producing] few bunches but much more intensity," adds Wilkinson.

Though these offbeat styles of Sauvignon Blanc are broadening the grape's spectrum in this island nation, don't expect that signature New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc style to disappear. "It is a style that is well suited to the geographic and climatic conditions of New Zealand's major grape-growing regions," says Judd. "But as the New Zealand industry matures, there will be an increasing presence of what we call 'left-field' Sauvignon Blancs in the market."

While this might worry those who have come to rely on the predictable nature of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc as a category, stylistic diversity doesn't undercut the intrinsic tie of these wines to their place of origin. "I think that ultimately, this will eventuate into two, perhaps three styles that will be instantly recognizable as [being] from New Zealand," says Healy. "The one thing that they will all share is an interpretation of the intensity of the fruit quality that we have seen consistently over the past three and a half decades out of this country. It really is unique."

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