
New Zealand, A to Z

Here are 26 things you need to know about uber-cool Kiwi wine country

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Courtesy Cephas / Kevin Judd

AUCKLAND, New Zealand -- In 2005, New Zealand welcomed its 516th winery, planted its 49,000th acre of wine grapes and sold 11.5 million cases of wine worldwide. For a country about the size of Oregon and with a population of just 4 million, that's huge.

The world's love affair with assertive Sauvignon Blanc, New Zealand's signature wine, hasn't cooled, though the pulse is quickening for aromatic white varietals such as Gewurztraminer, Pinot Gris and Riesling.

NAPA, SONOMA DOWN UNDER. Foreign corporate investment has helped New Zealand fund its growing wine industry, yet a couple of little guys, based in Sonoma County and Napa Valley, are putting their personal touches on Kiwi Sauvignon Blanc.

Tom Eddy, a Cabernet Sauvignon producer in Napa Valley, makes TENZ (Tom Eddy New Zealand) Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc (\$19), buying fruit from three growers, determining the blend and overseeing production at the same Marlborough facility that Buechsenstein uses.

"On a summer night, it's 85 degrees and my wife, Kerry, says, 'All we have is Cabernet and I'm not drinking Chardonnay,' " says Eddy, who lives in Calistoga. "I wanted to make a really tasty Sauvignon Blanc, so I went to New Zealand."

Mendocino Wine Co. founder Paul Dolan, Santa Rosa chef John Ash, winemaker John Buechsenstein and North Carolina restaurateur Tom Meyer founded Sauvignon Republic Cellars in Santa Rosa in 2004, with the mission of producing only Sauvignon Blanc from distinct regions of the world. Their first vintage of Sauvignon Republic Cellars Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc was 2004; the 2005 (\$18) is the current release.

THE CHRONICLE'S WINE SELECTIONS

New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc

Every winegrowing region in New Zealand produces Sauvignon Blanc, yet the best examples come from Marlborough, on the northern tip of the South Island. Warm, dry days, very cool nights and long days of sunlight during the growing season ripen Sauvignon Blanc just enough to develop its mostly green-fruit flavors, yet retain the wine's signature firm acidity.

Here are our recommendations from the 52 wines tasted, 36 from the 2005 vintage and 16 from 2004. With some exceptions, we preferred the intense, fresh-tasting flavors of the 2005s.

TWO STARS 2005 TENZ Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc (\$19) TENZ stands for Tom Eddy New Zealand -- Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon producer Tom Eddy's Down Under project. The wine is gentle and juicy, with fresh pea, passion fruit, pineapple and citrus notes. It goes down easy, and has just 12.3 percent labeled alcohol.

TWO STARS 2004 Tohu Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc (\$13) In-your-face, exotic fruit takes the lead, with guava, papaya, pineapple and passion fruit aromas and flavors. Richer and fuller-bodied than most, it has just enough acidity to cleanse the palate.

TWO STARS 2005 Whitehaven Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc (\$18) Lean, elegant and calling for food, it favors tart citrus (grapefruit, lemon) flavors over tropical fruit and has an earthy minerality and crisp acidity.

TWO STARS 2004 Woodthorpe Te Mata Estate Hawkes Bay Sauvignon Blanc (\$17) A minerally, slightly herbal nose leads to a racy palate of lime, white grapefruit and passion fruit. It's clean as a whistle and middle-of-the-pack in pungency.