

WORDS TYSON STELZER

GREAT WHITE

New developments are changing the face of New Zealand white wines. Sauvignon blanc was just the beginning.

A NEW STAR HAS RISEN from the hallowed lands of Central Otago in New Zealand's south. Auburn makes wines from just one grape variety, and it's not what you'd expect. All seven labels, at varying levels of sweetness to suit, are riesling. Auburn makes no more than 900 bottles of any label and therein lies its secret. Wines of such precision cannot be made in monumental volumes.

Five hundred kilometres north, in Marlborough, sauvignon blanc plantings have ballooned almost fivefold in the past decade. More than 80 per cent of exported bottles are now sauvignon blanc.

The well-established estates that have driven the success story continue to refine their style. But success also lures cowboys. "There are a lot of sauvignons in the region that are taking too many shortcuts," says Dog Point Vineyard partner Ivan Sutherland. The popularity of sauvignon blanc has opened the way for opportunistic investors who have planted on lesser lands, overcropped young vines and taken shortcuts in the winery to rush young wines off to market.

The results are predictable, with a raft of new budget sauvignons leaving drinkers disillusioned and established growers disgruntled. Quality-focused growers and winemakers have fought back, attempting to establish a wine assurance mark. Sadly, growers haven't been able to agree on the yield requirement, and the idea remains on hold.

After a recent tasting odyssey in New Zealand, I found just one in 20 sauvignons to be of a standard worthy of a gold medal in a wine show, while chardonnay scored a hit rate of more than one-quarter and riesling an impressive two-fifths. This leads me to a big call: New Zealand riesling and chardonnay are better than sauvignon blanc.

It's the counter-cyclical principle of the wine world, if you like. Buy the great varieties that are less popular rather than the lesser varieties that are greatly popular. New Zealand pinot gris is another case in

point. Plantings have exploded almost eightfold in a decade and the results are largely sweet, simple and disappointing.

Chardonnay, by contrast, has never looked more refined. With maturing vines and minds, talented growers are finding the confidence to harvest earlier. "It seems that picking later produces broader, deader flavours, while picking earlier captures more delicate, mineral characters," says Felton Road winemaker, Blair Walter, who crafts Central Otago's most expressive chardonnays.

At Kumeu River, near Auckland, Michael Brajkovich is the mind behind New Zealand's most celebrated chardonnays. The five recently landed are the most classic and refined from the estate yet.

This counter-cyclical trend is playing out decisively across the country, with chardonnay stars spanning every region. Riesling, too, shows its potential from Auburn and Felton Road in Central Otago to Pegasus Bay in Waipara and Framingham in Marlborough. The landscape of New Zealand white wines is as dynamic as the country's breathtaking geography. Take the time to venture off the sauvignon highway to discover its enticing vinous back roads. 🌐

DOG POINT VINEYARD

Sauvignon Blanc 2012 \$25

A consummately crafted mineral mouth feel and character propel Dog Point above the vast sea of sauvignon. Regulated yields produce an impeccable fruit profile that dodges the extremes of under-ripe herbaceousness and overripe passionfruit.

AUBURN WINES

Aura Riesling 2012 \$35

The most pristine season yet for Auburn, instilling a harmony that enables this medium-sweet style to finish tangy, clean, balanced and refreshing. It's loaded with all the concentration and exotic fruits you could wish for, yet remains defined and confident.

FELTON ROAD

Block 1 Riesling 2012 \$45

Felton Road has crafted a riesling of finesse, persistence and sheer purity at the snow-capped pinnacle of New Zealand riesling. Deeply chalky and textural, and simultaneously taut and refined, its minerality resonates with the glacial soils of this unique site.

KUMEU RIVER

Hunting Hill Chardonnay 2009 \$49

Kumeu River's 2009s represent New Zealand's most impressive set of chardonnays yet. Hunting Hill, its first-picked, is an ethereal style of white florals with gunpowder notes. Its texture is a revelation: deep-set yet finely poised, impeccably honed and elegant.

