

# So much more to Sauvignon

Independents adore Kiwi Sauvignon because it flies off their shelves. As producers refine their styles, there are new things to discover, at a range of price points. So can the love affair continue?

**I**t's "quite hard", according to Ted Sandbach, "not to like New Zealand Sauvignon.

"If any of us were anywhere – at the theatre or a sporting event – and someone said, have a drink, a New Zealand Sauvignon would always be nice. It would always taste good. You very rarely get a bad New Zealand Sauvignon."

But is that enough for today's wine adventurers? At a small gathering of independents, held at The Providores in London, the discussion centred around what New Zealand Blanc offers specialist retailers – and whether it can maintain its phenomenal consumer appeal.

The wines we tried were intended to reflect a range of styles, and express a regionality that tends not to be apparent in the mainstream end of the market. Some had a tropical tinge, others were more

mineral and linear; some even had an exotic touch of oak.

New Zealand Sauvignon has a habit of selling itself in the independent trade, which creates something of a double-edged sword. "It's one of those things that you order as it's running out and then you're ordering it again because it's running out again," says Wayne Blomfield. "We have a selection and people have favourites amongst them." It takes extra effort, retailers agree, to take customers into new territory.

"I think it's good to offer these Sauvignon Blancs from different areas," says Matt Ellis. "When people open a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc they know what to expect but the idea is to try and make them excited and try something completely new. Different flavours, different concepts."

New Zealand specialist Rachel Gibson

says: "My overall feeling about New Zealand wine is that there is still huge demand for their wines in the UK, certainly from my own customers. They are divided into the group that come in for their regular case of £9 Sauvignon Blanc and also the group that are interested in [more expensive] New Zealand wines, and actively come into my shop to try something new from different regions."

**SO DID THE** wines on display make an impact? Ellis was particularly impressed with the Te Mania from Nelson; Sandbach, meanwhile, was taken by something he found unfamiliar. "There were one or two Sauvignons here that I thought were quite Pouilly-Fume in style. The Foxes Island Sauvignon from Marlborough I thought was a very nice wine, very gunflinty, as was the Seresin. The oak was very subtle on that ... I wasn't sure whether it was oaked or whether it was just lees stirring. It's very cleverly oaked."

The wine's 2010 label demonstrates the potential of New Zealand Sauvignon to age.

"That's the other thing that people are learning," says Sandbach. "A few years ago people would always say, 'Sauvignon Blanc, you need to drink it in the first year or 18 months maximum'."

Ellis adds: "We had some Clos Henri 2009 that I found a couple of weeks ago and that was fantastic – really amazing stuff."

Sandbach says: "It will also age a lot better in screwcap. We did a fantastic



Our guests: Wayne Blomfield, Park Vintners, Wimbledon Park; Matt Ellis, The Smiling Grape, St Neots; Ted Sandbach, The Oxford Wine Company; Rachel Gibson, Wine Utopia, Winchester and Stockbridge.

experiment a few years ago when the first screwcaps were coming over from New Zealand. Let's say it was the 2004 vintage. I can't remember what it was that we were bringing over but the first lot came over in cork and the second lot in screwcap. Same vintage, same wine.

"I put six bottles of each away for about three years. We then brought them out blind and everybody said one was young and fresh and the other old and tired. It was fascinating. I think the screwcap does help preserve these wines."

Gibson says: "I thought the Palliser Sauvignon was very good. The Villa Maria Single Vineyard Sauvignons always show well, although they are not a brand I do a lot with. I really liked the Seresin Reserve Sauvignon – in fact I ordered a case from Armit on Friday. It's the perfect upsell for Christmas."

**GUESTS EXPRESSED CONCERN** about the way New Zealand Sauvignon has been routinely discounted in the multiples – a tactic they worry could have a long-term impact, and which many independents feel obliged to mimic to some degree.

Both Wine Utopia and Oxford Wine Company run special offers on Tarangi.

"We sell it at £7.99," say Sandbach. "It ought to be £9.25 but we're promoting it because you need a New Zealand Sauvignon at a competitive price to make you look good value. You're always competing with Majestic or whoever and they've always got a New Zealand Sauvignon at a cheaper price. We only make 21% or something at £7.99, but it's a way of getting people into the shops."

Amelia Jukes, director of Te Whare Ra importer Hallowed Ground, believes the widespread appeal of New Zealand Sauvignon makes it a "safe" choice for consumers. But she believes there is masses of scope for independents to shepherd their customers towards a



© Peter Burge

*Yealands in Marlborough: a young wine region where production continues to evolve*

broader spectrum of styles.

"Now the sub-regionality is coming out of Marlborough," she says. "I like that drier, more precise and linear character – others are ripier and fruitier."

"When I open Te Whare Ra Sauvignon Blanc most people say 'that's not what I expected from Marlborough'. I know lots of people who think the best examples are cross-regional blends with a little bit of everything. They're getting better and better at making them and toning down the sugar. It's about persuading people they're no longer tropical fruit bombs."

"People should champion it and educate consumers about sub-regions and about degrees of ripeness and residual sugar. New Zealand Sauvignon has improved vastly over the past five years as they lower the sugar and fruit and focus more on the picking time and acidity."

Chris Stroud of New Zealand Winegrowers agrees. He adds: "Knowledge of the diversity of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc is definitely increasing as regions, sub-regions and styles are evolving."

"Indeed, in early 2016, New Zealand will be hosting a celebration of our signature grape variety. Watch this space for further details."

## The Sauvignon selection

- **Palliser Estate 2013**, Martinborough, £12.99
- **Te Mania 2013**, Nelson, £13.99
- **Woollaston 2013**, Nelson, £14.49
- **Invivo 2014**, Marlborough, £12.99
- **Tinpot Hut 2014**, Marlborough, £12.99
- **Southern Lights Marlborough 2013**, Marlborough, £9.99
- **Ara Single Estate 2013**, Marlborough, £10.99
- **Te Whare Ra 2013**, Marlborough
- **Stanley Estates 2013**, Marlborough, £13.49
- **Babich Wakefield Downs 2013**, Marlborough, £13.99
- **Villa Maria Single Vineyard Southern Clays 2013**, Marlborough, £15.99
- **Kim Crawford Spitfire Small Parcels 2013**, Marlborough, £15.99
- **Yealands Estate Winemaker's Reserve 2013**, Marlborough, £14.95
- **Churton 2012**, Marlborough
- **Foxes Island 2010**, Marlborough, £16.99
- **Seresin Reserve 2010**, Marlborough, £26.99