



28 OCT, 2023

DRINK | NEW ZEALAND White wine

Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney



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A tour among the vines of Marlborough turns this sauvignon blanc sceptic into a savvy fan. By Ben Groundwater

The movie *Sideways* almost single-handedly destroyed the reputation of merlot. There's a scene in the film in which the lead character, Miles, a writer and incredible wine snob, stands outside a restaurant and tells his friend: "If anyone orders merlot, I'm leaving. I am not drinking any f--ing merlot!"

Never mind that some of the world's most desirable and expensive wines — those from the Right Bank in Bordeaux — are

predominantly merlot. To this day, almost 20 years later, there's still a stigma, known as the "*Sideways* effect", among many drinkers when it comes to that grape.

I have no issue with merlot, though I do think about *Sideways* any time someone wants to order sauvignon blanc. Because I have to tell you, I feel similarly to Miles when it comes to the wine affectionately known as "savvy b". "I am not drinking any sauvignon blanc," I mumble to myself,



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maybe not always so politely, as glasses are filled with that grassy, acidic drop.

So you might wonder what I'm doing in Marlborough. This Kiwi region is one of, if not *the* most famous in the world for sauvignon blanc. The two just go hand in hand. Marlborough is sauvignon blanc. It's a globally recognised brand, one you will spy on every bottle shop shelf from London to Longreach.

Would you even bother to visit Marlborough if you weren't a fan of sauvignon blanc? Does this region have anything to offer those who say a firm no to savvy b? I'm here to find out.

I'm starting at Huia, a winery that does, to be fair, produce sauvignon blanc. But then, everyone here produces sauvignon blanc. At Huia, however, winemaker Claire Allan does things a little differently: this is a certified organic vineyard where wines are hand-crafted in small batches, with a lot of love and a lot of skill.

It shows, too. As I stand at the wooden bar in the winery, working through Claire's chardonnay, riesling, pinot noir and even her sauvignon blanc, I'm endlessly impressed with what is happening here, with the way wine in Marlborough can be made on a small scale with very few additions and be so good.

This is not the standard, because there are some big, big names in Marlborough. Drive across the valley flats outside Blenheim, at the top of the South Island, and you spot signs for Villa Maria, Cloudy Bay, Geisen: names that instantly conjure wine labels, visions you've seen at every Dan Murphy's.

But just as it works at the bottle shop, if you don't want to drink that you don't have to. Because there are more people doing great things in small batches.

Check out Elemental Distillers, brainchild and passion project of Ben Leggett, a former bartender and hospitality guru who realised that he had a gift for making gin.

Working from a few shipping containers stacked among the vines near Renwick, Ben has been tinkering away on sustainably sourced and produced spirits, and the World Gin Awards recently crowned his Roots Marlborough Dry Gin the world's best.

Sitting outside his lab on a sunny day with a gin and tonic, you forget that this is even a wine region.

There's more to explore, too: high-end dining at Harvest Restaurant, on the

sprawling, luxurious grounds of the Marlborough Boutique Hotel; more relaxed eating options on the friendly streets of Blenheim; activities like hiking and fishing if you get sick of all that food and drink.

My final stop, however, is another winery and another small name, Dog Point. This is the long-held passion project of the Sutherland family, another organic operation and one that only produces four wines: a standard sauvignon blanc, a wild-fermented, barrel-aged sauvignon blanc called "Section 94", a chardonnay and a pinot noir.

I'm treated to a sample at the cellar door, up on the hill overlooking vineyards, rivers, mountains and coast. And you know what? Section 94 is the clear winner.

It's a full-bodied wine, with warm minerality and all the harsh acidic edges of a young sauvignon blanc smoothed off by extra time in barrel and bottle.

On this, I'm sold. I am drinking sauvignon blanc. **i**

The writer travelled as a guest of Tourism New Zealand

Above, Villa Maria, one of the biggest sauvignon blanc producers in the South Island. Below, Dog Point's Anna Dunne and Nigel Sowman. Photo: Tourism New Zealand





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THE DETAILS

DRINK

The Huia cellar door reopens in spring (huiavineyards.com). Dog Point is open Monday to Friday for free tastings by appointment (dogpoint.co.nz). Elemental Distillers is open daily (elementaldistillers.com).

STAY

14th Lane Urban Hotel is a smart new boutique property in downtown Blenheim, with rooms from \$NZ323 (\$300) a night. See 14thlane.nz

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