

TRAVEL



Visitors chill out at Frank's Oyster Bar and Eatery. Photos / Destination Marlborough

Mike Yardley tastes the wine, gin, food and ambience of the Marlborough district

FRAMED BY THE BISCUIT-BROWN Wither Hills and the lofty prongs of the Richmond Ranges, Blenheim's vast blanket of the Wairau Plain bursts with possibilities.

When it comes to winery finery, few venues can hold a candle to the elemental elegance of Wither Hills Cellar Door & Restaurant. Exuding a mix of contemporary design and relaxed sophistication, coupled with soul-rinsing views from their four-storey tower, the Wither Hills Winery is pitch-perfect for a wine tasting and bite to eat.

I met up with Steve from Explore Marlborough Wine Tours for lunch at Wither Hills, noshing on king prawns and parmesan arancini; salt and pepper squid, and barbecued eggplant.

Be sure to take a stroll among the vines in the Vine Library, showcasing several dozen varieties; and savour the sublime Barrel Hall, a sensory treat with the seductive scent of oak and yeast.

Also enjoyed a great wine-tasting, sipping and swirling my way through a



FINE WINE

single vineyard wine flight. As the national powerhouse of sauvignon blanc, try Wither Hills' Rarangi 2021, where minerality, sea salt and lime form the backbone of this delightful sav blanc.

Steve and I then headed over to Vines Village, which is homebase for Explore Marlborough's Wine Tours. They offer a great range of options, included guided or self-guided tours.

Kitted out with a trusty e-bike, over the next few hours, we tooted our way around the vineyards, mostly on off-road trails, including the fabulous stopbank of the Wairau River, which serves up elevated views of the vast bucolic canvas. My biggest highlight was tasting the glorious wines of Hans Herzog Estate, widely acclaimed as one of the best wineries in New Zealand.

Hans planted pinot gris, viognier and montepulciano over 30 years ago – rarely seen varieties in New Zealand at the time. Today the 11.5ha vineyard is densely planted and a complex patchwork of 26 different grape varieties, produces some of New Zealand's most treasured organic wines, mostly snapped up by discerning wine lovers worldwide.

The effervescent cellar door manager, Sharon, guided me through a truly superlative tasting and a fascinating tour of the intimate estate.

I also enjoyed a great gin-tasting at the Vines Village, sampling the delights of Elemental Distillers in the Roots Gin Shack. Founded by Ben Leggett and Simon Kelly this craft distillery delivers premium craft spirits and liqueurs with complete



Above, a couple walk through the vines.

Left, Wither Hills Winery.

transparency of all ingredients, processes and production, from root to cup.

Garnering accolades aplenty, Roots Marlborough Dry Gin is a crisp and robust London Dry-style gin, bottled at a bold 45% alcohol by volume. It was crowned World's Best Gin at the 2023 World Gin Awards.

I met up with Ben at the recently opened Roots Gin Shack and Tasting Room, which is a wonderful venue, combined with a garden setting for leisurely indulgence. Enjoy a signature G&T or a negroni on tap, while the menu also spans seasonal cocktails, exquisite wines and curated selection beers.

Gin Shack has mixed up the distillation game with some delicious fare from the talented team behind Boom Sauce, Spice & Barbeque, with small plates and irresistible snacks complementing their gin creations. You'll love their grapefruit and gin sorbet!

While at Vines Village, extend your exploratory and check out the Cheese and Cheers venue. This charming operator showcases an extensive range of New

Zealand craft whiskies, and international brands, paired with three matching cheeses and bread. For great evening dining in Blenheim, I'm a big fan of Frank's Oyster Bar & Eatery.

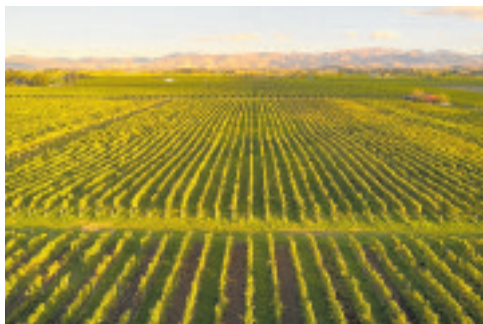
This buzzing Scott Street establishment, under the command of Sam Webb, has an old-school New York bar vibe. Despite its name, Franks delivers so much more than Marlborough's magnificent molluscs. Share plates run the gamut from Merino lamb shoulder and grilled zucchini to jerk chicken and venison tartare. Can't choose? Plump for the Frank Eats option and celebrate the feast of curated flavours.

Where to stay? Scenic Hotel Marlborough enjoys is perfectly poised in the heart of town. This stylish property features superb facilities including a spa, pool, sauna, restaurant and bar. You'll enjoy superb service, free wifi, complimentary car parking, spacious air-conditioned guestrooms with flat-screen SKY TV and super-comfy beds, swathed in their signature Kiwi-made wool and down bedding. www.scenichotelgroup.co.nz

Below, visitors get ready to check out wine country on e-bikes, thanks to Explore Marlborough Wine Tours.



Above, Scenic Hotel Marlborough is in the heart of town. Photo / Scenic Hotels



Left, Hans Herzog vineyards. Photo / Hans Herzog



Left, wine-tasting at Hans Herzog.

Above, Roots Gin Shack serves up world-beating gin. Photos / Destination Marlborough

Right, Wither Hills' Barrel Room is where fine wine meets elegance. Photo / Wither Hills

