

AMONG THE VINES OF NELSON

Charmian Smith, Otago Daily Times, 3 Dec 2014

When Tranja Fry of Fossil Ridge Wines in Nelson produced some of her own freshly roasted macadamia nuts and a flowering stalk from one of the trees behind the vineyard restaurant, it struck me that Tasman Bay has a remarkably mild climate for the South Island.

They also grow subtropical crops such as tamarillos and avocados.

The sunny, north-facing region, sheltered by mountains to the east, west and south, besides being home to artists and food producers also boasts a number of wineries and craft brewers.

Members of Wine Writers New Zealand were invited to visit recently and taken on a whistle-stop tour and tasting of the region's wines.

Most of the wineries, either on the alluvial Waimea plains or on the clay soils of the Moutere hills, are small.

Some, like Neudorf were established more than 30 years ago and have an international reputation.

Others like Waimea Estates are larger and produce wines of good value.

Nelson is known for its aromatic whites, riesling, pinot gris, gewurztraminer, and its pinot noir, but what impressed me most on this trip were the chardonnays.

They tend to be lively with citrus characters, textural, often creamy with nicely integrated oak and well-balanced finishes.

We tasted several vintages of Neudorf's acclaimed Moutere chardonnay, which has become more refined over the years.

The 2009 is drinking particularly well, bright with citrus creme brulee undertones and fine balance, as is the current vintage, 2013, although, of course, it will develop with bottle age.

Brightwater's Lord Rutherford chardonnays tend towards grapefruit, with creamy nutty undertones and a fine balance.

The current vintage, 2012, is particularly delicious.

Near Kina Peninsula are the neighbouring Kina Cliffs and Kina Beach vineyards, both relatively new.

Julie and Alistair Ashcroft have a small tasting room at Kina Cliffs where they make a lively, attractive sauvignon blanc, a powerful pinot gris and a minerally pinot noir.

Kina Beach is owned by Karin Schoch and Achim Bauer, who produce a full-on style of chardonnay and a savoury pinot noir.

Waimea Estate is one of the larger producers in the region, and its wines are exemplary, fresh, varietal and charming, both the simple Spinyback wines (\$13-18) and the slightly more complex Waimea Estate wines (\$18-25) are good value.

I particularly enjoyed the first vintage of Waimea Albarino 2014, a Spanish variety, opulent with a steely backbone and dry, textural aftertaste, the rich fragrant Waimea classic riesling, and the perfumed Waimea gewurztraminer.

At Richmond Plains vineyard Lars Jensen and winemaker Steve Gill brought barrels into the organic vineyard so we could taste barrel samples and wines from neighbouring producer Te Mania.

We tasted samples of the textural Blue Moon (reserve) sauvignon blanc, which is barrel fermented with wild yeast, a stylish Richmond Plains blanc de noir, and a deliciously balanced Te Mania gewurztraminer 2014 that is yet to be released.

One of the quiet achievers when it comes to quality is Andrew Greenhough, of Greenhough Wines at Hope.

He and Jenny Wheeler bought a 12-year-old vineyard in 1990 and produce some fine pinot noir, sauvignon blanc, riesling, and especially, chardonnay.

The 2013 Hope Vineyard chardonnay, to be released in February, flirts with richness but has an elegant restraint.

In Woollaston's tussock-covered winery on the Moutere Hills, winemaker Shane Munn produces three ranges of wine, the reserve Mahana, Woollaston and the entry-level Tussock Ridge, which is mostly exported.

Chef Jason Innes, formerly of Amisfield in Central, produces food to match the wines in a stylish restaurant.

Kahurangi has some of the oldest vines in the region, as it is based on Seifried's original vineyard in the Moutere hills, planted in the 1970s.

Greg and Amanda Day now have a smart new tasting room and pizza restaurant.

Their Mount Arthur Riesling 2012 is pristine, with bright fruit and a lovely balance.

If you are up in Nelson this summer, pick up one of the wine guide brochures and visit some of the tasting rooms.

- *Charmian Smith travelled to Nelson as a guest of Wine Nelson.*