



It needs to be acknowledged that in the past New Zealand's red wines have been viewed unkindly. While our Sauvignon Blanc has had heaps of accolades thrown at it, our reds have largely been dismissed in a patronising and sometimes even brutal fashion. This from the world's most powerful wine commentator, American lawyer Robert Parker in 2002: "New Zealand's attempts with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot continue to be annoyingly herbaceous and/or atrociously vegetal, with few exceptions. It is unbelievable that anyone can find anything to praise in these offerings. If you like wines that taste like liquefied asparagus, you will find some merit in them."

Hardly a ringing endorsement. To be fair, Parker suggested that all was not lost and strides were being taken to "purge some of these grotesque characters", and he points to Pinot Noir as possibly being New Zealand's salvation.

The problems with the weightier, more brutish yet elegant Bordeaux style wines made here were a lack of genuinely ripe fruit, yields that were too high and too much over-processing.

Well, good news: less than a decade on and Parker and his international tasting and reviewing panel are now sitting up, being suitably impressed and saying lovely things, and dishing out high scores as if they were lollies at a Santa parade.

New Zealand reds, long in the shadow of our whites, are now emerging as serious wines with a purity of fruit, excellent tannins and a silky texture with poise and balance.

The really good ones are quickly developing cult status and although not cheap by New Zealand standards are genuine value for money when compared to their overseas Old World equivalents.

Here are three of the best that any serious wine drinker should have in their cellar:

THREE TOP REDS

New Zealand red wines are finally receiving international acclaim. A few of them are sublime. By John Hawkesby.



2007 TRINITY HILL HOMAGE SYRAH

Homage Syrah is from the revered Gimblett Gravels sub-region of Hawke's Bay, where the soils consist of deep river shingle deposited by the Ngaruroro River as it changed course over the years, exposing greywacke gravel stones that absorb and radiate heat.

If ever there was a blockbusting New Zealand Syrah – this is it. But the big, bold brassiness is not overwhelming; at no stage do you feel you're sucking the mantelpiece.

Viognier makes up around 9 percent of the blend aiding colour, tannin structure and fragrance and pulling the wine back a little from becoming too bruising and overpowering. Ebullient winemaker John Hancock is a big fan of adding the white Viognier.

"We don't want it to show through but it adds structure and texture and softens the wine making it more feminine."

Availability? Says Hancock: "We only made 300 cases and there will be no 2008 as the vintage for Homage wasn't good enough."

Homage is only made in great vintages and 2007 reached the exacting standards set by Trinity Hill. Grapes are all hand-picked and treated with kid gloves, and after fermentation the wine is bottled with carefully controlled and gentle filtration to ensure spoilage yeasts do not grow in the bottle. In other words, each step in the total vine-to-bottle process is supervised with the kind of care reserved for delivering a newborn baby. And it shows. This is a wine of concentration, weight and elegance, with black fruits, cassis, forest floor, truffle and leather.

The only New Zealand red wine to appear on the list at Alain Ducasse's Michelin two-star restaurant at the Dorchester Hotel in London.

Don't look for it at your local supermarket. \$120

2008 FELTON ROAD PINOT NOIR BLOCK 5

The boutique Central Otago winery holds an esteemed position based on meticulous viticulture and careful, sensitive and superb winemaking. Pinot Noir is notoriously difficult to get right and winemaker Blair Walter manages to capture the essence of great Pinot with remarkable regularity.

"Our team has been together a long time now, adding to a harmonious understanding. Our wines sell out every year, even in tough times...we're grateful for that."

Felton Road is not just about Pinot Noir. There are some smart whites as well, an achingly beautiful dry Riesling and a classy Chardonnay in particular.

Walter points to vine age as being the biggest contributor to quality in the future.

"With our Pinot Noir we're developing a more Burgundian style, which is where we want to be."

And what is the 2008 Block 5 Pinot like? Sublime even in its infancy. Concentrated boysenberry, cherry, spice and buttered toast on the palate, but, with an underbelly of earth and subtle mushroom. It smells of brooding dark fruits.

A Pinot Noir of understatement with all the promise of greatness. It's \$69 on allocation from the cellar door or client mailing list.



2006 DESTINY BAY MAGNA PRAEMIA

A Bordeaux-style red from a small but perfectly formed single-vineyard estate in a north-facing valley on Waiheke Island, this was the creation, 10 years ago, of expatriate American business consultant Mike Spratt. He has vines of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot planted in cracking clay soils on a steeply sloped amphitheatre that provides natural drainage and shelter while capturing the warmth of the sun.

The mantra is simple: "Old World traditions, New World techniques and a timeless passion for excellence." Prices, especially for the top red, Magna Praemia, are amongst the country's highest but Destiny Bay wines are crafted exclusively from estate-grown grapes with uncompromising standards of viticulture. Only the best grapes survive a harvesting and processing gauntlet that is extreme – consequently yields are low but quality high. As veteran New Zealand wine critic Geoff Kelly observed,

"This wine encapsulates my vision for an optimal Waiheke Island Bordeaux blend and confirms again that Cabernet Sauvignon can be fully ripened on the very best sites on Waiheke."

Without doubt, Destiny Bay has one of those sites and all the high-tech bells and whistles one could wish for in a winery. Mystae and Destinae are impressive entry-level wines and a superb entrée to the top-of-the-range Magna Praemia.

A blend dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon (74 per cent), with Merlot (14 per cent), Cabernet Franc (7 per cent) and Malbec (5 per cent), Magna Praemia is smooth, rich, supple, long, complex and silky, with loads of plum and spice flavours. From Latin, meaning "great rewards", Magna Praemia is well named. One to cellar for eight to 10 years, it will be well worth the wait. \$275.

