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The wines of New Zealand are unique, bridging the gap between the styles of the New and Old Worlds. While high quality, super-intense versions of sauvignon blanc afforded New Zealand international recognition, the wine landscape has quickly diversified and this guide gives what you need to tap into the country’s other rising stars: world-class pinot noirs, high quality red Bordeaux blends, and some up-and-coming alternative white varieties (gewürztraminer, riesling, and pinot gris).

This Approach Guide begins by offering a straightforward vintage ratings table, which affords high-level insight into the best and most challenging years for wine production in New Zealand. It then describes the country’s primary red and white grape varieties and where they reach their highest expressions.

Finally and most important, this guide provides detailed, region-by-region reviews of each of the country’s 11 wine producing regions: Auckland (Kumeu, Matakana, and Waiheke Island), Canterbury (Waipara), Central Otago, Gisborne, Hawke's Bay, the famed Marlborough, Nelson, Northland, Waikato-Bay of Plenty, Wairarapa (Martinborough), and the Waitaki Valley. For each region, this guide offers insight into its unique terroir, pointing out the best wines and what makes them distinctive.

This guidebook’s approach is unique: Rather than tell you what specific bottle of wine to order by providing individual bottle reviews, this Approach Guide gives you the information you require to make informed wine choices on any list.

* Look for the asterisks. We mark each of our favorite regions, sub-regions, and grape varieties with an asterisk (*) — they have a record for providing quality, consistency, and good values.

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Our readers are our greatest inspiration. Email us at founders@approachguides.com to let us know about your experience with Approach Guides — many of our recent updates have been inspired by customers like you. We personally respond to every email.

We hope you enjoy what we believe is a totally unique guide to the wines of New Zealand.

Have a great trip!
David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides

P.S. We have also designed this guide as a wine app for the iPhone or iPad (www.agwine.com)
Primary Red Grape Varieties

Cabernet Sauvignon

Cabernet sauvignon does not assume the same prominent position in New Zealand as it does in many other countries; the grape only accounts for 2% of plantings, far behind pinot noir (14%) and merlot (4%). It is usually seen in Bordeaux style blends, often in a secondary position to merlot. This ‘secondary status’ is largely attributable to the fact that cabernet sauvignon struggles to ripen optimally in many of New Zealand’s geographies.

That said, there are some very high quality Bordeaux blends being made in New Zealand. The two premier areas of production are Auckland’s Waiheke Island and Hawke’s Bay.

While New Zealand’s Bordeaux blends are unquestionably full-bodied and powerful wines, they are not the ‘jammy’ fruit style popular in many parts of the New World; these are sophisticated, pleasing wines, made in a more Old World style.

Merlot

Merlot is New Zealand’s second most planted red grape variety, accounting for 4% of total. While it is sometimes seen in single-varietal wines, it is usually found in Bordeaux blends, where it often assumes a leading percentage over cabernet sauvignon. As compared to cabernet sauvignon, merlot is better suited to the New Zealand’s cooler growing conditions and more successfully ripens optimally.

Compared to those based on cabernet sauvignon, merlot-based wines are less tannic and carry lower acidity, which makes them more immediately approachable. Flavors include dark cherry, plum, violet, chocolate, and herb; absent is cabernet sauvignon’s spicy component. Merlot-based wines also typically carry slightly higher alcohol levels. In order to get merlot just right, winemakers need to have conditions that support slow ripening (this is usually the result of cooler temperatures) and harvest early enough that the grapes maintain sufficient structuring acidity.

There are some high quality Bordeaux blends being made in New Zealand. The two premier areas of production are Auckland (Kumeu and Waiheke Island) and Hawke’s Bay.

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Pinot Noir

Pinot noir is New Zealand’s star red grape variety and, if you are a red wine lover, this is where we’d recommend you focus your attention. It is the most planted red grape in New Zealand (second overall to sauvignon blanc), accounting for 14% of total.
Positioned in the southeast corner of the South Island, Central Otago is the southernmost wine-producing region in the world. It experiences cool temperatures, big day-night swings in temperature (due to its higher elevation and inland position, which affords it a greater continental climate), minimal rainfall, and a high degree of sunshine; soils are varied, but often contain stony sub-soils and some element of mineral-rich metamorphic rocks (including mica and schist) that impart mineral characters to the wines of this region.

Central Otago is chiefly focused on red wines derived from pinot noir, which represents 80% of plantings. These impressive wines are made in a cool climate, ‘Burgundian’ style, offering bright acidity, seductive aromas, and red fruit flavors, with distinctive notes of mineral, earth, and herbs.

The region’s best white wines are based on riesling and pinot gris, both of which are light-bodied and high in acidity, with intense fruit and mineral flavors.

There are several sub-regions, although they are not always referenced on bottle labels:

- **Alexandra Basin.** The southernmost wine-producing region in Central Otago, the Alexandra Basin has the hottest daytime and coolest nighttime temperatures in the region. Wines are generally delicate with big acidity; their flavor profiles are slightly darker and more pronounced than in Gibbston and Wanaka.

- **Cromwell Basin.** Cromwell’s wines set the benchmark for the region. This sub-region has the warmest climate in Central Otago; while still cool climate in style, these wines have the greatest intensity and depth of flavor in the region, often adding both red and dark fruit flavor elements. There are slight variations even among Cromwell’s wines, as this sub-region can be broken down into even smaller zones: Bendigo (biggest, most powerful wines), Bannockburn (powerful and refined wines), Queensberry/Tarras (most restrained and delicate wines of the three, but bigger than those of Alexandra).

- **Gibbston.** Pinot noir from Gibbston is the most delicate in Central Otago, displaying light red fruit; in this, the coldest sub-region, producers can struggle to bring pinot noir to full ripeness.

- **Wanaka.** Pinot noir from Wanaka is made in a similar delicate style to that of Gibbston. The northernmost sub-region, Wanaka is slightly warmer than Gibbston; nevertheless, producers similarly struggle to get pinot to ripen fully.
* Waitaki Valley
First planted in 2001, the Waitaki Valley is **New Zealand’s newest wine region**; it is positioned midway down the eastern coastline of the South Island on the border between the North Otago and Canterbury regions. The Waitaki Valley experiences cool temperatures, high levels of sunshine, and low precipitation. The region’s soils are unique in New Zealand, as they are predominantly limestone based, affording **wines an altogether unique character** that cultivates flavors of earth and mineral.

Waitaki’s reds are dominated by **high quality, cool climate pinot noir**; these are the region’s pride and joy. They are crisp, light-bodied, elegant wines with delicate notes of flowers, earth, and mineral. The intensity of flavor is derived from the grapes’ long hang-times. They are very nice wines.

Whites are based on pinot gris, riesling, and gewurztraminer. All display good acidity, intense fruit, and mineral highlights.
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What started as one couple’s travel notes aimed at filling in the gaps in guidebooks has become ApproachGuides.com — a menu of downloadable travel guides that cover cultural and historical topics of interest to thoughtful travelers. What’s hot: Bite-sized travel guides that specialize in topics ranging from ... the foods of Italy to one that helps you explore the historical and architectural significance of Angkor’s famous temple structures in Cambodia.

Los Angeles Times
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