



TEXT BOB CAMPBELL MW

Top NZ Chardonnays

The best-performing Kiwi drops on the market, tasted and rated by Bob Campbell MW.

New Zealand chardonnay has never looked so good. Despite sluggish market demand, quality is higher than ever, thanks to better site selection, reduced crop levels and greater vine age, not to mention a general refinement in winemaking techniques.

Big is out, elegant is in. Wines with overt oak character or an excessive buttery influence are "oh-so-nineties". Subtle power is the formula that wins medals and the hearts of chardonnay lovers today.

With a few exceptions, the top wines are the product of low-yielding vines. Their crop of grapes is inevitably hand-harvested and whole-bunch-pressed to avoid the excessive extraction of phenolics and inevitable coarse texture. Barrel fermentation is de rigueur, so, appropriately, the choice of oak is likely to be French, rather than American, with relatively low levels of toasty influence.

Hawkes Bay is more likely to produce top wines than other wine region, according to my selection, with more than one-third of the

top wines coming from there. Marlborough is in second place, with Central Otago third. Auckland manages fourth place, thanks to the efforts of Kumeu River and its chardonnay master-craftsman, Michael Brajkovich MW.

Gisborne, New Zealand's self-proclaimed chardonnay capital, managed only one wine in my Top 20 list, along with the Nelson and Martinborough regions.

The 2002 vintage was kind to chardonnay generally, while quality is variable in 2003, due to a vintage that was ravaged by frost, particularly in Hawkes Bay. When the going gets tough, however, New Zealand's leading producers of chardonnay quietly continue to make excellent-quality wine.

The wines in this article were tasted blind. For more information about how wines are tasted and rated, see page 129.

Prices are approximate; where unlisted, wines are not available in that country. To source wines in this story, see page 155.



STAR PERFORMERS



95 2002 Fromm La Strada Chardonnay

94 2002 Villa Maria Waikahu Vineyard Chardonnay

94 2003 Kumeu River Maté's Vineyard Kumeu Chardonnay

93 2002 Villa Maria Reserve Chardonnay

93 2002 Sileni Estate Selection The Lodge Chardonnay

93 2002 Villa Maria Keltern Vineyard Chardonnay

93 2003 Neudorf Moutere Chardonnay

93 2003 Kumeu River Chardonnay



91 2003 Felton Road Barrel Fermented Chardonnay

90 2003 Selaks Founder's Reserve Chardonnay

90 2003 Te Mata Elston Chardonnay

90 2003 Clearview Estate Winery Reserve Chardonnay

89 2002 Foxes Island Chardonnay

88 2002 Matariki Chardonnay

88 2002 Gibbston Valley Reserve Chardonnay

88 2002 Huntaway Reserve Chardonnay

88 2003 Palliser Estate Chardonnay

88 2002 Mt Difficulty Chardonnay

88 2002 Auntsville Cobb Cottage Chardonnay

87 2003 Spy Valley Chardonnay