

FOOD & DRINKS · WINE

The Best Italian Wine Comes From... New Zealand?

Written by **Krisanne Fordham** · *January 13, 2016*



Marlborough, in the northeast of New Zealand's South Island, is the country's largest wine-growing region.



You don't have to go to the source to drink world-class Sangiovese or Montepulciano. Turns out, some of the finest Italian wine is made in Middle-earth.

When it comes to wine, New Zealand is best known for its fruity sauvignon blancs and sun-kissed pinot noirs, and no wonder: They're delicious, easy to drink, and aggressively marketed to an international audience. But during a recent trip to New Zealand, I found out that the Kiwis might actually be keeping their best wines to themselves—think world-class merlot and syrah, and finer still, some outstanding Sangiovese and Montepulciano.

But don't just take my word for it. At the recent [Air New Zealand Wine Awards \(ANZWA\)](#), a wine competition judged by local and international judges, New Zealand winemakers took home Gold and Silver medals for multiple Italian varietals, including the obscure Marzemino, a light, plummy red mainly produced in northern Italy and not especially known beyond it. Some winemakers, like [Heron's Flight](#) in Matakana, have even gone so far as to produce *only* Italian varietals, experimenting primarily with Sangiovese and Dolcetto and creating Italian-style *passito* (sweet) wines.

Having previously lived in Italy, a stone's throw from Abruzzo, the birthplace of Montepulciano, I was shocked to find that [Trinity Hill's 2014 Monty](#) was some of the best I'd had, well, anywhere. It was inky, medium-bodied, and savory, with great acidity and flavors of herbs, spice, and dark chocolate—classic Montepulciano, yet dancing with the freshness and vibrancy characteristic of New Zealand wines. Could it be that the Kiwis are making Italian wines even better than the Italians? Experts seem to think so.

"A few years ago, it was quite hit-or-miss, but now New Zealand winemakers have really hit their stride with Italian grape varietals. The quality has grown by leaps and bounds," says Fongyee Walker, head of [Dragon Phoenix Wine Consulting](#) in Beijing and a wine consultant for Air New Zealand. "Many Italian grapes grow well on slopes and hillsides, and in volcanic or alluvial soils—all of which New Zealand has. Throw in a moderate climate and amazing sunshine, and you get these wines with great purity of fruit flavors."

Ironically, it was the meteoric success of New Zealand sauvignon blanc in the '80s that spurred local winemakers to experiment with alternative international varietals in the first place, says Walker. "As the industry began to mature and evolve, it became clear that New Zealand could not be a one-trick sauvignon blanc pony," she says. "Winemakers started planting new varieties and found great success, particularly with grapes from northern and central Italy."

One of these winemakers was Michael Wood, of [Obsidian Winery](#) on Waiheke Island. In addition to being one of the pioneer producers of Montepulciano in the country, Obsidian is unquestionably one of the best: Wood's newly released 2013 vintage just took home the Best in Class trophy at the [New Zealand International Wine Show](#) (against stiff competition from Italy), the Silver Medal at ANZWA, and was declared the "best Montepulciano outside of Italy" by renowned international wine critic and Master of Wine Bob Campbell.

Wood, like Walker, says climate has much to do with the success of Italian grapes in New Zealand. Waiheke, in particular, boasts a consistently mild, coastal climate that's almost identical to that of Abruzzo. "Rather than the exaggerated spike in heat over the summer in a more continental climate, the temperature we have on Waiheke is represented by a rather gentle bell curve, which results in a longer ripening period that suits Montepulciano," he says. "Our clay soils also seem to work quite well."

It's not just Montepulciano that shines, either. Top Aussie sommelier and ANZWA judge Mark Protheroe also calls out the Barbera produced on Waiheke by [Poderi Crisci](#). "It's savory, mid-weighted, and screams out for food," he says, while [Church Road Wines'](#) senior winemaker Chris Scott praises the "fine" Hawke's Bay Fianos and Matakana Sangioveses. "Arneis is also being planted across various regions, and there's a producer that's growing Primitivo [better known as zinfandel]," adds Scott. "But what I'm really watching with great interest is a new planting of Nebbiolo at [Bilancia's](#) steep north facing hill site, here in Hawke's Bay."

And though it's early days yet for Italian varietals in New Zealand, that's exactly why you should pay attention. Italian varietals comprise less than five percent of all wines produced in New Zealand, but they've consistently been winners: rich, ripe, and textured, with the natural acidity and freshness typical of New Zealand wine. Sure, it's unlikely that New Zealand Sangiovese or Nebbiolo will ever come close to sauvignon blanc or pinot noir in popularity, but their presence—and success thus far—is an exciting and welcome addition to a fairly new (and still evolving) wine region.

"The consistently high quality of Italian varietals in New Zealand today is really a reflection on the nature of Kiwi winemakers—their determination to understand new varieties and their relationship with the land, their hard work, and their ability to innovate," says Walker. "It took a long time to see the fruits of their labor, and I feel that the best is really yet to come."