

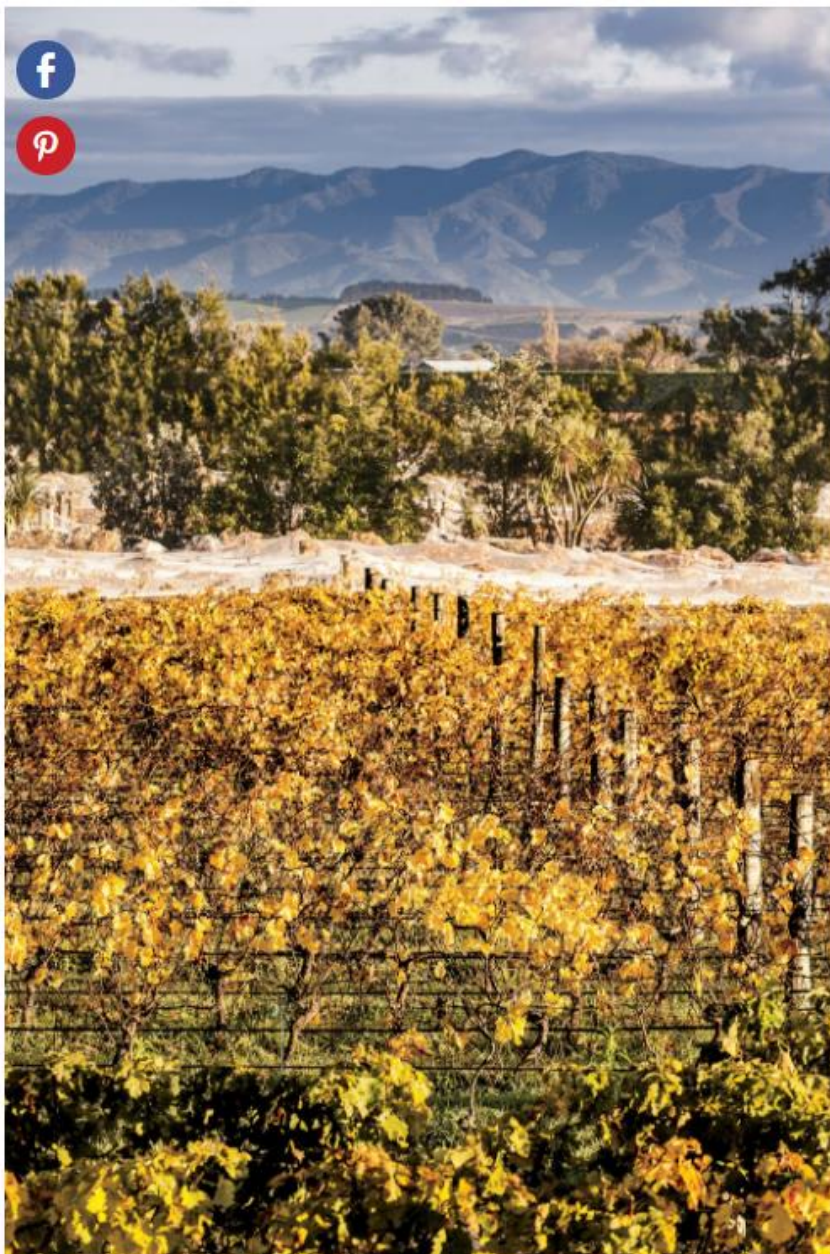


FOOD & DRINKS • WINE



# Why Martinborough, New Zealand, Should Be Your Next Wine Destination

by Erin Florio • January 25, 2017



A homesick Kiwi explains why everyone should be sipping their way through the town.

When I was ten, growing up in Wellington, New Zealand, my parents would pile me, my brother, and my sister into our Ford station wagon on weekends and drive an hour over a forested ridge to the South Wairarapa District in the lower North Island. We'd always stop in the colonial farm town of Martinborough, which had a tired main street with some run-of-the-mill café where we kids would eat fries while our New York-born parents complained about the [coffee](#). I remember being supremely bored wandering around the streets with their Victorian architecture, but I have zero recollection of the easy-to-miss vineyards that were only then gaining any type of following.

Unlike Marlborough, known for its big-batch, screw-capped sauvignon blancs

Photo by Mike Heydon

Pinot noir vines at Ata Rangi, one of Martinborough's first vineyards.

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developed to global success back in the '80s, these [vineyards](#) 85 miles to the east managed to stay largely under the radar until the late '90s. Two scientists planted pinot noir grapes here in 1979 after realizing that the soil had river gravel and rainfall similar to that of Burgundy (which, like Martinborough, is roughly 40 degrees from the equator). When they bottled the first vintages several years later, the wine was phenomenal—fruitier than France's, thanks to younger vines and a microclimate with hotter days and cooler nights. Over the years, savvy winemakers, including Napa maverick Reg Oliver, who ran Dry River Wines here, rushed to invest in land, which was mostly filled with sheep. Now there are about 50 vineyards total—largely small-scale, family-owned, and non-industrialized.

I'd heard that Martinborough was, well, cooler since my forced-family-fun day-trips. Indeed, when I went back this fall I found a much different scene—like a secret rosé-soaked block party, with vintners for neighbors who served up grilled lamb and local Kapiti brie as finger food. “You can't access so much top wine this easily in only a day in practically any other wine region on earth,” says Arvid Rosengren, wine director at New York City's [Charlie Bird](#), who was recently crowned Best Sommelier in the World by the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale. He's right: The town is built for vineyard-hopping, since pretty much all of the wineries are located on streets that run off the main square. Rather than hiring a driver, you can simply walk or cycle between tastings.

If you want to understand why those partial to the grape are high on this place, start at [Schubert Wines](#), right off the town square, whose 2008 pinot noir Block B won the International Trophy at the 2010 Decanter World Wine Awards, the industry's highest honor, beating out others from [Sonoma](#) and [South Africa](#). Owner Kai Schubert will greet you as early as 11 a.m. in his tasting room, with rosé and 2014 pinot (sorry, mates, his 2008 sold out within days of the win). Round the corner to the landmark [Martinborough Vineyard](#), whose 2008 chardonnay is what got Rosengren hooked on the area. You'll make it to [Poppies Martinborough](#) in time for lunch, where Poppy Hammond and husband Shayne will chat you up as you sip their rosés, sauvs, and pinots, all sold only on-site (“We watch every bottle walk out that door,” says Shayne). And definitely eat their smoked Akaroa salmon and grilled peppers on the outdoor deck. Walk it off en route to [Te Kairanga Wines](#), whose “cellar door” (Kiwi for tasting room) is in a nineteenth-century cottage once owned by the town's founder, John Martin. You'll be right next to the ranch-style tasting room at Ata Rangi, one of the original wineries. Around 5 p.m. the vineyards close and everyone heads into town for one final glass at the [Martinborough Hotel](#), which has stood here since 1882. I didn't recognize it from my childhood, but after a few glasses of startlingly good Palliser sauv blanc, I'd be hard-pressed to forget it.





Photo by Paul Howell  
Wharekahu Country Estate

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## The Strategy

### How to Do It

Travelers tend to rent cars in Auckland and drive New Zealand's North Island. I always tell first-timers to plan on staying one or two nights in Martinborough since it's an easy detour off State Highway 1 when driving to the capital, Wellington, from the resort town of Taupo. Or drive State Highway 2 (also known as the Classic New Zealand Wine Trail) if coming down from the chardonnay-heavy Hawke's Bay, stopping for fig cake at [Food Forest Organics](#) in Greytown.

### Transpo to Tastings

[Green Jersey Cycle Tours](#) rents bikes for the day, though everything is easily walkable.

### Where to Stay

[The Martinborough Hotel](#) has 20 rooms (ask for one with a claw-foot tub), and the more upscale [Relais & Châteaux Wharekahu Country Estate](#), popular with Dutch and British royals, is worth the 45-minute drive southwest for the green setting alone.

### When to Go

Vineyards are usually open year-round but may close for a few weeks in July or August. Warmer weather makes November through March the best time to go if you want to eat and drink outside.