

PREMIUM

New Zealand whites: 2018 vintage report

Rebecca Gibb MW

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It wasn't the swimmers' imagination. A so-called marine heatwave meant that water temperatures were between 2 and 4°C above average and this was the main driver behind the hottest summer in New Zealand since records began in 1909. Temperatures across New Zealand were 2.1°C higher than the 30-year average (1981-2010), pushing the balmy summer of 1934/35 out of the record books. The heatwave began in November, which is not technically summer in New Zealand. In **Central Otago's** Cromwell, there were 23 consecutive days above 25°C up to 10 December.

And the crazy barbecue weather kept on coming. Hot and dry weather – Auckland received just 9% of its average rainfall in December – meant vines successfully flowered and there was an abundant crop ready to ripen early: on the eve of 2018,

the vines were tracking 10-14 days ahead of their 'usual' schedule.

But weather can be unpredictable when you're a remote island at the bottom of the world and February brought the remnants of two tropical cyclones. The first, named Fehi (1 February), broke the heatwave. Felton Road's owner Nigel Greening says: '2018 was bewildering: if we had not had the cyclone come through and break the heatwave, we would have been in deep [trouble].'

That said, many Central Otago growers report it was their earliest-ever harvest. Amisfield picked its Riesling on 5 March – three weeks earlier than normal. Winemaker Stephanie Lambert says: '2018 epitomised Central Otago's unpredictability more than ever. It was hot, it was cold, we were worried about sunburn, lack of sun, lack of wine, low acidity, disease, lack of flavour, it had it all for us.'

Meanwhile, cyclone Gita (20 February) dropped 300% of the South Island's monthly rainfall in just 18 hours. While the North Island's wine regions of Hawke's Bay, Gisborne and Wairarapa dodged the worst of Gita's wrath, the country's most prolific region, Marlborough, was affected. For the early ripeners this caused a few headaches but the **Sauvignon Blanc** berries were still tough at this stage.

Vintners were on high alert for botrytis with high humidity and the February deluge. Picking was delayed until March but the temperatures remained high: the average temperature in **Marlborough** in March was 22.3°C compared with 16.3°C in March 2017. Nights were unseasonably warm.

The cyclones also affected the crop level. At 419,000 tonnes, 2018 is the fourth-largest harvest on record but it is well below initial expectations. In the glass, you can expect Sauvignon Blancs with ripe flavour expression, broader palate weight, gentler acidity and immediate accessibility. Vintners report that **Pinot Noir** is flavoursome and lush with lower acidity and alcohols nudging 14% and beyond.

Will it be a great year? It is difficult to say at this early stage but they will show a clear vintage expression when compared with the far cooler 2017 season.

Rebecca Gibb MW's top New Zealand white wines from 2018

Craggy Range, Te Muna Road Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc

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A harmonious and balanced style with a high level of fruit concentration on the silken mid-palate. A more restrained style than you might anticipate from New Zealand, but this is the windy Wairarapa providing its own interpretation, usually with worryingly low yields to boot. The warmest Kiwi summer on record ...

Points 94



Babich, Headwaters Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, 2018

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Babich's organic vineyard continues to impress with its subtlety. It's almost Chenin-like in its flavour spectrum, offering apple and straw notes as well as floral and tropical mango-like notes lurking in the background. It's super smooth and round, with good intensity and a fine line of taut acidity.

Points 92

Cloudy Bay, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand, 2018

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New Zealand's most famous Sauvignon Blanc debuted in 1985 and its 34th vintage is an elegant yet juicy example.



The warmth of the season has brought ripe tropical fruit flavours and more breadth to the mid-palate although the 'ripe yet green' characteristics of Marlborough are still in evidence, with subtle ...

Points 91



Felton Road, Dry Riesling, Central Otago, New Zealand, 2018

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Juicy and sweet on entry, this is bursting with floral and apple sauce flavours. There's bags of concentration wrapped in a delicate package with a powerful, medium-sweet finish. There's a hint of grippy phenolics on the finish but it's balanced by the residual sugar.

Points 91

Valli, Riesling, Waitaki Valley, New Zealand, 2018

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Floral and full of nectarine and orange fruit, this is a wine of two halves: at first it's sweet, juicy and welcoming, then the finish is satisfyingly structured, offering a fine-grained



texture and precise acidity. Valli's Grant Taylor has been making wine in Waitaki for over a decade and has ...

Points 91



Valli, Gibbston Vineyard, Gibbston, Central Otago, 2018

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Hailing from the coolest part of Central Otago, Pinot Gris here retains a sense of direction despite its inclination toward richness on the palate. Aromatically, imagine walking into a florists that also has a side-line in Parma Violets and you'll get the picture. The finish is off-dry and satisfying with ...

Points 90

Loveblock, Pinot Gris, Awatere Valley, Marlborough, 2018

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This is a supple and smooth organic Pinot Gris from Kim and Erica Crawford. It offers delicate pear and apple



aromas and a subtle floral note. This is all about texture, palate breadth and balance; the slight phenolic nature of the variety offset by 7g/l of residual sugar rounding the ...

Points 90



Greywacke, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand, 2018

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The warmest vintage on record in Marlborough, 2018 also saw plenty of rain, including three inches during harvest. This Sauvignon is perhaps the most 'typical' wine in the range, using mostly cultured yeasts and stainless steel for a fresh, zesty Sauvignon with lime and nettle scents. The subtly textured palate ...

Points 91

Blank Canvas, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, 2018

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A round and relaxed expression in the mouth offers weight with no angular edges. There's no mistaking the Sauvignon Blanc flavours here, from gooseberry and blackcurrant to passionfruit. There's a satisfying textural, slightly grippy



element on the finish which lends itself to classic SB food pairing options, from goat's cheese ...

Points 90



Auntsfield, Single Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc, 2018

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This is hugely youthful, and at this early stage in its life it's slightly taut aromatically. However, the richer soils of its Southern Valleys location - and the warm 2018 season - have yielded a Sauvignon Blanc with a fuller, more opulent mouthfeel than you'd experience on the alluvial Wairau ...

Points 90

Yealands Estate, Single Vineyard PGR, Marlborough, 2018

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This blend of Pinot Gris, Gewurztraminer and Riesling captures the nuances of all three varieties in one mouthful.



The Pinot Gris is supple and pear-like in flavour, there's vivacity in the form of Riesling that leads to a linear finish, and the Gewurztraminer is apparent on the finish with its

...

Points 89



Forrest, The Doctors Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, 2018

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Forrest Wines continues to lead the New Zealand field with its low-alcohol wines thanks to the scientific research done by its founder on reducing the sugar-producing leaves on the canopy. It offers impressive texture for a wine that has just 9.5% alcohol, and while many lower-alcohol Sauvignons can look green, ...

Points 89

Tinpot Hut, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand, 2018

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A rich, aromatic and supple style redolent of tropical fruits ranging from pineapple to passionfruit. There's a fine line



of acidity that zips through the round, juicy palate, leaving a bright, medium-length finish reminiscent of elderflower and passionfruit.

Points 89

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