

Seasons

in the sun

WORDS MISHA WILKINSON

Nelson is the sunshine capital of New Zealand, but as Misha Wilkinson reports it's doing its best to crawl out of Marlborough's shadow.

Blue skies, smiling at me, nothing but blue skies do I see. We're in Nelson – the sunshine capital of New Zealand. The region certainly lets the sun shine in – clocking up well in excess of 2,400 sunshine hours every year. The shiny happy people of Nelson must have decided 'I'll follow the sun' when it came to naming things with the likes of Sun City Taxis, Sun City Motors, the NZ Sun City Country Music Awards and a retirement village Summerset in the Sun. Even the local naturism group (aka nudist club) is called the Nelson Sun Club which naturally is located at Sunrise in the Sunrise Valley – in fact you'll find every name under the sun here.

As the second-oldest settled city in New Zealand (and the oldest in the South Island) Nelson was named in 1842 in honour of Admiral Horatio Nelson who, at the Battle of Trafalgar, defeated the French. Who would have known that 150 years later Nelson would start stomping on French sensitivities again with a challenge to those grape varieties the French hold so closely – Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Nelson's first foray into grapegrowing started in the 1800s but it's actually Hermann Seifried who's credited as the pioneer of the modern wine industry in Nelson after dreaming of making wines in New Zealand's sunshine capital. "We felt that Nelson would be an ideal grapegrowing area and Hermann, who grew up in Austria, has a German winemaking degree so wanted to get back into grapes and wine," says his wife, Agnes Siefried. "We grafted our first vines in 1973 – everything was grafted from day one," she says. The Siefrieds purchased land in the Moutere Valley and the two hectares

they planted on a gentle northward slope of clay loam has grown to more than 250 hectares of vineyards that now comprise Seifried Estate with Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay planted along with a range of aromatic varieties including Grüner Veltliner from Hermann's homeland.

After the Siefrieds put down roots in Nelson, the next people to open up their hearts and let the sunshine in were Tim and Judy Finn who planted at Neudorf in Upper Moutere, harvesting their first crop in 1981. As to why they chose Nelson for a vineyard, Judy says, "Tim wanted a hill site on clay soils for the production of fine Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, and cool climate aromatics." They also liked the challenge of being in a new viticultural region. And of course there was that factor of an appealing climate. "Nelson has warm summers – seldom hot, with high sunshine hours – the highest in New Zealand," Judy says. "It wasn't an intelligent decision so much as a gamble – a gamble that only cost a few million. But if we can produce world-class Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Riesling from one block then I think the gamble paid off."

Certainly the reputation for some of Nelson's wines is globally acknowledged with Lisa Perrotti-Brown MW, editor in chief of Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate* tweeting a year ago, "Tasting some gr8 wines from Nelson, NZ this morn 4 *Wine Advocate* report. Tho located in the shadow of Marlborough, the wines r anything but!" While it's almost blasphemy to mention shadows and Nelson in the same breath, the Nelsonians still liked the quote so much it features on the home page of Wineart, the wine marketing

arm of the Nelson Winegrowers Association.

A year on, and after sampling another vintage of wines, does Lisa still have bright eyes when it comes to Nelson? "Generally I'd say Nelson is still largely finding its way in terms of stylistic and varietal focus," she says. "I'm not sure that the 'aromatic' or Sauvignon routes are the best ones, especially since Nelson is clearly capable of producing stunning and unique Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs. Established wineries such as Neudorf and Greenhough produce benchmark examples of these grapes and pretty interesting Rieslings to boot. I understand the commercial appeal of producing Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Gris and pressure to do so, but if you've got terroir that has the potential for hitting the noble variety heights, why compromise just to try and be all things to all people?"

Not only is there the issue of trying to be a palate pleaser, but surely it presents a marketing problem for the region when there's no single grape variety it can hang its hat on as Marlborough does with Sauvignon Blanc and Central Otago with Pinot Noir? "Absolutely not," says Agnes Siefried. "It is a distinct advantage. I don't think any one variety works best in Nelson. Sauvignon Blanc is the region's biggest variety and it has a very rich and distinctive character, Pinot Noir is deeply flavoured with fine tannins and elegance, while Nelson Chardonnays are complex and multi-faceted with wonderful structure. Our favourite varieties are actually the aromatics which are fine, elegant and truly delicious." Top of the pops producer Neudorf, which consistently receives the region's highest scores for its Chardonnay and Pinot

Noir, also doesn't see any issues because of not having a defining variety in the region. "Having a hero variety can also be a bind. I can only speak for Neudorf and say we have never faced any difficulty co-promoting Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Riesling etc," says Agnes. She agrees that perhaps in Nelson's case it's the wineries that define the region more than the variety.

With only 962 hectares of plantings, Nelson represents just three percent of the national total versus its more corpulent neighbour Marlborough, with over 22,500 hectares and 66 percent of the nation's plantings. "Producing wine from a smaller wine region such as Nelson can be an advantage as many distributors already have Marlborough/Central producers and are looking to introduce their market to something different," says Jennifer Wheeler, who with partner Andrew Greenhough owns Greenhough Vineyard. Also Nelsonians are proud of what makes them distinct from Marlborough. "Nelson wineries differ from across the hill in that even the largest operations are family owned. The large corporate companies have not come to Nelson as vast tracts of land have not been available as in Marlborough," she says.

Producing 100 tonnes annually, Greenough is another of the premium Nelson producers with its production split predominantly across Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir, but also producing Riesling, Chardonnay and a little Gewürztraminer and Pinot Blanc. "When we started out 23 years ago there were only four other wineries. Now there are 24 wineries with cellar doors but there are further vineyards that contract their fruit to other wineries," she

Fun in the sun. Photos by Nelson WineArt



says. “We liked Nelson as a region and all that it had to offer. Neudorf Vineyards and Seifried Estate were established wineries producing consistently good wine.” And was there anything else about Nelson that made it attractive? Ah, yes, here comes the sun. “Nelson is one of the sunniest regions in New Zealand and its warm, maritime climate makes it ideally suited to producing a wide range of varieties,” says Jennifer.

In spite of how much Nelson claims to be a producer of aromatics as well as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, the reality is half of the plantings (479 hectares) are still Sauvignon Blanc and not all of that even ends up in a Nelson designated wine. “A lot of Nelson Sauvignon Blanc is trucked over to Marlborough because there’s a shortage of Sauvignon Blanc, so it gets blended and not bottled as Nelson Sauvignon Blanc,” says Judy.

The region has had to find ways to attract attention because, as Jennifer explains, “Given the dominance of Marlborough in terms of the overall grape production the smaller regions tend not to be visited as regularly by overseas wine writers.” Every three years they piggy-back on the Pinot Noir event held in Wellington and hold the Nelson International Aromatics Symposium. Judy says that after days of tasting just Pinot Noir, the prospect of coming to the sunshine capital and enjoying aromatic whites has proven very appealing. “We had Jeff Grosset and Olivier Humbrecht as speakers for our first event in 2007,” she says proudly.

They have continued to attract key media and high profile speakers at the subsequent two events including Mosel superstar Ernst Loosen (from Dr Loosen Estate) and they sell the 160 tickets quickly.

The symposium is organised by Nelson Wineart – a name which you’d be forgiven for thinking is a bunch of hippies making pottery while sipping Chardonnay. “The name came about because Nelson is noted for its many arts and crafts,” says Jennifer. Agnes also explains, “We have painters and potters, sculptors and glass art. The area is dotted with galleries and there are constant exhibitions covering every facet of art. In the last 40 years these craftspeople have been joined by artisan winemakers. “Wineart is an extension of the region’s established reputation for Nelson’s fine handcrafted art,” she says, although Judy says, “The brand is actually undergoing a review.”

Based on an annual fee according to the number of cases of wine produced and an additional event participation cost, wineries can get involved in the various activities Wineart organises, which includes regional tastings around the country, the Nelson wine trail map and bringing wine writers to the region. As with all regional marketing organisations there are positives and negatives. “It’s very hard to pursue excellence when you’re trying to be democratic,” says Judy. “I am by nature a democrat but at Neudorf we have to focus on what we need to do – we have our separate goals. Having said that I’m on the Board of our Winegrowers Committee – but we also know we have to drive our own ship.” Judy says it’s hard to satisfy everyone in a marketing group like Wineart. “Everyone wants to have their sunshine,” she says.

Nelson also seems to have attracted people who like the benefits and beauty of what the region offers like Daniel and Ursula Schwarzenbach, who own Blackenbrook. “We didn’t want to be in a big region and wanted a more niche boutique feel,” explains Daniel. “In Nelson you have many hills and three national parks – we love tramping,” he adds.

After making wine at Siefried for four vintages Daniel decided it was time to start his own vineyard but discovered there was a two-year waiting list for grafted vines. “So we went into the grafting business and that gave us the capital for our vineyard,” says Daniel. Now there are eight varieties planted on their small eight hectare vineyard but the passion at Blackenbrook is for the aromatic whites which are ideally suited to the Moutere clay soils.

Surprisingly their most important export market is Japan where they have incorporated three paintings of a Nelson artist into their Shangri-La series of labels. “They are positive and vibrant, standing for Nelson’s laid-back lifestyle in the sun,” Daniel says. In Nelson it seems people always look on the bright side of life! ■

MISHA WILKINSON owns Misha’s Vineyard in New Zealand. Email misha@mishasvineyard.com.