A California wine writer’s world is turned upside down when she tastes the next-gen wines from New Zealand.

By Sara Schneider | Photographs by Sean Fennessy
A brilliant Kiwi concept: Throw a party to get to a party. I’m jouncing down tracks along New Zealand’s South Island in a historic train, surrounded by revelers, on a beer run out of Blenheim—the tiny town in the heart of what is probably this country’s most famous wine region, Marlborough. With each swig of local brew, talk among my seatmates gets more heated about...cricket. Their conversation is bewildering to me. How, I wonder, can a sport that can go on for five days and still not have a clear winning team generate this much passion? I focus instead on the warm, crusty pork belly pies being passed down the aisle, along with more beer. The coastline views that slip past my window conjure the rugged curves of the California coast I know so well, but these are more feral, with clumpy Seuss-like flora and a startlingly azure sky.

The train stops in coastal Kekerengu, where the party spills out onto the grass and a strip of white-sand beach. Pork belly pies give way to oysters, green-lipped mussels, and crayfish (lobsters, really), a feast from the sea. And beer gives way to Marlborough’s famously crisp Sauvignon Blanc, plus Chardonnay and Pinot Noir: the wines that my seatmates—local winemakers and global wine writers—are here to savor, celebrate, and study.

And to team up for a pickup game of cricket. Close observation yields no better understanding of the game. But I’m relieved to learn that it can be played with one hand. Because no one in this crowd seems willing to part with their glass of wine—not even for cricket.

The wine in these glasses is why I’m here. One single varietal, Marlborough’s Sauvignon Blanc, is what propelled the country into the worldly wine light 20 or so years ago. Back then, the good stuff was really good—vibrant and juicy—just what you’d want in your hand at a beach feast. But less-than-best versions could be underripe and vegetal. “Canned green beans,” showed up in tasting notes. The bottle-to-bottle roulette eventually put me off the probe. What I’m sipping now, though, is a different breed, still racy with acidity, but the citrus is less green, and stone fruit is showing.

In the past year, I’ve noticed that New Zealand labels are commandeering more shelf space on the West Coast. Beside the Sauvignon Blancs are vibrant Pinot Noirs, Chardonnays of all styles, and a few rich but earthy red blends. Last year, the U.S. surpassed Australia to become New Zealand’s largest wine export market, with a 10-year volume increase of nearly 275 percent. In 2015 alone, Americans uncorked 24 percent more Kiwi wine than just two years before.

Now seems to be a critical point in this country’s wine evolution. So I’ve flown 6,000 miles and 13 hours to meet the makers and kick the dirt in their vineyards and find out why the wine coming our way is better, and more interesting, than it used to be. But I’ve also come for the other reasons one travels halfway around the globe: to take in the otherworldly terrain, from rolling, sharp green countryside to ice blue glaciers; to taste the fresh farmhouse cheeses and mussels. All pair well with the next generation of New Zealand wines.

THE NEXT MORNING, in the lobby of my Blenheim hotel, a slightly tousled man walks up and introduces himself: “Hi, I’m Kim!” So this is Kim Crawford, whose namesake bottles put Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc on the map 20 years ago, and who, all this time, I thought was a woman?

Years ago, he sold off the Kim Crawford brand, and now he’s here to show me the vineyards he’s planted with his wife, Erica, for their new label, Loveblock. We drive 45 minutes, crossing over dry hills, to the Awatere Valley, an up-and-coming subregion of Marlborough. Stunning vistas open up before us of Cook Strait, the ribbon of sea that separates New Zealand’s North and South Islands, home to some of the most dangerous currents on the planet.

“We were taking a risk coming out here,” says Crawford, as we climb up a steep road toward his acreage. “We didn’t necessarily know if vineyards would work, but we just fell in love with the place.” He bumps the car past what he calls “the cemetery,” a block of deceased whites (Chenin Blanc, Sauvignon Gris, Muscat, Arneis)—evidence of the challenge of untested land. Listening to Crawford talk as we browse row after row of Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris, and Pinot Noir, I sense that—the occasional new failed experiment notwithstanding—the pioneer is pioneering yet again.

That night over beef from the barbie (which I’m not actually hearing anyone say), he describes the adjustments he’s making in this second phase of his career. In the old days, it seems, winemakers here actively encouraged the compounds in the grapes behind those love-em-or-hate-em green bell-pepper aromas. “Now,” says Crawford, “with competition from cover crops in our organic vineyards, we can slow the grapes’ growth, which naturally opens the canopy for more light to enter.” With the grapes exposed to sun, they’re riper at harvest, resulting in wines that, he hopes, are more “complex, seductive, and interesting.”

“Complex, seductive, interesting.” They’re words I find myself repeating on a journey that will take me through Marlborough—and two other cornerstone regions here, Hawke’s Bay and Central Otago—as I taste through a river of these exciting New World wines. Many of these bottles are hard to come by in the States because they’re small productions. To try them, you have to book a flight.
Clockwise from top left: Napier’s Sound Shell theater; view of Napier; Rudi Bauer, winemaker at Quartz Reef; Napier’s Bistronomy delights with fresh, local flavors; Gibbston Valley is known as “Valley of the Vines”; sharing small plates at Bistronomy; Craggy Range Winery’s barrel room; Bistronomy.
Craggy Range Winery and Terrôir restaurant beneath 1,300-foot Te Mata Peak, known to Maoris as The Sleeping Giant.
But where do you start? Painting the wine-growing regions of New Zealand in broad strokes is like trying to tie up the entire West Coast of wine into a neat little bow. Vines stretch along the North and South Islands in pockets for 1,000 miles, including the southernmost vineyards in the world, in Central Otago.

The spine of the country is made up of the Greywacke Mountains, which start gently in the north and grow ever more precipitous as they turn into the Southern Alps. It’s the dry, east side of the range that offers propitious grape-growing conditions. Most vineyards are within 80 or so miles of the moderating ocean. And that legendary sunlight? It’s coming, I’m told, from a hole in the ozone layer—source of intense UV rays that seem to be plumping grape skins and yielding powerful flavors.

From Marlborough—at the “top of the South,” as they say—I, along with the other wine writers who were my train companions, fly to the North Island and Hawke’s Bay. The region is home to one of the largest indigenous populations in New Zealand whose Maori baka, a ceremonial warrior challenge, is worth seeing performed. Heavily tattooed men pound spears, thump their bare chests, and chant angrily, while women seemingly sing them down off the cliff of war. The spectacle is terrifying and exhilarating. Ours ended by bumping foreheads and noses with the Maori, who then hung a gift of jade around our necks.

Not long after the performance, we’re scrambling across the Hawke’s Bay countryside, around the town of Napier, on a rollicking chase our hosts have dubbed “The Amazing Race.” The whirlwind tour serves as Cliffs Notes to some of the best-named subregions in the world—Gimblett Gravels, Havelock Hills, Tukituki Valley. We hit winery after winery armed with tasks: blind-taste here, compare Bordeaux blends there. At Esk Valley Estate, winemaker Gordon Russell takes us off-task to show us his old-school concrete fermentors, which produced the textured Chardonnay we’re tasting. “The wines from these fermentors always seem rich, soft, and approachable,” he says. Here’s cutting-edge winemaking with ancient tools.

The race culminates at the top of Te Mata Peak, a lime green chunk of earth that shoots up 1,300 feet from sea level. From the summit, you can take in 360° views of Hawke’s Bay—a sight line to every subregion. On a clear day, you can even see the volcano in Tongariro National Park, 124 miles away. It’s breathtaking. And we toast Hawke’s Bay with its product in our glasses. THE END OF THE LINE for me on this trip is the bottom of the world: Queenstown, on the South Island—jumping-off point for Central Otago, New Zealand’s newest, and some say most exciting, wine country. The last decade has made it synonymous with Pinot Noir. The plane banks, and suddenly a mountain meets our wingtip. Just getting to this extreme playground is a prologue for the nail-biting adventures people come for. Paragliding, bungee jumping, river canyon surfing, and all manner of other risky water behavior—it all goes down in and around Queenstown. The town itself, perched on the edge of Lake Wakatipu and surrounded by dramatic peaks, might be Aspen without the billionaires. Well, maybe a few billionaires (the airport has reportedly run out of parking spots for private jets).

Rudi Bauer, cofounder and winemaker at Quartz Reef, collects me at the airport to give me an overview of Central Otago—quite literally. We pile into his 4x4 and bounce higher and higher into the Dunstan Mountains, to the Bendigo Historic Reserve, a ghost of a gold mine with abandoned huts and batteries (New Zealand’s Gold Rush fell directly on the heels of California’s). The views stretch out to forever, with dark green swaths of vineyards against a stark moonscape of peaks. “We have a beautiful advantage in Central Otago,” quips Bauer. “Even if you don’t like the wines, the scenery will make up for it.”

Bauer would be the last to apologize for the wines, though. He’s one of a top crop of makers turning out vibrant, deeply fruity Pinot Noir that’s beginning to evoke superlatives from critics worldwide. Born in Austria, he’s made wine in plenty of other places, including at Oregon’s Sokol Blosser and Sonoma’s legendary Simi, almost 30 years ago.

He senses similarities between the West Coast and Central Otago. During harvest, he says, “The air sometimes smells like Simi here.” But, he adds, “You can’t do what we were doing back then in California anymore. Here, we have the privilege of being part of history.”

The sheer beauty of the region is inspiring Bauer to discover ways to perfect his Pinot Noir—wines that echo the pure air of Central Otago itself. He’s still working on it, and loving that he has a part in crafting the narrative of this place. “We are writing a novel here,” he says. “We’ve just finished the prologue, and we know the cast of characters. We just don’t know which way the plot will turn.”

Now it’s time to see that plot unfold—and drink these seductive wines. Just don’t come looking for tasting rooms. Around here, they’re known as cellar doors.
Wine editor Sara Schneider accessed a bucket list of winemakers and places, not all of them open to every traveler. Here’s a guide to help you follow closely in her tracks after you touch down in Auckland.

—Serena Renner

GET AROUND
Air New Zealand, American, and United fly nonstop to Auckland from West Coast cities. To get to other Kiwi cities, you can fly Air New Zealand or regional carriers like Jetstar and Sounds Air.

Two earthbound scenic options include a multi-day drive on the North Island’s Pacific Coast Highway (the east coast road links Auckland to Napier in Hawke’s Bay) and/or a 3 1/2-hour ferry ride on Bluebridge or Interislander from Wellington to Marlborough.

WINE BASICS
> There are 12 wine regions in New Zealand.
> Vintage (harvest) starts in April.
> Fees for cellar doors (wine-tasting rooms) average $3 to $5.
> The legal drinking age is 18 and older.

3 REGIONS TO HIT

HAWKE’S BAY
WHY GO BESIDES THE WINE
Art deco architecture in the town of Napier • Gorgeous Cape Kidnappers headlands for wildlife • 1,300-foot Te Mata Peak.

GRAPE TO TASTE
Take at least a couple of days to explore the region’s 70-plus wineries, known primarily for full-bodied reds (but don’t skip the Chardonnay and other whites). Craggy Range Winery (craggyrange.com) produces terrific Burgundian-style Pinots. New Zealand’s oldest winery, Mission Estate (missionestate.co.nz), pours Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, and more in a restored seminary building. Newcomer Ash Ridge Wines (ashridgewines.co.nz) is headed by 27-year-old Lauren Swift, who specializes in Syrahs and Chards.

EAT
Blackened salmon, meatballs, and fennel prosciutto pizza are served with gin and tonics in a chandeliered space painted three shades of pink at Pipi. $$; Havelock North; pipicafe.co.nz.

PENDANT LIGHTS AND BLONDE-WOOD LATTICEWORK SAY SCANDI CHIC AT SMALL-PLATE BISTRONOMY. TRY PACIFIC OYSTERS WITH WATERMELON GRANITA AND A PINT OF LOCAL BEER. $$$$$; Napier; bistronomy.co.nz.

DO
Maori elder Robert MacDonald is a storyteller who explains the indigenous traditions, like tattooing and healing, of the Waimarama tribe. Tours from $283; Napier; waimaramamaori.co.nz.

SLEEP
In the village of Havelock North, Black Barn Vineyards offers stays ranging from a cottage shrouded in grapevines to a modernist bungalow. From $282/night; Havelock North; blackbarn.com.

MARLBOROUGH
WHY GO BESIDES THE WINE
Marlborough Sounds’ beauty • Bustling wharf towns of Picton and Havelock • Stellar sea kayaking • Green-lipped mussels • Famous Queen Charlotte Track for trekkers.

GRAPE TO TASTE
This region of more than 150 wineries put Sauvignon Blanc on the map, but look for other crisp whites and ever-better Pinot Noir. Cloudy Bay in...
Blenheim is a great intro to NZ’s bright Sauv Blanc (cloudybay.co.nz). But Brancott Estate (bran cottaestate.com), just 10 minutes away, was the first to plant it. At Forrest Estate (forrest.co.nz), sample a splash of aromatic Grüner Veltliner, then stroll the sculpture garden.

EAT
Savor the region’s famous mussels while overlooking the Sounds at Slip Inn Cafe. They come grilled, steamed, as fritters, or in chowder. $$; Havelock; slipinn.co.nz.

DO
Picture tagging along with your local FedEx driver, except you’re on a boat in the middle of dolphin-rich waters delivering goods to descendants of New Zealand’s early settlers. Visit the Marlborough Sounds on the Pelorus Mail Boat with a Scotsman captain recounting the area’s history. From $92; Havelock; themailboat.co.nz.

SLEEP
It may be an hour’s drive from area wineries, but visiting Spray Point Station is like journeying to Middle Earth. Possum skins, antler handles, and a 17th-century fireplace make Cob Quarters feel like a hipster fever dream. An outdoor shower and two claw-foot tubs teeter over the Waihopai River. The 1910 cottage is one of four accommodations at Spray Point Station in Waihopai Valley. From $355/night; Marlborough; offthemapp.co.nz.

CENTRAL OTAGO
WHY GO BESIDES THE WINE
Gold Rush country • Otago Central Rail Trail for cyclists • Historic Alexandra and Cromwell with nearby ghost towns • Snowcapped mountains • Waterfalls • Nearby Queenstown (birthplace of bungee jumping).

GRAPES TO TASTE
The shining star here is pure-fruited, fragrant Pinot Noir, like that at Wooing Tree Vineyard (wooing tree.co.nz). Anchored by a pine tree that’s witnessed a century of racy rendezvous, the vineyard now wins affection for its Blondie rosé and wide range of Pinots. The soil of Quartz Reef (quartz reef.co.nz) sparkles like the winery’s biodynamic bubbies from the quartz deposits beneath the vineyards. Respect for the land prevails at Maori Point Vineyards (maoripoint.co.nz), an ecosystem of native flowers, bees, produce, and wild yeasts. The results here are exciting: unfiltered Pinot Noir, bone-dry Pinot Gris, and the “Gold Digger” sparkling wine that you pop from a beer bottle.

EAT
Bespoke Kitchen’s menu of organic staples and vegan options includes berry pancakes with homemade coconut whip, and cacao and cranberry granola. The courtyard views of Lake Wakatipu don’t hurt, nor does its 2016 award for New Zealand Cafe of the Year. $$; Queenstown; (64) 3-409-0552.

Named after the red-flowered rata tree, Rata is an ode to nature, from the wall panel with an image of forested Milford Sound to polished river-stone bowls. Michelin-starred chef Josh Emett delivers slow-cooked lamb, Cloudy Bay clams, and local brie, showcasing the South Island’s seasonal splendor. $$$; Queens-town; ratadining.co.nz.

DO
For the best views over Queenstown and the Remarkable Range, ride the Skyline Gondola up to Bob’s Peak. During New Zealand’s summer, you can hike through the Ben Lomond Reserve, luge or bike down the mountain, and then see the Southern Cross through a high-powered telescope. From $24; Queenstown; skyline.co.nz/queenstown.

SLEEP
Sherwood Queenstown A converted motor lodge with an Ace Hotel vibe, Sherwood attracts eco-minded guests to its outdoor firepit, music nights, mountain-bike tracks, and yoga studio tucked into the attic. At the lakeview restaurant, chef Ainsley Thompson works wonders with foraged greens and bycatch fish. From $129/night; Queenstown; sherwoodqueens-town.nz.

All prices in U.S. dollars.