



Wine

BY MICHAEL COOPER

A new leaf

This season, Waiheke is offering its best wines yet.

It was a dream come true for red-wine lovers: 75 Waiheke wines assembled in one room, ready for tasting. Most of the island's producers combined recently to promote their wares, with Goldwater and Te Whau the only conspicuous absentees. But how good were the wines?

Less than 1% of New Zealand's wine flows from the lovely sprawling island in Auckland's Hauraki Gulf. "Volumes are low," admits the Waiheke Island Winegrowers Association, "and economic viability depends heavily on the ability to achieve quality standards that justify a loyal following at the price levels needed for mainly boutique operations."

In other words, Waiheke wines aren't cheap. Inevitably, they are compared with those of Hawke's Bay. Both areas are acclaimed for Bordeaux-style reds, made from merlot and cabernet sauvignon, backed up by the hot new star – syrah. But with a vineyard area more than 20 times greater than Waiheke's, Hawke's Bay has major economy-of-scale advantages, enabling it to offer sharper prices.

The latest batch of Waiheke wines is clearly the best yet. Several underperformers have disappeared recently and been replaced by quality-focused newcomers, notably Destiny Bay and the Hay Paddock. A series of favourable vintages has done the rest.

The island's winemakers have also been meeting regularly, tasting their wines alongside benchmark wines from other regions. Those attending say these "blind" yet revealing tastings have also played a key role in boosting wine standards.

The wines currently on sale include many jewels. "If you couldn't make good wine from 2008 then you probably shouldn't be in the wine game," says Chris Canning of the Hay Paddock. Man

O' War vineyard reported 2009 wines of "unparalleled purity and concentration".

Here are some of the most memorable wines from the 15 exhibitors.

Cable Bay Reserve Syrah 2008 ★★★★★
Bold, very stylish red, enticingly fragrant, with concentrated, spicy flavours, rich, ripe and long. (Cellar door only.) \$59

Destiny Bay Magna Praemia 2006 ★★★★★

Lush, silky, cabernet sauvignon-based blend, deeply coloured, very fragrant and supple, with lovely depth, complexity and harmony. \$275

Man O' War Dreadnought Syrah 2008 ★★★★★

Bold, highly complex red with deep plum, cassis, spice and nut flavours and a lasting finish. Built for the long haul. \$46

Mudbrick Vineyard Velvet 2008 ★★★★★

Sumptuous, beautifully fragrant red made from unidentified varieties – but it smells and tastes of merlot and cabernet sauvignon. Sturdy and rich, with notable power and complexity. \$105

Obsidian 2008 ★★★★★

This classy cabernet/merlot should be a 10-year wine, but is already approachable, with dense, ripe flavours of blackcurrants and spice, a hint of dark chocolate, and lovely vibrancy and suppleness. \$53

Pilgrim Syrah/Mourvedre/Grenache 2008 ★★★★★

From Stonyridge, this powerful, dark Rhone Valley-style red is still in its infancy, with highly concentrated cassis, plum and berry flavours, finely integrated oak and a long, peppery finish. One for the cellar. \$80

The Hay Paddock 2007 ★★★★★

Syrah-based red, intensely varietal, very sweet-fruited and savoury, with ripe,

peppery flavours, showing lovely balance and density. \$65

Jurassic Ridge Montepulciano 2008 ★★★★★

Strapping, powerful red with loads of colour, body and plummy, spicy, slightly earthy flavours. Well-rounded and already delicious, but worth cellaring. \$35

Kennedy Point Merlot 2006 ★★★★★

Very elegant claret-style red – rich, spicy and savoury, with bottle-aged complexity. Lovely now. \$39

Te Motu Cabernet/Merlot 2005 ★★★★★

Dense and complex, fragrant and full-coloured, with hints of spices, herbs and leather. A top vintage, drinking well now. \$100

Miro Cabernet/Merlot/Franc/Malbec 2008 ★★★★★

Elegant, youthful red, deeply coloured, with concentrated, plummy, spicy flavours, ripe and savoury. \$45

Poderi Crisci Viburno 2008 ★★★★★

Merlot-based blend with good weight and strong, ripe, plummy, spicy flavours, showing good complexity. Already highly enjoyable. \$39

View Estate Syrah 2008 ★★★★★

Instantly appealing, with strong, ripe plum/spice flavours, seasoned with sweet American oak, and a well-rounded finish. Ready to roll. \$39

Peacock Sky Chardonnay 2009 ★★★★★

Upfront style with generous, ripe flavours, toasty and buttery, and a creamy-smooth finish. \$30 ■

Wine of the week

Passage Rock Reserve Syrah 2008 (★★★★★, \$50)

Powerful, lush Waiheke Island red: big, black and beautiful. A great vintage of a classic label.



Passage Rock Vineyard, Waiheke