

A Small and Mighty Vintage 2021

PRESS RELEASE: 5 MAY 2021

Marlborough's 2021 vintage story is one of low crops and "exceptional" wines, according to Forrest Estate General Manager Beth Forrest. "For me it was the year for Sauvignon Blanc," says the winemaker, describing the complexity of Marlborough's flagship variety. "They were overly aromatic and beautiful, with multi-layered flavour levels as well."

Plant & Food Research weather expert Rob Agnew says lower yields were due to a variety of factors, including inclement flowering conditions, with Marlborough temperatures mostly lower than average from mid-November to the first week of December last year. A late frost on September 30 last year also played its part, coinciding with early budburst for Sauvignon Blanc in some parts of Marlborough.

Beth, a director on the Marlborough Winegrowers board, says the lighter crops enabled viticulturists to pick blocks three or four times to ensure the fruit's "peak" profile. "It gave you time to wait for the absolute best." The great quality of the harvest, following on from excellent 2019 and 2020 vintages, is a prime opportunity for premiumisation in "small and mighty Marlborough", adds Beth. "For us it will be a focus on 'great' this year."

Blank Canvas co-owner and winemaker Matt Thomson, a consultant for several wine companies, says crops ranging from "extraordinarily light" through to fairly light, promise wines of "great intensity and balance". He believes the 2021 vintage is an "industry changing event", as low yields meet strong demand for Marlborough and New Zealand wine. The vintage will bring "short term intense pain, for a longer term gain", he adds. "It is an opportunity for our industry to refocus on premium."

Villa Maria's Chief Global Sales and Marketing Officer Matt Deller agrees, saying there is "absolute opportunity" in the lower yields. "It gives us the opportunity to prioritise our higher tiers, so proportionately it will accelerate our premiumisation."

But it's also a challenge, says Wairau River Wines General Manager Lindsay Parkinson, who is working to manage expectations, as buyers run low of 2020 wine and clamour for their share of the limited 2021 supply. "It's quite a complicated methodology on who you restrict, or where you change the price... And there's not one solution to fit them all."

The 2021 harvest won't only be remembered for light and lovely crops, with the earliest ever harvest finish for many companies, says Wine Marlborough General Manager Marcus Pickens. "It also stands out because of increased costs and labour shortfalls," he says. International workers were locked out by Covid-19 border closures, but individual companies proved light on their feet in recruiting and training new people from around the country, while also employing foreign cellar hands and vineyard workers who remained in New Zealand during the global pandemic. "The season was also a credit to industry collaboration, with companies, suppliers and organisations all working together to find and implement efficient solutions," says Marcus. Meanwhile, Covid-19 precautions were rolled out, to ensure "excellent operating plans for a safe harvest".

Allan Scott Winemakers Managing Director Sara Stocker says having a harvest with no rain, disease pressure or isolation bubbles was a relief after the tension of the 2020 harvest, operated under strict Alert Level-4 criteria. "Harvest is a really exciting time of the year and the fact that we could enjoy that with others and be able to create some fantastic wines this year - knowing the fruit coming in was awesome - gave us a whole new level of excitement really."

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About Wine Marlborough Ltd

- Wine Marlborough is a wholly owned subsidiary company of the Marlborough Winegrowers Association.
- Established in 1992, Wine Marlborough is effectively owned by the industry with a purpose to proudly stand up for, and build, the reputation of Marlborough's wine region.
- Wine Marlborough is tasked with an organisational role to educate, grow, protect, and celebrate the Marlborough wine region for the benefit of Marlborough grape growers (514 members) and wine companies (158 companies), representing 74% of New Zealand's grape growers and 22% of New Zealand's wine companies.
- In 2020 Marlborough harvested 77.7% of the country's harvest, from 70% of the total country's producing area.
- The 2021 harvest statistics will be released by New Zealand Winegrowers mid-June 2021.