

History of Winemaking on Waiheke Island

The lack of a fast ferry service meant that Waiheke Island remained an isolated community until the mid-1980s. Until that time the stretch of water separating the island from metropolitan Auckland was bridged by a slow and ancient steamboat, the *Baroona*, or by visiting pleasure boats enjoying one of the world's great sailing grounds in the Hauraki Gulf.

Commercial infrastructure – shops, roading and service industries – were non-existent in the 1970s when Kim and Jeanette Goldwater stepped ashore with a view to purchasing land at Putiki Bay. Attracted by the hotter, drier climate and poor soils that struggled to support drystock farming, they were the first to see the potential for grape growing and in 1978 they planted their first vines at Goldwater Estates.

This was a time when the New Zealand wine industry was moving to the classical European varieties and away from the hybrid grapes which had sustained the fortified wines prevalent to that point. (There is evidence that one such vineyard planted in non-vinifera grapes had existed during the 1950s on Seaview Road, Onetangi, planted by the Gradiska family.)

Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay were the varieties of choice in the late 70s and the Goldwaters quickly demonstrated their ability to produce high quality wines in this new environment. Kim's demanding standards, both in the vineyard and the wine cellar, were rewarded by the approval of international and local wine writers and Waiheke began to be noticed.

Following closely on the Goldwaters' heels, Stephen White planted his Stonyridge Vineyard in the Onetangi Valley in 1982. Stephen's goal was, unashameably, to produce the country's finest Cabernet blend (Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petit Verdot), and from the moment of its release in 1987, his Stonyridge Larose became the highest priced red wine in New Zealand.

While the Ministry of Agriculture and the Rural Bank could see no merit in the establishment of a winegrowing industry on Waiheke Island at that time, the leading international viticulturist, Dr Richard Smart, supported the decision taken by these early pioneers and the results soon vindicated their investments. They were followed in the late 80s by the Dunleavy family with their Te Motu Vineyard, also in the Onetangi Valley (Terry Dunleavy being a driving force in the establishment of the NZ Wine Institute), and by the Peninsula Estates development and Fenton Estate to the west of Oneroa.

Cabernet blends remained the flag bearers for Waiheke well into the 90s as the number of vineyards began to grow at a fast pace, leading to the formation of The Waiheke Winegrowers Association Inc. with 22 member vineyards by 1997. A survey in 2002 showed that Merlot was the dominant variety planted (40%), followed by Cabernet Sauvignon (39%), then Chardonnay (estimated at 10%). However, a surge in new planting was underway reflecting the desire of some winegrowers to expand their cellar door range and meet the changing mood away from Bordeaux-style reds.

The frequency and speed of the passenger ferry services from Auckland had brought about a major change in the Waiheke economy, boosting tourism and encouraging the development of vineyard cellar door operations and vineyard restaurants. Mudbrick Vineyard, Stonyridge and the Te Whau Vineyard restaurant became destinations in their own right with the latter described as *“one of the best restaurants in the world for wine lovers”* by Wine Spectator magazine. Meanwhile, David Evans at Passage Rock Wines was harvesting the Syrah vines planted at his Te Matuku valley property and becoming a consistent Gold Medal and Trophy winner in national competitions.

The suitability of the island’s climate for the growing of this classic Rhone Valley variety was quickly recognised by other growers, some of whom selectively moved away from Cabernet Sauvignon as their mainstay. In 2003, The Hay Paddock established a single-variety vineyard in the Onetangi Valley based on approximately 15,000 vines representing the principal Syrah clones sourced from the Hermitage area of the Northern Rhone.

The wide variation in site orientation and soil type has allowed for considerable experimentation in varieties, none more so than at the largest property on the island, Man O'War Estate at the eastern end where Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon all express the individuality of their respective sites. Obsidian Vineyard has been a competition trophy winner for its Weeping Sands Montepulciano variety and, in common with a number of others, has found conditions that suit the growing of Viognier. Ridgeview Vineyard has enjoyed success for some years with Pinot Gris.

While land prices and availability limit future plantings, a number of companies like Cable Bay, Goldwater and Kennedy Point have augmented their production with grapes sourced from other regions, particularly with Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough. Increasing the quantity of wine produced is not, however, an option for many of the island's smaller producers. Increasing the quality of wine produced will remain the goal for all.