

great white

Under the watchful eyes of its owners Neal and Judy Ibbotson, Marlborough winery Saint Clair now makes New Zealand's best sauvignon blanc.

SAINT CLAIR IS New Zealand's ninth-largest wine producer and one of New Zealand's larger family-owned wineries. That's quite an achievement for a family that first planted grapes in Marlborough in 1978 as a contract grower for Montana and first made wine under its own label a little over a decade ago.

But while big may be good, best is better. Saint Clair now makes the country's, and perhaps the world's, best sauvignon blanc. It's won more top awards for sauvignon blanc in recent years than any of the three or four hundred other local producers. That tally includes a staggering 37 trophies for sauvignon blanc in the past six years.

And although sauvignon blanc is clearly Saint Clair's signature wine it has also earned trophies for chardonnay, merlot, pinot noir and riesling over the same period.

Neal and Judy Ibbotson are the owners behind St Clair's success. Neal was a rural valuer and farm consultant before he became a full-time wine producer. He's a quiet, thoughtful man who enjoys the intellectual challenge of making better wine in the same way that others enjoy solving crosswords.

Neal plays down his part in his company's success while praising the expertise and enthusiasm of his vineyard and winemaking team. He uses a think-tank approach to decision-making. Everyone is invited to contribute. Winemaker Matt Thomson earns special praise. "Matt leads our production

team and practically lives in the vineyard during harvest in order to make the critical call about harvest dates", explains Neal.

He attributes much of his success with sauvignon blanc to a simple and effective screening method of evaluating wines after vintage. The grapes from every vineyard are made into separate batches of wine. Each batch is then tasted and rated on a 10-point quality scale.

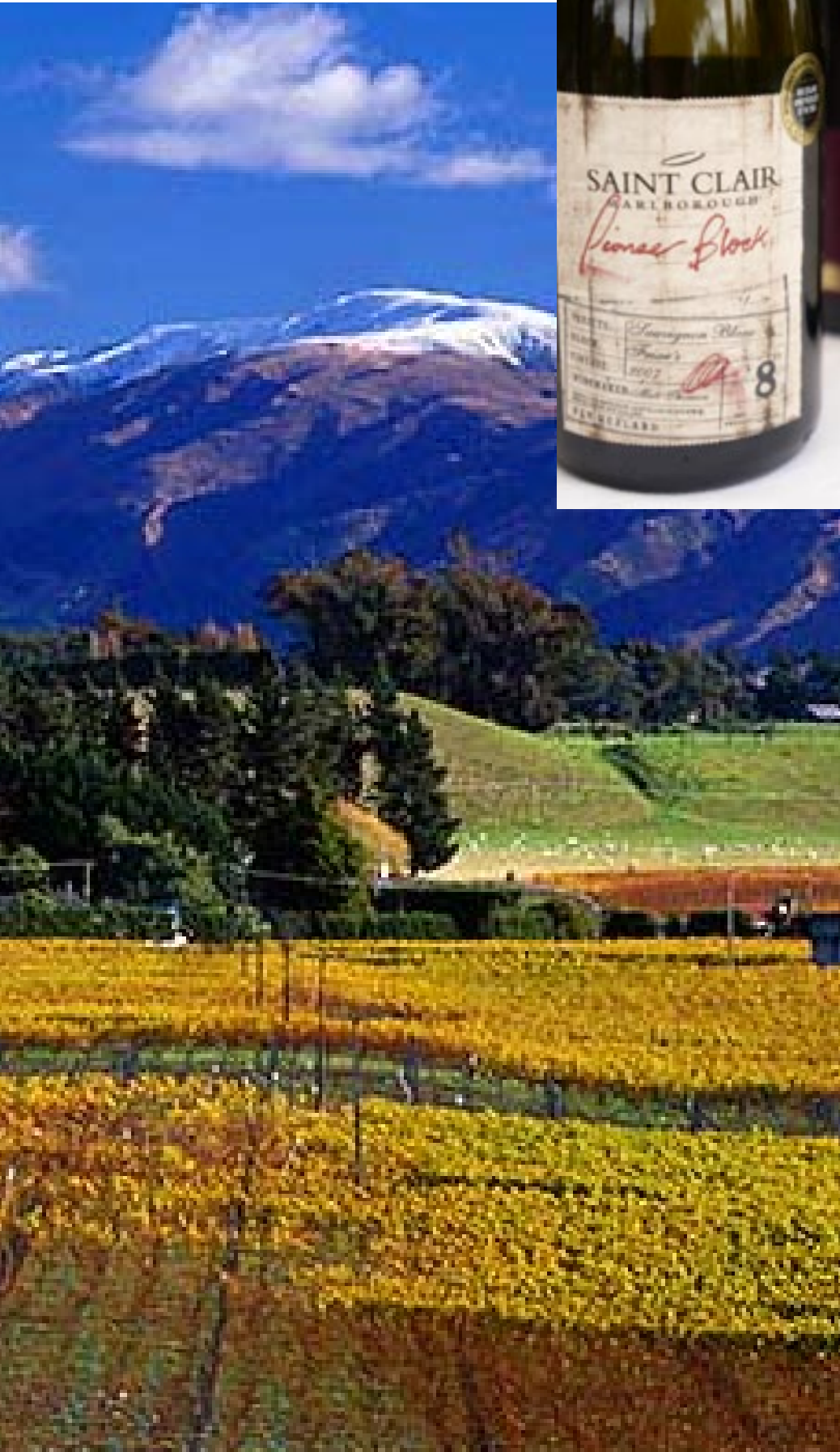
When Saint Clair first began this screening method, conventional wisdom was that the vineyards with lighter, stonier soils made the best wine. Saint Clair's vineyard assessments suggested otherwise. Sauvignon blanc with the highest scores tended to come from vineyards with more fertile and deeper silt loam soils. The best wines showed greater concentration and complexity than those grown in lighter soils.

When Neal bought a new sauvignon blanc vineyard or contracted a new grower, he looked for richer rather than stonier sites. Saint Clair's intense, full-flavoured sauvignon blanc stood out in a crowd. It performed well at wine shows and helped set a new standard for Marlborough sauvignon blanc.

By 2004 Saint Clair produced three sauvignon blanc labels: Vicar's Choice was the price-friendly option, Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc the mid-range while limited edition Wairau Reserve Sauvignon Blanc was the flagship wine. In 2005 Saint Clair controversially introduced a new single-vineyard range of wines under the Pioneer Block label.

Some competitors regarded the expansion of Saint Clair's sauvignon blanc labels from three to the current range of 10 wines as a bid to gain extra show awards by expanding the number of entries. One cynic even suggested that the new provision in the Air New Zealand Wine Awards to limit the number of entries per class to three wines





Clockwise from left: The stunning Saint Clair Awatere Valley Vineyard in Marlborough; the winery's single-vineyard range, Pioneer Block, was released in 2005; owner Neal Ibbotson enjoys the intellectual challenge of winemaking.



Winemaker Matt Thomson “practically lives in the vineyard during harvest.”

was a deliberate attempt to counter this shotgun approach.

Neal doesn't deny that Saint Clair will gain more exposure from the greater number of wine-show entries, “but only if the quality is high enough.” He maintains that their driving forces are a desire to make the best wines possible and to make wines that satisfy a large, diverse, local and international market. “If we succeed in making high-quality wines that meet the market we find they sell well and earning medals is a bonus”, he says. He adds that in his view, “the number of entries per class in the Air New Zealand Wine Awards should be further restricted as this would be fairer to all wineries that enter.”

Saint Clair draws sauvignon blanc grapes from 90 different vineyard blocks. About one percent of the very best grapes are used to make the Wairau Reserve wine while four percent are earmarked for the Pioneer Block range. The next 35 percent make Saint Clair's Marlborough Sauvignon with 25 percent devoted to the Saint Clair Vicar's Choice label. The balance is either sold as bulk wine or used to make own-label wines for large UK retailers.

Neal believes that part of the reason for the rapid rise in sauvignon blanc quality is the fact that they have such a wide range of vineyards to choose from. “We've gained so much information – it's created a very steep

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learning curve”.

Growth in pinot noir quality has been slower because there are fewer vineyards to learn from but Neal is enthusiastic about the potential for high-quality wines. “As a general rule we find that the tighter clay soils on the southern side of the Wairau Valley produce the best wines. I'm not convinced that the current trend for planting pinot noir on north-facing slopes is a good thing. It will give the vines more heat but our vines on valley-floor vineyards don't lack heat. Sloping sites often have a wide variation in soil types which can lead to inconsistent flavours in pinot noir which can be a problem.

“Visitors to Marlborough see two large valleys that appear to enjoy the same consistent weather and be carpeted with similar soils. In reality there is a wide range of soil and climate across the Wairau and Awatere valleys. The challenge, and it's a fascinating one, is to match grape varieties and viticultural methods to the most suitable vineyard sites in order to maximise quality.

“The French took many hundreds of years by trial and error to produce some of the world's greatest wines. We've fast-tracked the process and have come a long way in a comparatively short space of time but I feel we've got a long way to go yet. I'm proud of what we've achieved but get really excited when I think about what we have yet to achieve.” With an attitude like that from the man in charge, no doubt Saint Clair will go from strength to strength. 