

WINE JOHN HAWKESBY

Treasure island

WAIHEKE ISLAND has never been better positioned to take its place as a serious feature on the New Zealand winescape.

An island, especially as attractive and accessible as this one, has its own seductive personality. With breathtaking beaches and endless panoramas, it now also boasts some excellent restaurants, cafes and a raft of galleries and craft shops as well as myriad winery tastings.

It is a colourful place, with lots of young people from all over the world working in vineyards, delivering coffee to your table, making a delicious pizza or teaching you how to paddle a kayak.

What has all this got to do with its boutique wine industry? Quite a bit really.

Firstly it's not corporatised, large, impersonal and obsessed with volume. It is a bunch of genuine artisans who dared to dream big – on quality not quantity. With more than 30 years of commercial plantings, the island's vigneronns have worked out what they are best at.

Instead of trying to do everything, there is now a focus on what this Mediterranean-style climate, with its clay soils, does best.

Recommended

2007 The Hay Paddock

Relative new boys on the block, established in 2002 by Chris Canning and Bryan Mogridge, who have a reputation for classy premium wines. A stunner.

Price: \$72

2007 Destiny Bay, Mystae

A Bordeaux red of just over half cabernet sauvignon and a mix of merlot, cabernet franc, malbec and petit verdot. With a lovely balance of tannins with flavours of cassis, liquorice, sandalwood and cedar combined with dark berry fruit. Outstanding.

Price: \$115

Because most of the producers (with the exception of Man O' War) are tiny, it's a gentle hands-on winemaking approach with hardly a piece of machinery or huge steel holding tanks in sight. Even bottling

and labelling are often done by hand.

The urban legend that all grapes are crushed underfoot in wooden barrels by young naked virgins is pure fantasy, although one cavalier producer does have a staged photo discreetly hanging at the winery.

Realising they can't and ought not to compete at the mid to lower level of the market, Waiheke producers have chosen to aim at the premium end. This means careful fruit selection, resulting in lower yields and often more labour-intensive winemaking practices, thus making the cost of production significantly higher.

But, as they say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating and although many Waiheke wines may stretch the budget you can be assured that higher-priced wines translate into higher levels of quality.

The island's winemakers have never been more aware of their reputation, which can be a two-edged sword. If the better wines are going to be expensive they must be worth it. Thankfully, so far, they are. ☺

