

# NEW ZEALAND WINE

## A BRIEF HISTORY

**W**inemaking in New Zealand may be a relatively recent development, but its history goes back further than generally recognized. Early pioneers saw the country's potential, and their influence is still felt today.

Missionaries introduced grapes to New Zealand in the early 1800s to supply sacramental wines. Mission Estate Winery in Hawkes Bay—considered the oldest winery in New Zealand—is descended from the first vineyard in the region, originally established in 1851 by Catholic priests. The first commercial wine venture dates back to 1863, when Charles Levet, an English coppersmith, planted 7 acres and made a living making and selling wine to other settlers.

It was also at this time that the South Island's Central Otago region became a magnet for gold miners, about a decade after California's own gold rush. Some miners planted grapes for wine, including Jean Desire Feraud, a French baker who is believed to be the first to identify the region as suitable for Pinot Noir.

Setbacks followed later in the century: In the late 1880s, New Zealand winemakers were hit with a plague of powdery mildew. While the temperance movement was building steam in the United States, a similar push resulted in alcohol restrictions in New Zealand, slowing production. But when the question finally came to a ballot, in 1919, a national prohibition was narrowly defeated by the votes of returning servicemen interested in a drink.

It was in this same period, however, that support for the wine industry was growing in other quarters of the government, with investigations into viticulture as a way to boost the country's economy. A report, *Prospects of Viticulture in New Zealand*, was published in 1895.

The modern era of wine was heavily influenced by foreign investments and vineyard plantings in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but it wasn't until the mid-1980s that exports increased and the rest of the world took notice. *Wine Spectator's* May 15, 1994 issue features a Cloudy Bay cork on the cover with the headline, "Uncorking New Zealand: Time to Try Its Dazzling Whites."

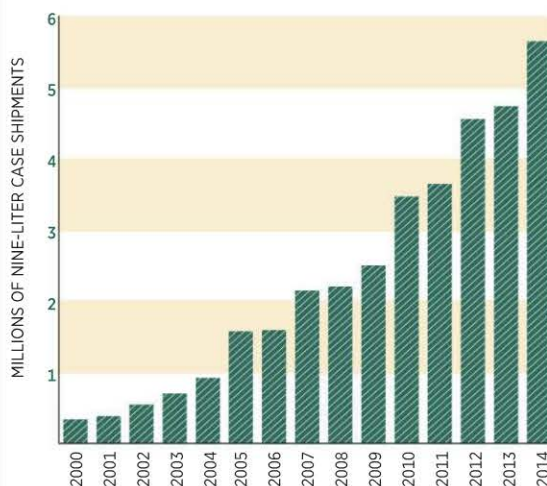
Some historic wineries are still family businesses, such as Kumeu River (established in 1944) and Villa Maria (1961). The Delegat family, owners of Oyster Bay, has been making wine since 1947, but the oldest is Babich, which will celebrate its 100-year anniversary next year. David Babich explains that his grandfather left his native Croatia at 14, planted grapes when he was 17 and became a winemaker at 20. "When I mention this within the U.S., it usually evokes a reasonable level of surprise," he says. "The common conception being that New Zealand has made wine for 20, maybe 30 years."



New Zealand's oldest family-run winery, Babich Wines will celebrate its 100-year anniversary in 2016. It is led today by two generations of the Babich family (from left): David, 47; Joe, 75; and Peter, 83.

### New Zealand Wine Exports to the U.S.

New Zealand's wine exports to the United States have surged over the past decade and a half, rising from less than 500,000 9-liter cases shipped in 2000 to more than 5.5 million in 2014.



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