

New Zealand Syrah

There may be only 433 hectares planted but this variety is on the up – in plantings, global recognition and price. Bob Campbell MW charts the success of Kiwi Syrah

UNTIL A FEW years ago Syrah was New Zealand's biggest wine secret. That's beginning to change as the accolades mount for a variety that still represents only 1.2% of the national vineyard. Although Syrah ranks a lowly seventh in terms of vineyard area, it is growing faster than any of the top 10 varieties planted. In the two years to 2014 the area of Syrah vines grew by 22.2%.

It's easy to understand why more winemakers are planting Syrah. It is now the country's most expensive wine, outstripping the other glamour red variety, Pinot Noir, by nearly NZ\$5 (£2) a bottle for the 2013 vintage, according to my database.

Syrah/Shiraz is Australia's signature variety, and yet when that country's best wines are tasted blind against the best from New Zealand and South Africa at an annual Six Nations Wine Challenge in Sydney, New Zealand wines have topped the category seven times against four Australian victories and one each from South Africa and the US. That's impressive when you consider that Australia has more than 40,000 hectares of Shiraz, while New Zealand has just 433ha.

In 1983 there were only a few Syrah vines in New Zealand, planted at the Government Viticultural Research Station south of Auckland. They were destined to be destroyed when Allan Limmer, founder of Stonecroft Wines in the Gimblett Gravels district of Hawke's Bay, uprooted them all and planted them in his own vineyard. Recent evidence suggests that those cuttings may be derived from original early imports of French Syrah which James Busby sent back to Sydney's Botanical Collection in 1831-32. Most of the country's Syrah derived from those vines, thanks to Limmer's generosity.

The sweet spot

To many wine drinkers, the Gimblett Gravels sub-region of Hawke's Bay is New Zealand's Syrah sweet spot. Syrah makes up 134ha of vineyard plantings from a total of 630ha on dried up, stone-strewn riverbed, producing inky wines with powerful fruit flavours.

The nearby Bridge Pa Triangle in Hawke's Bay, also formed from an ancient river bed with free-draining gravels, boasts an even greater area of Syrah vines while smaller sites from cooler coastal areas and hotter hillsides add further diversity to the region's wines.

Waiheke Island in Auckland harbour has the largest area of Syrah vines outside Hawke's Bay, giving wines that are often richer and more textural than those from the Bay, often with a savoury edge adding extra complexity. Outside these key regions, there are at least small plantings of Syrah in every wine region including Central Otago in the south of the South Island.

Bob Campbell MW is the DWWA Regional Chair for New Zealand and recognised as the leading authority on his country's wines as a writer, judge, author and speaker



Hawke's Bay Syrah: know your vintages

I've rated these out of 10. Auckland/Northland (mainly Waiheke Island) is similar, enjoying slightly better vintage conditions in 2008, 2010 and 2012, but slightly less favourable conditions than Hawke's Bay in 2009.

2014 9 A cool start then a hot, dry period followed by Cyclone Lusi which did little damage. A challenger to the excellent 2013s.

2013 10 A long, warm summer with modest rainfall. An easy vintage producing many top wines.

2012 3 Wet; the worst in 20 years.

2011 6 Warm and wet conditions were better for reds than whites

2010 8 Moderately cool vintage but low crops of Syrah helped achieve good ripeness.

2009 10 A cool start with a warm, dry finish. Syrah was the star.

2008 7 Rainfall and humidity made this a challenging vintage. Quality was patchy.

2007 9 Very dry vintage and lots of heat produced soft, ripe wines.

NZ Syrah: the facts (Source: NZ Winegrowers vineyard register 2014)

Hectares of Syrah under vine in 2014 (total 433ha; increase of 22% since 2012)
Auckland/Northland 55.1; **Waikato/BoP** 3.1, **Gisborne** 5.4, **Hawke's Bay** 332.2; **Wairarapa** 9.1; **Nelson** 5.7; **Marlborough**

11; Canterbury/Waipara 8.2; **Otago** 3.2
Exports in 2014 26,888 cases (16% of total production)
Tonnes harvested in 2014 = 2,178 (6.03 tonnes/ha = 35 hl/ha) ➤

The results

New Zealand Syrahs – especially those from Gimblett Gravels – are consistently high quality, and excellent value compared to the Rhône. And recent vintages are the best ever. Tina Gellie reports

OUR EXPERTS WERE jubilant at the quality of these wines. 'Top Syrah is never cheap, but the value in New Zealand is as good as you're going to get because the quality level is so high,' said Christine Parkinson who, along with her fellow judges, cited the Gimblett Gravels sub-region of Hawke's Bay as the outstanding area.

'Gimblett Gravels is probably the best site outside France not only for Bordeaux varieties but also for Syrah,' said Philip Tuck MW. Melanie Brown agreed, adding: 'They are exceptional value compared to the Rhône.'

Despite its small size, Gimblett Gravels 'is miles better than anywhere else in New Zealand', said Tuck, because of its free-draining soils, which all the tasters felt contributed to an iconic style. 'The wines had so much personality,' said Parkinson. 'Structure, weight, vibrant fruit, fragrance, concentration and depth.'

Syrahs from the larger encompassing region of Hawke's Bay were 'a step down in quality and personality but still consistently very good, particularly in terms of value', said Brown. Parkinson compared Hawke's Bay and its famous sub-region with the Rhône.

'Gimblett Gravels is miles better for Syrah than anywhere else in New Zealand' Philip Tuck MW

'It's like Crozes-Hermitage and Hermitage, where being on that hill – or the Gimblett Gravels – gives a profound quality edge that is worth paying extra for.'

The Marlborough wines divided opinion. Brown was 'disappointed', while Parkinson liked the 'lighter-bodied, pretty, floral character', which she said 'was ideal for more immediate drinking'. Brown also singled out Wairarapa as having good potential.

Looking at vintages, 2013 is the year to buy, said our experts, particularly from Gimblett Gravels. They felt the older wines showed a more 'heavy-handed' approach. 'Winemaking and viticulture have improved a lot,' said Parkinson. 'More clever and subtle use of oak and allowing the fruit to express itself.' While the 2012s were regarded as 'okay', the 2011s were roundly criticised.

The scores

68 wines tasted

5

Outstanding

15

Highly recommended

42

Recommended

6

Fair

0

Poor

0

Faulty

The tasters' verdicts

Melanie Brown



A New Zealand native, Brown joined the team at Peter Gordon's *The Providores and Tapa Room* in London in 2006, where she transformed the wine list to the largest offering of premium New Zealand wine in the UK. Her passion has led her to establish her own specialist retailer, *The New Zealand Cellar*, which opened in summer 2014 and which won a 2015 *Decanter Retailer Award* (see p104).

Brown's verdict

'An exciting, quality-driven line up! Gimblett Gravels was the star, with wines of great structure, elegance and poise. The overall use of oak was well managed and it was clear these wines have the ageability required for this region to have now defined its iconic style. While it was hard to see any clear styles coming from Wairarapa or Marlborough, these regions have small productions compared to that of Hawke's Bay.'

'Wines produced from the wider Hawke's Bay region excited me: while they lacked the definition and structure of Gimblett Gravels, the wines were more focused on entry-level price points and will be ones to watch over the coming vintages. Critics, the media and retailers need to work harder to help consumers understand regionality in New Zealand, particularly the Hawke's Bay region and Gimblett Gravels sub-region.'

'In terms of value for money, these wines exceeded expectation. If this is the quality benchmark of Kiwi Syrah, we can only hope for even greater wines to come from this still young wine-producing country.'

Christine Parkinson



Parkinson started her career in the kitchen before moving into wine and creating the first wine list for Michelin-starred *Hakkasan* in 2001. She is now wine buyer for the restaurant and others in the group, including *Sake No Hana* and *HKK*, and Michelin-starred *Yauatcha*.

Parkinson's verdict

'Syrah from New Zealand always seems to be overshadowed by Pinot Noir. Based

on this tasting, Syrah's reputation should be far higher. With several regions and vintages on show, the wines were consistently good, and deserve to be better known.'

'These are not the big, blockbuster Aussie Shiraz-style wines you might expect, but much more elegant, fresh and pure. Where there was oak, it rarely stood out, and alcohol levels hovered around 13.5%. Younger vintages were more precise and restrained, which suggests producers have consciously toned down their approach. There wasn't a single faulty bottle, and just a few wines showing a little reduction.'

'The surprise was just how good the Gimblett Gravels wines were. Quality and personality stood out, yet this is a young sub-region. With the prospect of vines maturing and producers developing their skills with this terroir, there is huge potential for it to become a genuine star.'

'Vintages showed variation, with wines from the cooler 2012 being firmer and leaner than the riper 2013s and 2014s. But Syrah character showed throughout, and this was a consistent set of wines.'

'Hopefully they've all disappeared off shelves and wine lists now,' said Parkinson.

Ageability was also discussed. Tuck questioned whether the 2012s, '11s and '10s were better now than they would have been soon after the vintage. 'I'm not sure they are. If you manage the tannins well, New Zealand Syrahs can be enjoyed young and up to five years old, but I tasted no wine that needed bottle age to improve.'

Tuck added that the country's Syrah vineyards were still young, and vine age would bring increased complexity.

He was also pleased the average alcohol level had gone down, giving the wines 'a purity, freshness and drinkability that was missing five years ago'. On the flip side, he questioned whether screwcaps were the right closure for Syrah. 'You don't get cork taint, but Syrah is prone to reduction. If I were a producer, I'd be looking at Diam [cleaned, milled cork granules 'glued' together].'

Speaking for the panel, Tuck had the last word: 'Kiwi Syrah is sadly under-appreciated and hopefully this tasting will bring it to the attention of more wine lovers, who shouldn't pigeonhole the country as only a producer of Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc.'

Entry criteria: producers and UK agents were invited to submit their latest-release New Zealand Syrahs (85% minimum)

Outstanding 18.5–20pts (95–100pts)



Babich, Winemakers' Reserve, Hawke's Bay 2014

Decanter average score: 18.75/20pts (95+/100pts)

Individual judges' scores: Melanie Brown 18.5 Christine Parkinson 18.5 Philip Tuck MW 19

£16–£24.99 Bibendum, The New Zealand Cellar, Walker & Wodehouse

Babich has always made its Winemakers' Reserve Syrah from its own Gimblett Gravels vineyard. About 18 months ago the family bought another vineyard in the nearby Bridge Pa Triangle district of Hawke's Bay and made Syrah from both areas. When they tasted samples of both, the wine from the heavier soils of Bridge Pa was deemed better. It certainly seemed to produce a wine with more pronounced peppery character. The wine was matured in French oak barriques for 12 months.

Melanie Brown Dominant rhubarb nose and palate, complemented by soft perfume, delicate spice and rich fruits. Persistent length that keeps opening; tannin structure is just superb

Christine Parkinson Big, liquorice and cassis aromas; a dense, inky and juicy palate, with an exotic minerality and spice. Long, lean and textured with gentle tannins.

Philip Tuck MW Still tight and oaky. Impressive depth and there is real complexity to the pure fruit here. Delicious, balanced, very long finish.

Drink 2015–2025 Alcohol 13.5%

Philip Tuck MW



Tuck is the wine director of *Hatch Mansfield*, which he helped set up in the 1990s. He previously worked for *Avery's* in Bristol, and at wineries in South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, the US, Chile and Italy.

Tuck's verdict

'This tasting confirmed two things to me. First, that the Gimblett Gravels is clearly the best place to plant Syrah if

one is looking to produce structured yet elegant, ageworthy wines. The free-draining soils and moderate maritime climate are the ideal mix, even for relatively young vines. More people need to champion this sub-region. Second, producers' drive for physiological ripeness at lower potential alcohol was evident. I was pleased to see there's a conscious effort to produce premium styles at moderate alcohols. This gives the wine a freshness, elegance and drinkability that is lacking in other areas that purport to produce top-quality Syrahs.'

'For me, vintage did not play a major role, though I know it can have a bigger effect than we tasted here. Nor am I convinced that these wines really repay prolonged bottle age. In my experience the best examples will keep for a few years but rarely will they improve. My advice would be to drink within five years of the vintage on the label. Finally, virtually all the wines we tasted were under screwcap closure. A few wines showed slight reduction, so it might be worth producers experimenting more with Diam corks.'



Man O' War, Dreadnought, Waiheke Island 2012

18.75 (95+) MB 18.5 CP 19 PT 19

£25.99–£34 AG Gallie, Carruthers & Kent, Hard to Find Wines, Highbury

Vintners, Love Wine, The New Zealand Cellar, Oddbins, Salut Wines, The Wine Chamber Made from five tiny vineyards on Waiheke Island – Man O'War has 150ha planted on 76 individual hillside blocks. 2012 was a wet and challenging vintage. To produce a wine of such quality in a year like that is a great credit to Man O'War's adventurous winemaker Duncan McTavish and his team. It was a vintage where handpicking and sorting were essential if you wished to achieve a top result, which they did.

MB Sichuan pepper overwhelms the nose and carries blissfully to the palate. The wood-smoke oak use is slightly on the edge, but the palate manages to still captivate fruit purity and provide good complexity. Noticeable alcohol but finishes balanced and long. Outstanding!

CP Damson and nutmeg aromas then woodsmoke and red plum palate. Dense and long, with firm but ripe and supple tannins. Mineral finish.

PT Lifted, aromatic style with a citric edge that adds to the purity. Perhaps very slightly green but I don't mind this. There is ample fruit to give the wine balance and ageability. Excellent length. Very good!

Drink 2015–2025 Alc 14.5% ➤

Outstanding (continued) 18.5–20pts (95–100pts)**Matua, Single Vineyard, Hawke's Bay 2013**

18.75 (95+) MB 18.5 CP 18.5 PT 19

N/A UK www.matua.co.nz

The success of this organic wine is as much about Matua's fairly recent decision to produce top, single-vineyard wines as it is about vineyard site and a stellar vintage. Talented winemaker Nikolai St George chose the vineyard in the Bridge Pa Triangle district of Hawke's Bay because the soils are heavier than in other areas of the region so, in a dry year, they stay cool and stop the vine from struggling. This is the only one of the five Outstanding wines that was co-fermented with a 'handful' of Viognier grapes. No sulphur dioxide was added until 10 months after harvest – St George preferred to use biological control instead.

MB Generous palate fuelled with savoury nuances, pretty violet aromatics and generous weight. The richness on the palate is pure and fresh, and finishes dry with good tannic structure.

CP Old leather and clotted cream aromas; vivid floral, blackberry, black cherry and blueberry fruit. Smooth tannins, well integrated oak and a long finish. Polished and charming.

PT Iodine character and dense, concentrated fruit. Lovely sweetness on the middle which will give much pleasure. Excellent and difficult.

Drink 2015–2019 Alc 13.5%

**Stonecroft, Reserve, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013**

18.75 (95+) MB 18.5 CP 18.5 PT 19

N/A UK www.stonecroft.co.nz

Stonecroft founder, Allan Limmer was the founding father of Syrah in New Zealand after establishing the country's first commercial vineyard in 1982, so it is fitting that a Stonecroft wine won an Outstanding rating here. Limmer was also an early pioneer and tireless promoter of the Gimblett Gravels sub-region. He has retired now but new owners Dermot McCollum and Andria Monin continue a tradition of making high-quality, hand-crafted wines from the winery's excellent vineyard site. Old vines certainly made a contribution, with 25% from the original vineyard planted in 1983 and the balance from another planted in 1992.

MB Bright, aromatic fruits and bubblegum notes coming through: dark, spicy and rich. Enticing silky texture and wonderful balance; charming.

CP Licorice, truffle and cola along with cherry and blackcurrant fruit. The palate is layered and creamy with plenty of oak, but the fruit shines through. Juicy, generous, suave and sophisticated.

PT Attractive lift and extract with pure, spicy black fruit and oak. There is a generosity allied to excellent palate structure that is impressive.

Drink 2015–2020 Alc 13.5%

**Mills Reef Winery, Elspeth Trust Vineyard, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013**

18.75 (95+) MB 19 CP 18.5 PT 18.5

N/A UK www.millsreef.co.nz

Mills Reef has a strong Hawke's Bay focus with the lion's share of its wine being produced from the Gimblett Gravels sub-region. The flagship Elspeth label is a reliable marker for anyone seeking a top Hawke's Bay wine. Made from grapes grown in its two most prestigious vineyards, Elspeth Trust (87%) and Mere (13%), this wine is a fine expression of a great vintage and a quality-focused producer. Most New Zealand Syrah makers mature their wines in French oak barriques. Mills Reef uses 20% US oak barrels for extra complexity and accessibility. It's built to last.

MB Delightfully charismatic purity that runs through this wine. Exceptional acid balance and oak integration, with layers of flavour that evolve on the palate to a long, attractive length.

CP Piquant black fruit and sweet cola and raspberry flavours with distinct minerality. Serious, dense and long. Poised, elegant and classy.

PT Muted spice on the nose and a medium-bodied palate for Gimblett Gravels. This is a more elegant style of New Zealand Syrah that will have great appeal. Impressive length and very sensitively made.

Drink 2015–2030 Alc 13.5%

'Kiwi Syrah is sadly under-appreciated, and hopefully this tasting will bring it to the attention of more wine lovers'

Philip Tuck MW

Highly Recommended 17–18.25pts (90–94pts)**Sacred Hill, Deerstalkers, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013**

18.5 (95) MB 18.5 CP 18 PT 19

N/A UK www.sacredhill.com

Sweet oak nose with earthiness. A youthful perfume floats off shining black fruit. Nicely plummy acidity, savoury nuances and delicate minerality all lend structure. Decent weight, integrated oak and a lovely grip. This wine sings Syrah. **Drink** 2015–2030 **Alc** 13.5%

**Obsidian, Reserve, Waiheke Island 2013**

17.75 (92) MB 18.5 CP 17 PT 18

N/A UK www.obsidian.co.nz

Appealing nose of cinnamon, loganberry, mint and laurel matched by an equally enticing, full-bodied palate. Generous dark fruit with spicy complexity and mushroom notes continue to unfold across the succulent length. Elegant with firm tannins. **Drink** 2015–2025 **Alc** 14%

**Wairau River Wines, Reserve, Marlborough 2013**

17.5 (91) MB 18 CP 17 PT 17.5

POA The Wine Reserve

Brightly perfumed with notes of ripe damsons, black cherries, cloves and leather undertones. Ripe but attractively fresh palate with generous pure fruit, a soft violet and lavender lift and excellent savoury depth. Has a high drinkability factor. **Drink** 2015–2020 **Alc** 13%

**Cypress, Terraces, Hawke's Bay 2013**

17.25 (90+) MB 16.5 CP 17 PT 18

£29 (2012) Bordeaux Index

Invitingly creamy bramble fruit nose with an appealing dash of cinnamon. Joyous mouthful of super-ripe berries and plums lifted by notes of freshly cut hay, cinnamon toast and a hint of thyme. Juicy and long. **Drink** 2015–2019 **Alc** 14%

**Dry River, Lovat, Martinborough Terrace, Martinborough 2011**

17.75 (92) MB 18.5 CP 17 PT 18

£47 Raeburn, The New Zealand Cellar

Leather, raisin and bay leaf nose followed by a vibrant, compellingly spicy juicy black fruit palate showing equally impressive depth and length. Solid tannins, good weight and lovely mushroom undertones on the finish. Superb. **Drink** 2015–2026 **Alc** 12%

**Vidal, Legacy Series, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2010**

17.75 (92) MB 18 CP 18 PT 17

£39 Clear Black Wine, The New Zealand House of Wine

Intense blackberry and violets with a kick of pepper. Remarkably fresh for 2010, retaining vibrant fruit to balance the tannins which are underpinned by a savoury note. Firm grip and a long mineral finish. **Drink** 2015–2020 **Alc** 13.5%

**Coopers Creek, Select Vineyards, Chalk Ridge, Hawke's Bay 2013**

17.25 (90+) MB 17 CP 17 PT 18

£14.45–£20 Berkmann, Hard to Find Wines, Hawkshead, Slurp

Ripe damson and fresh straw aromas. Meaty, rich palate with a plump core of crunchy black fruit, vibrant pepper and violets and a rich summer fruit compote. Well made with a generous finish. **Drink** 2015–2019 **Alc** 13.5%

**Mills Reef Winery, Elspeth, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013**

17.25 (90+) MB 17 CP 17 PT 18

N/A UK www.millsreef.co.nz

Spicy nose followed by an elegant palate with perfect persistence. Juicy black plums, cherries and blueberries entwine with smoky, spicy oak and ripe tannins. Great depth and potential. **Drink** 2015–2022 **Alc** 13.5%

**Moana Park, Single Vineyard Reserve, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013**

17.75 (92) MB 18 CP 17 PT 18

£15.99 Hard to Find Wines

High-quality spicy oak on the nose with grassy overtones that on the palate join rich cassis, pepper and an earthy depth. Polished style with juicy acidity, persistent aromatics and a gentle, grippy finish. **Drink** 2017–2025 **Alc** 13.5%

**Squawking Magpie, Stoned Crow, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013**

17.5 (91) MB 18 CP 17.5 PT 17

N/A UK www.squawkingmagpie.co.nz

Perfumed, elegant nose with great purity of fruit. The youthful palate shows a weight of juicy blackberries, sour plums, herbal tones and savoury, spicy oak. Firm tannins and a long finish. **Drink** 2015–2030 **Alc** 14%

**Craggy Range, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013**

17.25 (90+) MB 19 CP 16 PT 17

£17.50–£24 Farr Vintners, The New Zealand Cellar, The Square Wine Co, Winedirect, The Wine Society

Sweet, spicy oak and gentle dark fruit characters with a hint of wild lavender and a savoury note of polished leather. Medium bodied with impressive depth and silky tannins. **Drink** 2015–2030 **Alc** 13%

**Squawking Magpie, SQM, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013**

17.25 (90+) MB 17 CP 18 PT 17

N/A UK www.squawkingmagpie.co.nz

Lovely aromas of blackberry and lavender. The palate is a zesty ripe fruit compote with layers of generous black fruit and creamy oak interspersed with notes of olives and pepper. Long and dark. **Drink** 2015–2025 **Alc** 13.9% ➤

Highly Recommended 17-18.25pts (90-94pts)



Te Mata, Bullnose, Hawke's Bay 2013 17.25 (90+) MB 18 CP 16 PT 18

£25.50-£35.99 Fells, Hawkshead Wines, Lay & Wheeler, New Street Wine Shop, Slurp, Vintage Marque
An attractive spicy nose opens out into a beautifully pure, generous palate bursting with ripe dark fruits and measured by deeper earthy, peppery notes. Firm tannins and lively acidity lend structure and persistence.
Drink 2015-2020 Alc 13%

Pask Winery, Declaration, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013 17 (90) MB 18 CP 17PT 16

POA widely available via UK agent Crush Wines
Gently spicy, peppery notes lift the dark brooding fruit on the nose and a lovely liquorice nuance floats delicately above intense, juicy mulberry and black cherry flavours. Ripe, supple tannins, judicious oak and a long finish. **Drink 2015-2025 Alc 13.5%**

Spy Valley, Marlborough 2012 17 (90) MB 17 CP 15.5 PT 18.5

£16.50 Bibendum, Exel
Dark and mysterious on the nose with oaky depth and with a hint of mushroom. A rich, characterful mouthful with a nicely rounded mid-palate balanced by leafy undertones. Chewy yet elegant with appealing depth and length. **Drink 2015-2025 Alc 13%**

Recommended 15-16.75pts (83-89pts)

Wine	Score	MB	CP	PT	Tasting note	Alc	Drink	Price	Stockists
Ata Rangi, Juliet, Martinborough 2013	16.75 (89)	17	17	16	Intense blackberry and violet nose. Fresh and vibrant floral notes on the juicy black and blue fruit. Lots of weight and depth and a mineral finish.	13.5%	2015-2024	POA	Liberty Wines
Cable Bay, Waiheke Island 2013	16.75 (89)	16	16	18	Spicy chocolate nose followed by vibrant, juicy plum fruit on the palate with lots of quality oak. Impressive depth, lovely driving acidity and firm tannins.	14%	2015-2019	N/A UK	www.cablebay.nz
Coopers Creek, Reserve, Hawke's Bay 2013	16.75 (89)	16	16	18	Youthful nose of incense and some floral overtones. Lovely depth of sweet peppery fruit with a hint of liquorice, creamy oak and a warm finish.	14%	2015-2020	£22	Berkmann
Crossroads, Winemakers Collection, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013	16.75 (89)	17	17	16	Fresh vibrant and playful. Spicy ripe dark fruits backed by firm tannins and a minty lift. The fruit is intense with classy oak integration. Polished and long.	13.5%	2015-2020	£14.49-£21.49	Carruthers & Kent, Great Western Wines
Elephant Hill, Airavata, Hawke's Bay 2013	16.75 (89)	16.5	16.5	17	Lovely, inky black fruit with delicious hints of bonfire smoke, toffee, violet sweets and spice. The firm tannic grip and crisp acidity will soften. Long.	13.5%	2015-2019	£44.99	Barwell & Jones
Elephant Hill, Reserve, Hawke's Bay 2013	16.75 (89)	17	17	16.5	Perfumed, spicy nose followed by a generous palate of bright, crunchy black fruit layered with spicy oak and soft, earthy undertones. Long, vibrant finish.	13.5%	2015-2020	£22.99	Barwell & Jones
Kusuda, Martinborough 2012	16.75 (89)	17.5	15.5	17.5	Edgy, sour cherry-driven nose with enticing complexity. Firm and dense palate where savoury, earthy tones are lifted by white pepper spice.	13%	2015-2022	£60	Bordeaux Index, The Solent Cellar
Mission Estate, Jewelstone, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013	16.75 (89)	16	18	16	Rich, bold notes of blackcurrant, pomegranate and peppery watercress with lots of juicy acidity, creamy-textured tannins and a long, spicy earthy finish.	14%	2015-2020	£24.99	Chandos, Christopher Keiller Wines, Exel Wines, Le Bon Vin, Nicholls & Perks, Oz Wines
Moana Park, Estate Series, Hawke's Bay 2014	16.75 (89)	17	17	16.5	Bacon fat and plum aromas followed by a generous, bright, structured palate of black fruit white pepper, cloves and wild mushroom. Long, compact finish.	13%	2015-2022	£12.99	Hard to Find Wines
Saint Clair, Pioneer Block 17 Plateau, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013	16.75 (89)	17	16	17	Pure red fruit nose then lively textured layers of spicy blackberry compote, notes of orange peel, lavender and leather. Elegant with fine acidic drive.	13.5%	2015-2030	£20	Majestic
Trinity Hill, by John Hancock, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2012	16.75 (89)	18.5	16	16	Complex briary, spicy, peppery black fruit characters evolve in the glass. The palate has layers of dried black fruit, oak, mint and baked earth.	12.5%	2015-2020	£17.90-£19.99	Exel, Gwin Lym, Halifax Wine Co, Harvey Nichols, Hawkshead, Liberty, Park & Bridge, Planet of the Grapes, Slurp, The New Zealand Cellar, The Vineking, The Wine Shop
Trinity Hill, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013	16.75 (89)	17.5	18	15	Full of exuberance and poise. Lovely juicy acidity and sandy yet ripe tannins drive youthful blueberries, dark fruit, tobacco, citrus peel and violets.	13%	2015-2030	POA	Liberty Wines
Georges Road, Block One, Waipara, Canterbury 2013	16.5 (88)	15.5	17	17	Earthy, mineral characters lie over richly seductive bramble fruit and lifted cassis notes. Juicy mouthfeel and a long finish.	13.5%	2015-2019	N/A UK	www.georgesroadwines.co.nz
Ngatarawa, Proprietors Reserve, Hawke's Bay 2013	16.5 (88)	15.5	16.5	17.5	Elegant aromas of damson and nutmeg broaden out on the ripe palate that has zesty lift and mushroom undertones. Judicious oak and chewy tannins.	13%	2015-2019	N/A UK	www.ngatarawa.co.nz
Craggy Range, Le Sol, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013	16.25 (87)	17	16	16	Moody, serious Syrah with layers of complexity and spice. Earthy minerals sit over richly seductive bramble and cassis with a waxy lift and toasty oak.	13%	2015-2027	£39-£66.60	Bordeaux Index, Fareham, Farr Vintners, Fine & Rare, Hailsham, Hedonism, Hennings, Lay & Wheeler, The NZ Cellar, The NZ House of Wine, The Square Wine Co, The Wine Society
Mission Estate, Reserve, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013	16.25 (87)	16	15.5	17	Generous sour cherry and hedgerow fruit with a lovely savoury character in the background. Juicy mouthfeel with a strong yet supple tannic backbone.	13.5%	2015-2020	£14.95-£15.95	Exel Wines, Chandos, Christopher Keiller Wines, Oz Wines
Murdoch James, Blue Rock, Martinborough 2013	16.25 (87)	16	16	17	Delicate pepper and tar aromas underpin bright red fruit which carries across the palate, meeting notes of blackcurrant and earthy flavours. Soft and silky.	12.5%	2015-2020	N/A UK	www.murdochjames.co.nz
Ngatarawa, Stables Reserve, Hawke's Bay 2014	16.25 (87)	17	17	15	Wet leaves and dried fruit aromas, then a black cherry and damson palate boosted by notes of leather, herbs and spice. Long cedar and smoke finish.	13%	2015-2020	N/A UK	www.ngatarawa.co.nz

Recommended (continued) 15-16.75pts (83-89pts)

Wine	Score	MB	CP	PT	Tasting note	Alc	Drink	Price	Stockists
Pask Winery, Gimblett Road, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013	16.25 (87)	17	15.5	16	Black fruit nose with grassy tones and a hint of smoke and rubber. Powerful, rich fruit palate with juicy acidity, ripe tannins and liquorice finish. Very long.	13.5%	2015-2030	£11.90	Hawkshead Wines, SH Jones, Slurp, Tanners, The Wine Co, Wine Service
Sacred Hill, Halo, Hawke's Bay 2013	16.25 (87)	17	16.5	15	Rosemary and liquorice nose and an autumnal palate of spicy dried fruit, raspberries and plums. Lift of violet and pepper and a herbal, minty finish.	12.5%	2015-2020	£11.99	Berkmann
Villa Maria, Cellar Selection, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2010	16.25 (87)	15	16.5	17	Appealing fresh, plump fruit aromas then a generous, dark, brooding palate of concentrated spicy black fruit with hints of sandalwood and violets.	14%	2015-2017	£17.65	Ellie's Cellar, The New Zealand Cellar, The New Zealand House of Wine
Babich, Hawke's Bay 2014	16 (86)	16	16	16	Attractive shortbread and spice with a hint of rhubarb. The palate is full of youthful vigour meeting notes of coal, tar and plum and bright citrus acidity.	12.5%	2015-2019	£12.91	Bibendum, Derventio Wines, Hailsham Cellars, Partridges
Fromm, Vineyard, Wairau, Marlborough 2012	16 (86)	16	15.5	16.5	Enticing spicy, earthy aromas then a deep core of ripe blackcurrant fruit with sinewy tannins and a delightful smoky, leathery character. Excellent length.	13.5%	2016-2025	£30.50	Noel Young, Windermere Wine Stores, Woodwinters
Giesen, Clayvin, Marlborough 2012	16 (86)	16	15	17	Vivid cassis, cherry, plum and balsamic aromas. The palate is sweetly fruited and unctuous with soft, integrated oak and bags of spice.	14%	2015	£38	Ehrmanns
Huntaway, Lion Reserve, Hawke's Bay 2013	16 (86)	17	16	15	Blackberry, cedar and spice followed by smoky, ripe, juicy, dark fruit balanced by subtle oak. The palate has delicious grip and a liquorice finish.	13%	2015-2020	N/A UK	www.huntaway.co.nz
Staete Landt, Arie, Rapaura, Marlborough 2012	16 (86)	17	15	16	Bright ripe fruit with liquorice, leather and herbs mingling with waxy, earthy undertones. Crisp acidity, ripe structured tannins and a lovely floral finish.	14%	2015-2020	£18-£21	Hedonism, Highbury Vintners, Harvey Nichols, John Kelly Wines, Planet of the Grapes, St Andrews Wine Co, The New Zealand Cellar
Bilancia, La Collina, Hawke's Bay 2013	15.75 (85+)	15.5	16	16	A plump core of black fruit with a lovely lilac lift. The rich, supple palate shows spicy oak and a hint of herbs. Assertive with a firm finish. Great potential.	14%	2015-2025	£66-£73	The New Zealand Cellar, Wine Treasury
Bilancia, Hawke's Bay 2013	15.75 (85+)	16	16	15	Big, characterful, crowd pleaser. Bright rhubarb, black fruits and judicious oak. The purity of fruit is compelling and nicely balanced by grippy tannins.	13%	2015-2020	£23.50	Wine Treasury
Cypress, Hawke's Bay 2014	15.75 (85+)	15	16	16	Vegetal aromas, mushroom and pepper carry on to the rich, persistent palate of tasty blackcurrant and liquorice underpinned by bright, crisp acidity.	14%	2015-2019	£17.99 (2013)	The Wine Library
Mission Estate, Vineyard Selection, Hawke's Bay 2013	15.75 (85+)	15.5	16	15.5	Raspberry compote with hints of seashell plus ripe cherry fruit with a waxy nuance. Judicious oak is balanced by lively acidity and pleasant tannic grip.	13%	2015-2018	£12.95-£13.95	Alexander Hadleigh, Chandos, Christopher Keiller, Exel Wines, Horsley Wines, Hinchley Wines, The Tasting House
Obsidian, Waiheke Island 2013	15.75 (85+)	16	16	15	Ripe fruit aromas with a leafy overtone followed by a long, smooth, refreshing blackcurrant palate. The finish is sweetly fruited and warm.	14%	2015-2019	N/A UK	www.obsidian.co.nz
Saint Clair Family Estate, Premium, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013	15.75 (85+)	16	15	16	Eggshell and coriander nose, then a youthful palate of firm tannins and good oak. Piquant black fruit flavours with a hint of sweet hay and a chewy finish.	13%	2015-2025	N/A UK	www.saintclair.co.nz
Schubert, Wairarapa 2012	15.75 (85+)	15	16	16	Well structured with elegant restraint. Tarry, oaky notes followed by smoky black fruits and a hint of mushroom. Juicy and long with a firm grip.	13.2%	2015-2020	£37.90	The New Zealand Cellar
Sileni, Cellar Selection, Hawke's Bay 2013	15.75 (85+)	15	16.5	16	Bright cherry nose with mushrooms and a kick of pepper. Equally bright palate of sweet, spiced fruit, juicy acidity, ripe tannins and judicious oak.	12.5%	2015-2018	£10.95-£11.5	Cellar Door Wines, Hawkshead Wines, Peter Graham, Premier Wine, Slurp
Trinity Hill 2014	15.75 (85+)	15.5	15.5	16	Upfront violets and leather and subtle spice on the cherry- and plum-toned palate. Oaky, earthy, supple and smooth with impressive depth and length.	12.5%	2015-2016	£14.99	Beaconsfield Wine Cellars, Grape & Grind, Leamington Wine Co, Liberty Wines, The New Zealand Cellar, The Solent Cellar, The Wine Society
Vidal, Reserve Series, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2011	15.75 (85+)	15	16	16	Bright, sweet black fruit and toasty oak aromas carry across the long, dense palate. Lovely grip of ripe fruit tannins on the finish.	13%	2015-2019	£17.10	Ann et Vin, Lindley Fine Wine, R Campbell & Sons, Sunninghill Wine Merchants
Crossroads, Milestone Series, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2012	15.5 (85)	15	16.5	15	Herbal nose with hints of cream and bramble jelly. Cherry and plum acidity mingles with smoky oak and leafy overtones. Long, sinewy and spicy finish.	13%	2015-2020	£12.38-£15.99	The Fine Wine Co, Great Western Wines, Noble Green Wines, Quality Wines
Elephant Hill, Hawke's Bay 2013	15.5 (85)	15	16.5	15	Attractive polished nose then a big, juicy palate that's all bonfires, spice and ripe berry fruits. Lots of juicy acidity and a long, smoky finish.	13.5%	2015-2017	£19.99	Coe Vintners, Dvine Cellars, Mr & Mrs Fine Wines, Selfridges, Taurus Wines
Alpha Domus, The Barnstormer, Hawke's Bay 2013	15.25 (84)	15	16.5	14	Bright ripe fruit layered with spicy, toasty oak over an earthy background. Crisp and juicy with a long, oak-toned finish.	14%	2015-2017	£18.75-£19.99	Averys, Carruthers & Kent, McKinley Vintners
Cambridge Road, Martinborough Terrace, Martinborough 2011	15.25 (84)	15	15	16	Bright, ripe fruit aromas and attractive flavours of leather, truffle and dried fruit. Firm structure and delightfully perfumed length.	12.5%	2015-2025	£37.98-£43.99	Exel Wines, Tasting House, The New Zealand Cellar, The Rural Vintner, The Smiling Grape
Fromm, La Strada, Marlborough 2013	15.25 (84)	16	15	15	Enticing meaty aromas with a floral lift lead to a delicate, supple palate of bay, meat jus and herbs with subtle spice on the finish.	12.5%	2015-2019	£18.85-£21.50	Bentley's Wine Merchants, Hawkshead Wines, North Coast Wine Co, Reserve Limited, Slurp
Esk Valley, Hawke's Bay 2011	15 (83)	15	15	15	Sweet and spicy blackberry compote aromas carry across a palate of balsamic and cinnamon and finish on an intriguing meaty note.	13%	2015-2017	£17.10	Barrica Wines, Hoult's Wine Merchant, North & South, R Campbell & Sons, Flagship Wines, Wright Wine Co, The New Zealand House of Wine

Fair 13-14.75pts (76-82pts)
 ■ Georges Michel, La Reserve, Marlborough 2011 14.75 (82) ■ Man O'War, Bellerophon, Waiheke Island 2014 14.75 (82) ■ Te Awa, Hawke's Bay 2011 14.5 (81) ■ Mission Estate, Hawke's Bay 2013 14.25 (80+)

■ Te Whare Ra, Marlborough 2011 14.25 (80+) ■ Tinpot Hut, Hawke's Bay 2012 14.25 (80+)

For full UK stockist details, see pXXX

Next month's panel tastings
 Brunello di Montalcino 2010
 and Marsannay latest release

New Zealand Syrah

My top three

Melanie Brown

■ **Craggy Range, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013** The quality and execution of this Syrah at this price point is exceptional value. Concentrated aromas of dark fruits and wild lavender, a generous depth and silky texture with just the right amount of peppery spice. **19/20 (96/100) Drink 2015-2030**

■ **Ata Rangi, Juliet, Martinborough 2013** Not usually associated with Syrah, Ata Rangi has produced a fine wine here. Vibrant, pretty and well structured with soft mushroom undertones, spice and silky texture. A wine of character and poise. **17 (90) Drink 2015-2024**

■ **Giesen, Clayvin, Marlborough 2012** I didn't spot this in the tasting but Giesen is one of Marlborough's iconic producers and this Syrah is from a vineyard with a quality reputation. Soft ripe cherries and black plums on the nose, well-managed oak integration and impressive depth of character with a delicate spiced finish. **16 (86) Drink 2015-2030**

My top three

Christine Parkinson

■ **Man O'War, Dreadnought, Waiheke Island 2012** An unusual, smoky, savoury style, this stood out for sheer drinkability and for also being the most food-oriented wine on show. Man O'War is a remarkably consistent estate: good to see it continue. **19/20 (96/100) Drink 2015-2025**

■ **Dry River, Lovat, Martinborough Terrace 2011** Unusually for a 2011, this wine still tasted youthful and balanced, with deep fruit and lively acidity despite the hot, high-yielding vintage. Firm, elegant tannins are holding this together beautifully, and it still has some years ahead. **17 (90) Drink 2015-2026**

■ **Wairau River, Reserve, Marlborough 2013** Marlborough's lighter style doesn't always convince, but this showed lovely floral perfume. I think the key is shorter time in oak, giving real refreshment and purity of fruit. **17 (90) Drink 2015-2020**

My top three

Philip Tuck MW

■ **Babich, Winemaker's Reserve, Hawke's Bay 2014** This highly respected family winery can be mighty chuffed with what it has crafted here. Beautifully elegant, with a judicious use of oak and lightness of touch. **19/20 (96/100) Drink 2015-2025**

■ **Stonecroft, Reserve, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013** I was struck by the purity and poise of Stonecroft's wines when I first visited Alan Limmer – an early pioneer in the Gravels – in 1993, so am delighted to see the current owners are continuing to produce such fine wines. **19 (96) Drink 2015-2020**

■ **Sacred Hill, Deerstalkers, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay 2013** Another delicious example from Hawke's Bay stalwarts. Black pepper, fresh acidity and fine-grained tannins give this a European feel – delicious! **19 (96) Drink 2015-2030**

NB: the tasters' top wines are not necessarily their top-scoring, rather those which, on learning the wines' identity, they feel are the most notable given their provenance, price or other factors

Expert summary: Bob Campbell MW

The results may have been different if judged by a panel of Kiwis – nevertheless the Gimblett Gravels sub-region and the 2013 vintage were the clear winners



Bob Campbell MW is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for New Zealand and recognised as the leading authority on his country's wines as a writer, judge, author and public speaker

THE TASTING RAISES an interesting distinction between the palates of UK judges, who are more likely to be influenced by Rhône styles, and those of Kiwi judges, who perhaps have a stronger New World focus. If the same wines had been assessed by New Zealand judges, I'd say there would have been an even stronger emphasis on the intensely fruity Hawke's Bay and Waiheke wines from the 2013 vintage, while wines from cooler South Island regions may not have fared as well. Kiwi judges favour purity, ripeness and intensity while UK judges seem more forgiving about herbal and rustic nuances.

Having said that, I think the results certainly endorse the 2013 vintage. 75% of the top 20 wines were from that year, compared to 62% of total entries.

A number of winemakers now co-ferment their Syrah with Viognier in the style of Côte-Rôtie, claiming it gives their wines punchier, more perfumed aromas as well as silkier textures. An increasing number don't reveal that they've used Viognier, believing it can result in customer resistance or at least confusion. A winemaker recently told me that if he puts Syrah-Viognier on the label everyone remarks on the Viognier character, but if he labels the same wine as Syrah, nobody does. Those in

favour like the variation it brings, those against often feel it reduces varietal definition. While nine of the 68 entries declared they'd been co-fermented with Viognier, only one made the top 20. Perhaps the judges are, not unreasonably, looking for strong Syrah character.

The tasting was an endorsement for the Gimblett Gravels region. Around one-third of all entries were from this Hawke's Bay sub-region, while half of the top 20 wines claimed to be made from grapes grown there. One could also argue that it was an even stronger endorsement for the Bridge Pa Triangle district. Only two entries declared that they were made from grapes grown in the Bridge Pa Triangle. They were both included in the top five Outstanding wines.

My favourite wine, Craggy Range's Le Sol 2013, only got 16.75 (87) points. Perhaps we can blame the fact it was, unusually for a Kiwi wine, sealed under cork. **D**

'The results certainly endorse the 2013 vintage. 75% of the top 20 wines were from that year'