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The Rise of New Zealand Chardonnay

Unique Terroir and Climate Shape New Zealand's Distinctive Chardonnays

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New Zealand Chardonnay currently makes up only 2% of the country's total wine exports, as stated by New Zealand Winegrowers, the industry's governing body. Despite its small share, this varietal is becoming an ambassador for the diverse terroirs found in key regions like Hawke's Bay and Marlborough, and more recently, Central Otago and North Canterbury. This rising interest could potentially increase its

significance, but the challenge remains that Chardonnay only represents about 6% of the total grape plantings in New Zealand. Rather than focusing on mass production, many winemakers are concentrating on precision farming and winemaking techniques to produce high-quality, distinctive Chardonnays targeted at the fine wine market.

Steve Smith, MW, co-founder of Smith & Sheth and Pyramid Valley, believes that focusing on fine wine, priced between NZ$40 and NZ$150 per bottle, is crucial for long-term sustainability. He argues that compromising quality to achieve lower price points could impact margins, which in turn threatens business viability and undermines the quality of viticulture and winemaking. Many producers agree that New Zealand's varied climate and terroir offer a unique opportunity to create Chardonnays with a cool and temperate climate profile.

The main Chardonnay-producing areas include Marlborough, with 1,083 hectares under vine, and Hawke's Bay, with 1,034 hectares. Both are considered cooler climate regions, which results in wines that emphasize citrus, minerality, and savory characteristics. North Canterbury and Central Otago are smaller contributors, with just over 100 and 92 hectares, respectively, and also produce cooler climate expressions. Gisborne, with 582 hectares, offers a riper and more tropical style due to its warmer, temperate climate.

Smith highlights the influence of New Zealand's moderate humidity, high UV light, and cool ocean currents in regions like Hawke's Bay and North Canterbury. These factors allow grapes to fully ripen while maintaining freshness, a quality that is rare globally. In Hawke's Bay, ancient river terraces shape the soils, while in North Canterbury, limestone and clay play a defining role. Central Otago, traditionally known for its Pinot Noir, is also seeing a rise in Chardonnay plantings. Christopher Keys of Gibbston Valley Winery notes that the area's Chardonnay plantings have increased from 79 hectares in 2020 to over 100 hectares today, reflecting growing enthusiasm for the varietal.

Producers in Central Otago, such as Felton Road's Blair Walter, believe that Chardonnay is a natural fit for the region due to its cooler climate and similarity to other high-quality wine regions. Walter argues that Central Otago's Chardonnays are distinct, with vibrant acidity and restraint in the cellar, avoiding the use of new oak and allowing vineyard

characteristics to shine through. In Hawke's Bay, the focus is on replacing existing vines with new clones and planting patterns to enhance the quality of existing plantings, rather than expanding the vineyard area.

The commitment to quality is evident in the viticultural practices employed by many producers. Organic, biodynamic, and regenerative farming are common, and producers often opt for hand-picking and whole-bunch pressing to preserve the purity of the fruit. In the cellar, minimal intervention is the rule, with little use of new oak and a focus on allowing the vineyard's natural character to take center stage. At Pyramid Valley, which has been farmed biodynamically for over two decades, no commercial yeast has ever been used, and the winery relies on indigenous yeasts and bacteria to shape the final wines.

The United States is New Zealand's top wine export market, receiving NZ$797 million (US$498.62 million) worth of wine last year. While Chardonnay is still a niche category, the rising focus on quality and regional distinctiveness is likely to bring more attention to New Zealand's unique take on the Burgundian grape. With an emphasis on Turangawaewae—a Maori concept that combines soil, climate, and cultural identity—New Zealand Chardonnay is carving out its own identity that resists direct comparisons to other wine regions. As more American consumers experience the country's nuanced styles, New Zealand Chardonnay may become a more prominent part of its wine exports.