

tempranillo, verdelho, viognier, pinotage, sangiovese, grenache and others.

At Cottle Hill Winery near Kerikeri, former Californians Barbara and Michael Webb have even tried growing pinot noir, which flourishes in Central Otago. George often stops here for tastings of their wines, port and grappa.

Another popular stop is Ake Ake Vineyard, also near the town, where owner John Clarke offers a vineyard walk to explain why he prefers to grow organically. John's the new kid on the block and, as he's producing only a rosé, a port and two reds, he stocks a wide range of wines from other makers.

Some are locally produced at smaller wineries with no outlets. The former wine merchant from Jersey in the UK also showcases 60 other wines from around the world. At least 20 of these are organic, which ties in well with Ake Ake's vegetarian and seafood restaurant.

Nearby Marsden Estate is always a popular stop for George's punters because everyone appreciates the

Marsden Estate.



A matter of style

Jane Skilton takes a look at chardonnay's siblings.

It is always a mystery to me why my children have such different personalities. Though they share the same parents, they are as like as chalk and cheese. A parallel can be drawn with grapevines. Most of the varieties grown in New Zealand belong to the family *Vitis vinifera*, yet each one differs from its sibling. Some are fussy and will only grow in certain places (pinot noir springs to mind) while others will happily thrive in almost any conditions.

Chardonnay definitely falls into the second category and this is part of the reason it is such a popular variety.

Grape growers love it because it will happily produce a decent crop almost wherever it is planted. Winemakers love it because they can sculpt the wine to suit their own particular style. Chardonnay is a fairly neutral grape variety that doesn't have a distinctive aroma or a definitive flavour. All over the world winemakers use different techniques to add complexity and flavour.

Wine drinkers love chardonnay because it offers a soft creamy wine, often with an aroma redolent of stone fruit and ripe apple. Most chardonnay is made in a full-bodied, dry style though the wines usually carry quite high alcohol levels which can give an impression of "sweetness". The

heavier oakier wines so popular a decade ago have given way to lighter, fresher wines where the oak plays a much more integrated role.

Chardonnay is grown all over New Zealand, from Northland with its semi-tropical climate down to Central Otago, which enjoys an almost Continental climate – hot dry summers and cold winters.

New Zealand chardonnays combine the best textural qualities with bracing, mouth-watering acidity that makes them appear brighter and more vividly fruited than other New World examples.

As a general rule, chardonnay from the lower South Island is light to medium-bodied with a green apple and white peach fruit character and bright, zippy acidity. Marlborough produces a huge range of styles at all price points; the less expensive wines are fruity and easy drinking whereas the more expensive ones are usually fuller-bodied with spicy oak and rich fruit flavours of grapefruit and citrus.

Hawke's Bay, Gisborne, Auckland and Northland produce an immediately recognisable style: rich full-bodied wines with touches of ripe yellow peach, melon and sometimes pineapple with a lush, silky texture.