

# NZ Merlot

New Zealand's best examples of merlot are produced in the warmer North Island, in Hawkes Bay and Waiheke. But this soft, easy-to-ripen grape often struggles to hold its own against its fashionable counterpart pinot noir, writes Bob Campbell MW.



**93**★★★★★  
**2006 Villa Maria Single Vineyard Omahu Gravels Merlot, Hawkes Bay, NZ\$58**  
 This impressively dense and moderately tannic red is an exception to a vintage that has produced unusually soft and approachable reds from the Gimblett Gravels district of Hawkes Bay. In time, the wine promises to deliver even greater flavour and a silkier texture, although its character and quality are already evident. This is a serious and powerful merlot from a producer that consistently delivers some of the country's best wines.



**90**★★★★  
**2006 Newton Forrest Gimblett Gravels Merlot, Hawkes Bay, NZ\$30**  
 Dense, firm red with fresh cherry, plum, new leather, licorice, anise and spicy oak flavours. The tannins are unusually firm and drying for a vintage that tended to produce softer and more accessible red wines from the Gimblett Gravels district. The tannins appear to have locked in some of the wine's flavours; give them a year or two to be released. Newton Forrest is a collaboration between Hawkes Bay grape grower Newton and Marlborough winemaker Forrest.



**88**★★★★  
**2005 Rannach Reserve Merlot, Clevedon, NZ\$35**  
 Sweet, soft and savoury red with flavours suggesting ripe plum, cranberry, baked earth and oriental spices. The fruit flavours are still fresh, but the wine is beginning to show a hint of forest floor bottle development. Made by a relatively new boutique winery in Clevedon (south-east of Auckland), a region that enjoyed an excellent vintage in 2005. The grapes come from seven-year-old vines and the wine is aged for 15 months in French oak barrels.



**87**★★★★  
**2007 Brunton Road Merlot, Gisborne, NZ\$19.95**  
 Strong-flavoured wine with a focus on ripe red fruit, wild herbs and a suggestion of spicy oak. The wine has clearly benefitted from an exceptional Gisborne vintage and the care of a relatively new and quality-conscious producer. The grapes are grown in the producer's own vineyard located in clay/loam soils on Gisborne's Patutahi Plateau. The wine was aged in French and American oak barriques for seven months. It offers great value at this price.



**91**★★★★  
**2005 Matariki Reserve Merlot, Hawkes Bay, A\$48/NZ\$37**  
 This classy red's refined fruit and savoury flavours are supported by expensive French oak. This is a stylish Hawkes Bay merlot made from fruit grown in the Gimblett Gravels district. A year of two in bottle has helped integrate the flavours and soften the firm backbone of tannins that is a feature of red wines from the area. The 2005 vintage has produced firmer and potentially more long-lived wines than those from the generally more accessible 2006 vintage.



**90**★★★★  
**2005 Sacred Hill Broken Stone Merlot, Hawkes Bay, NZ\$64.90**  
 A dense, oaky merlot with some spice, plum and dark berry characters and a firm backbone of drying tannins. No expense is spared to make the very best wine under this flagship label. The wine is constructed to give it plenty of cellaring potential. The price it pays for its generous helping of oak and tannins is inaccessibility during its youthful stage. I believe it will become a great wine within a few years, but have given it a restrained score in the meantime.



**88**★★★★  
**2006 Thyme Hill Vineyard Merlot, Central Otago, NZ\$28**  
 I, along with many critics, believe Central Otago is too cool to produce consistently high-quality merlot. This wine surprised me. The sweet grassy influence to its rich plum fruit flavours clearly indicates a cool climate, but the wine is not too vegetal and shows great density and ripe tannins. It's an impressive full-flavoured merlot with considerable character. The grapes were grown in Alexandra, one of Central Otago's warmer districts, on a north-facing slope for extra sun exposure.



**87**★★★★  
**2006 CJ Pask Gimblett Road Merlot, Hawkes Bay, NZ\$24**  
 CJ Pask pioneered the Gimblett Gravels region to become one of the district's better-known producers of merlot. This vintage of its mid-range label is the best I can remember. Crisp red berry, new leather and spicy oak flavours provide an appealing mix in this youthful yet ready-to-drink red. A very typical example of a good New Zealand merlot showing pronounced fruit flavours and zesty acidity.



**90**★★★★  
**2005 Kennedy Point Merlot, Waiheke, A\$43/NZ\$32**  
 This offers a fascinating array of fruit and savoury flavours, and the sort of rich texture I often find in the red wines of Waiheke Island and Bordeaux. I noted cassis/dark berry, dark chocolate, wild herbs, licorice, anise and spicy oak characters. A year or two in bottle has allowed the wine to settle, giving greater flavour integration. The wine is more about vinosity than simple fruitiness, and all the better for that. A merlot with distinctive character.



**89**★★★★  
**2006 Bridge Pa Zillah Merlot, Hawkes Bay, NZ\$36**  
 Elegant and reasonably intense red with attractive sweet plum, cassis, smoked bacon and spicy oak flavours. It's certainly not a blockbuster, but what it lacks in weight it more than makes up for in power. It reminds me of a very good Chianti Classico: bone dry and supple. It even has a suggestion of Chianti-like violet flavour. A single-vineyard wine made from grapes grown in Ngatarawa Road, just outside the Gimblett Gravels boundary, in an area that tends to make slightly lighter but perhaps more supple styles.



**87**★★★★  
**2005 Black Barn Vineyards Merlot, Hawkes Bay, NZ\$25**  
 This is a moderately dense merlot with good savoury flavours and a suggestion of bottle development that adds a hint of beef tea character to its dark berry, plum and spicy oak flavours. Firm tannins promote a bone-dry finish. The wine was made from grapes grown on Black Barn's own vineyard on an elevated north-facing site on the lower slopes of the Te Mata hills.



**87**★★★★  
**2006 Glazebrook Regional Reserve 040S 177E Merlot, Hawkes Bay, NZ\$20**  
 Attractive wine with sweet, ripe berry flavours that are flattered by a seasoning of classy oak. It's an appealing merlot from a very good Hawkes Bay vintage. Elegant rather than blockbuster and not full-bodied, despite the claim on the back label; it has subtle power in a pleasing pinot noir-like way. Very accessible now but with potential to develop more complexity, at least in the medium term. This is what young merlot should taste like, and seldom does.

Read how wines are tasted and rated on page 147.

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