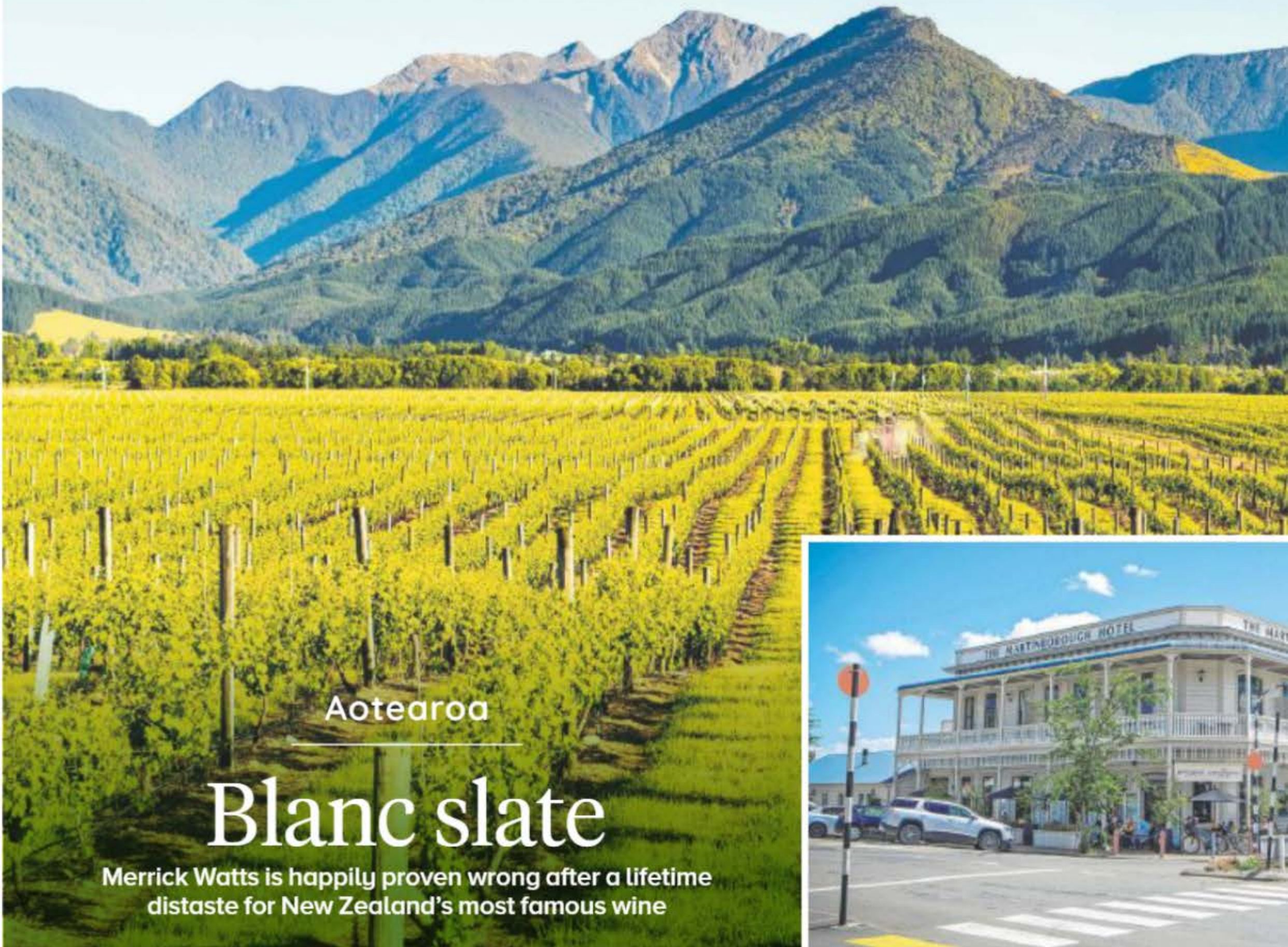


A vineyard in Blenheim, New Zealand. Below: The Martinborough Hotel; sea kayaking in Picton.



Aotearoa

Blanc slate

Merrick Watts is happily proven wrong after a lifetime distaste for New Zealand's most famous wine



The only thing I like more than being right is being proven wrong. That's a lie – I hate being wrong. However, I'm prepared to put myself in a position to have my mind changed. This is one reason I ventured to New Zealand (Aotearoa) to traverse the Classic Wine Trail.

You see, I love New Zealand, but I don't like New Zealand sauvignon blanc. There we go, battle lines drawn, pistols at 10 paces. The very floral, tropical and pungent NZ "savvy b" that is ubiquitous here in Australia I have often described with great satisfaction as "liquid Ambi Pur" and "the perfect wine for people who can't smell gas". In this I am correct. I knew, however, there was a good chance I would be proven wrong if I invested some time exploring the Classic Wine Trail, starting in Blenheim (Marlborough country) at the top of the South Island.

I arrive by air to view perfectly spaced, manicured vines that look like they've been raked into the land the way an old man combs his hair before heading to the shops. I'm told this detail is a result of a national preoccupation with neatness. It's a stunning entrance to a beautiful region.

Marlborough is flat but cradled by mountains, in this case the Richmond Range. Like pretty much all NZ, this offers the contrast sought after by many Australian travellers.

There's a lot more than just wine in this region. A short distance from the vines, you can take to the water at Picton for a sea kayak nature experience where the sea life is abundant all year round and, in a refreshing change for Aussies, the waters are not very sharky.

After appreciating sea life, you can then eat it. Frank's Oyster Bar and Eatery in Blenheim offers fresh, locally sourced produce and matches it with an excellent wine list.

If mountain-biking through terrain is your thing, then there's no shortage of options here, too. Lycra is optional,

but I suggest you BYO because I don't reckon that's something you can or should hire.

But back to the savvy b. Here I discover the hyper-passionfruitiness that normally disagrees with my taste is replaced by elegant wines and amazing people pouring them. Whitehaven Wine Company, Te Whare Ra and Hans Herzog Estate all offered excellent sav blanc, but also brilliant examples of other varieties. Spy Valley Wine is in a small valley where the Kiwis have a "secret" spy base that everyone in the area is doing a terrible job of keeping a secret. In classic Kiwi form, you can have a photo taken in front of the Waihopai Valley secret spy base. Go, New Zealand.

I finished up at the juggernaut that is Cloudy Bay. Its entry-level sav is popular and reasonable, but in my opinion it is eclipsed by its premium Te Koko sauvignon blanc. Complex and delicious. Perhaps a savvy b for chardonnay lovers?

Next stop is across the Cook Strait to the North Island and the Martinborough wine region. Martinborough is just over an hour's drive from Wellington and its rolling green pastures naturally draw the eye, along with the subconscious desire to see a hobbit going about their daily chores. Spoiler alert: hobbits don't exist. Didn't stop me from looking, though.

Martinborough is both a region and a town and it has an honest country feel about it. I stayed at the Martinborough Hotel and although the rooms looked like someone had thrown a Laura Ashley hand grenade at them, they were very comfortable. Food at the hotel is excellent and the wine list extensive.

One of the best things about Martinborough is the proximity of wineries to the town centre. They're a comfortable walking distance for many people, though bikes are commonly hired to cruise from cellar door to cellar door, and organised tours can be arranged. Ata Rangi, Nga Waka and Palliser are all worth a visit, while lunch at Moy Hall Vineyard is the epitome of genuine



Continued next page



From above: View from Te Mata Peak, Napier; Ngā Ara Tipuna tour, Waipukurau; Cloudy Bay Vineyards in Marlborough; Craggy Range Winery, Hawke's Bay.



hospitality, good food and an almost in-the-vines dining experience. Go see Katherine at Big Sky Wines and Wilco at On Giants' Shoulders. Lovely, passionate wine people. Mention my name for zero discount.

At night, take a tour of the universe with Under the Stars. This region is part of the Dark Sky Movement and the lack of light pollution allows for incredible clarity. Join a group or book a private viewing at your accommodation with Chris. Telescopes, chairs and blankets are included.

Wine production in this region is not as heavily focused on sauvignon blanc; pinot noir is very much the star, and it is excellent quality, approachable and ready to drink. I also really enjoyed the chardonnay and rosé here, and experiencing how different landscapes are reflected in the different varieties.

I continued my roadtrip to the Hawke's Bay region, a three-hour drive, stopping at Waipukurau to meet Phil. Phil is a local Māori guide and historian and we spent time walking, talking and looking at remnants of ancient villages and fishing grounds. Ngā Ara Tipuna offers a self-guided tour for people to do at their leisure, with an interactive, digital application available on your phone. It's worth the stop.

Hawke's Bay is a great conclusion to the Classic New Zealand Wine Trail. It definitely feels premium in every sense – the wines, the accommodation, the food and the views. This is a very popular region for a good reason. It's stunning.

But wait, wasn't it all destroyed by Cyclone Gabrielle? There are signs of the utter carnage from that period in February, but large parts of the region were left miraculously unscathed. There are landslip scars on green mountain sides and the rivers offer a sobering hint of the full force of the weather, but the majority

of the wine industry escaped the wrath. Hawke's Bay is very much open for business.

Kiwi wine regions promote the marriage of indoor cellars and outdoor activities in brilliant harmony, unlike, well, a lot of actual marriages.

If you're really enthusiastic and love a physical challenge, you can run or walk to the peak of Te Mata. That's exactly what I did, but in a car.

I did, however, take a hire bike from Black Barn Vineyards cellar door at the base of Te Mata to Elephant Hill Winery on the coast. Takarō Trails can drop off and pick up the bikes wherever you choose. It took about an hour and I was happy to have my bike picked up and returned after the cellar door tasting. The elevated and immaculate bike pathway wound through orchards and vineyards and lush fields before emerging at the sands of the coastline.

If you prefer your outdoor experiences to be a little more regal, try the open-top vintage car ride around Napier. This small city boasts the highest density of Art Deco architecture in the world, the result of a catastrophic earthquake in 1931 that levelled almost all the pre-existing buildings. In a consolidated and considered effort, the government and the people rebuilt in Deco fashion, and it has to this day been preserved by a trust. I took a walk back in time, but again, in a car.

And the wine? The real focus is on reds and baller chardonnay and I'm in my happy place here. Craggy Range is well renowned for quality wine, but its visitor experience is a parallel offering. It has incredible grounds that feel like the lawns have been painted on. Amazing architecture houses an incredible dégustation in the restaurant. Every detail here is considered. It is a high-end experience that still feels accessible – I mean, they let me in.

Visit the family-owned Te Mata Estate Winery, famous for its Coleraine Bordeaux blend and its Bullnose Syrah. If you like your shiraz with that white peppery, spicy, dry finish, this is for you. If you can, get a tour around the winery, it's very special. Again, mention my name for a lifetime ban.

In the township of Havelock North is a little wine enterprise, Smith & Sheth Oenothèque. Part bottle shop, part wine cellar and part immersive deep-dive, this shared brainchild of Steve Smith, Master of Wine, is an absolute must for wine nerds. I won't spoil the experience, but it is properly immersive and immensely informative. The day I was there, Steve was present and generously talked me through his winemaking ethos and agricultural logic. The man is a genius on several levels. His CRU wines are some of the best wines I have tasted, and not just in this region – in any. The Master Class was a fitting end to an amazing trip.

If you're a lover of the outdoors, partial to a snifter of fermented grape juice and love genuine hospitality, then this a great trip to consider. Has it made me more savvy? Well, how savvy can one person be?

The writer was a guest of Tourism New Zealand.



Merrick Watts is a comedian, travel enthusiast and qualified wine nerd. Combining his passions is his passion.



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