



# A Very Expensive Wine Tasting

**While the media spins endless tales of doom and gloom we decided to conduct a tasting of the most expensive wines that Nelson and Marlborough can offer.**

**By Kirsten Rødsgaard-Mathiesen.  
Photography by Tim Cuff. Location: Grand Mercure Nelson Monaco Resort**

**A**t WildTomato we like to graze in the opposite direction to the herd. Currently, the general media trend is to find bargain and value-for-money wines, according to the marketing manager at Marlborough's Fromm Winery. But not us, and thankfully the wineries were right behind our idea and readily supplied us with their sought-after, rare and expensive wines. What a treat!

But does high price necessarily equal a wine that's to die for?

The answer to this question is what we sought one rainy August evening equipped with 15 precious wines; each numbered and wrapped in a brown paper bag. Admittedly, it looks shabby serving wine this way – especially when some of the bottles are things of beauty in their own right.

However, to conduct a fair and prejudice-free blind tasting, either all 13 attendees at WildTomato's tasting had to be blindfolded... or the bottles had to be. Now, as much as the first idea would have made for some fun and quirky photos, we agreed to follow convention and cover the bottles rather than our eyes.

Fifteen wines may not seem very many compared to the vast number of wines that professional judges sip at international tastings. In fact, you wonder how they do it. However, the small crowd gathered here are not professional judges; merely keen wine drinkers with a healthy zest for the good life... like most wine drinkers.

I think you get the picture. This is not about imitating formidable wine writers like Bob Campbell. This is simply about indulging in some of life's most extravagant, blissful moments. Vinous pleasures to be exact. Alongside, of course, finding out what you actually get for the \$90 it costs for one of Marlborough's most expensive Pinot Noirs or the \$40-80 you may choose to spend on a bottle from wineries such as Neudorf, Herzog, Forrest, Fromm, Staats Landt,

## **The Tasting**

The first flight of wine boasts three very different examples of the country's most popular grape variety, Sauvignon Blanc, commonly known as "Savvy". Priced at \$40-\$45, this is expensive as, these days, the overflow of Savvy, especially from Marlborough, means you can get a decent Sauvignon for \$10-\$15. Having said that, the three in question are not your everyday Savvs. No, no, no!

After the initial sniffing, swirling, tasting and (for some) spitting, everyone agrees that these are out of the ordinary. Are they even Savvys? Before their identities are revealed, several amongst the 13 in the WildTomato tasting panel are guessing Chardonnay and Riesling. But whatever the wines are, we agree that they are elegant, layered and very different to the classic grassy/herbaceous Marlborough Savvy style. For Richard Aindow, WildTomato's advertising manager, the Te Koko from Cloudy Bay, with its "subtle lychee flavours", is "very good and the nicest of the three".

As the fact file shows, the wines are divided into grape varieties. For our second flight, the focus is on Riesling – two very different ones indeed. The Framingham is almost like a dessert wine, which puts some of us off. Still, it's a very lovely wine, especially if you imagine it served chilled on a hot summer's day. Steve Fullmer has a slightly different approach: "Ice cream, fun and late night only." The John Forrest Riesling is more elegant and everyone's favourite so far. "It dances around the mouth," Hayden Thomas muses lyrically.

Moving right along to Chardonnay, an often oaky and powerful variety, that for some is a star and for others a no-no. But for most, Chardonnay is a very recognisable variety. The first of the two has "aniseed flavours and quite a bite to it" as David Jerram points out while pondering if, thanks to its crispy dryness, it may even be a Viognier. A continuous swirling and airing in the mouth occurs

RRP \$45  
"A single estate, handpicked Sauvignon Blanc more reminiscent of a white Bordeaux than a typical Marlborough Savvy. A frangipani and tropical fruit scented nose leads to a rich, creamy palate with notes of almonds, passionfruit and lemon verbena, and a dry, pure finish. It is beautifully ripe, yet vividly fresh with its richness, depth and structure promising longevity."  
[www.herzog.co.nz](http://www.herzog.co.nz)

Cloudy Bay TE KOKO 2006  
RRP \$43-45

"Te Koko is an alternative style of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc. A tantalising infusion of jasmine flowers and sweet garden herbs, with lemon and mandarin citrus steeped in ginger spice. The palate is creamy and full, yet finishes with an intuitively balanced lemon citrus twist. Subtle smoky oak and fermentation with indigenous yeast bring an appealing savouriness to this wine."  
[www.cloudybay.co.nz](http://www.cloudybay.co.nz)

KORU Sauvignon Blanc 2007  
RRP \$40

"We have a 'no compromise' attitude and try to make white wine that can go the distance and develop into something more complex and unique with time and patience. This is a single, one-hectare vineyard wine and therefore a true expression of its terroir, the Upper Wairau Valley."  
[www.koruwines.co.nz](http://www.koruwines.co.nz)

## Riesling

John Forrest Collection Riesling (Wairau Valley) 2005  
RRP \$50

The palate is an amazing balance of ripe stone-fruits and fresh lemon zest, complemented by a mouth-watering acidity and finishing with hints of apricot. A dynamic and lively wine, perfect to enjoy pre-dinner both while young and fresh or cellared for some years."  
[www.forrest.co.nz](http://www.forrest.co.nz)

Framingham Select Riesling 2007  
RRP \$30.90

"The German Spätlese style is the inspiration for our Select Riesling. The palate is elegant with flavours of creamy lemon meringue pie, mandarin orange, red apple, "real" lemonade and stone fruit. Hints of beeswax, toast and witbier carry through onto a long, stony, mineral finish."  
[www.framingham.co.nz](http://www.framingham.co.nz)



As we move on to the red wines, the nibbles are rapidly disappearing. But after a brief water break, away we go – ready to taste the Top of The South's most expensive Pinot Noirs. Despite the hidden identity, no one is in doubt that this is indeed the grape variety in question. And there is no doubt either that Pinot Noir is the new star of the New Zealand wine industry. WOW! As we indulge in these incredible wines, we all experience explosively delightful taste sensations of dark cherry, chocolate, liquorice and red berries.

At this stage the spittoons are sadly filling up quickly. Spitting out these near-divine drops of wine truly does not feel right. But unfortunately it's necessary as we're not spending the night at the Grand Mercure Nelson Monaco Resort. We all agree that these are very powerful and amazing wines, but although very drinkable now, a year or two of cellaring will undoubtedly make them even better.

More red wine is on the agenda, and this is probably the most fun of the flights. Unlike the previous ones, the wines in this flight only have one thing in common: they are red. Number 11 is deep, dark and rich, and very hard to pick. A Merlot? A Cabernet Sauvignon? A Shiraz? A Malbec? No, no, no! Only David Jerram mentions Montepulciano.

Number 12 is equally hard for the panel to figure out, but there is consensus that it oozes vanilla and pepper. For editor Jack Martin it takes him back to a trip he made with his grandfather tasting wine in France's Rhone Valley. "It's my favourite wine so far. I love it," he says, beaming.

Syrupy and sticky dessert wines are always enjoyable, especially when served with blue cheese. Thankfully, there is still a bit of blue cheese left





Barbara Speedy, David Jerram, Chris Flaherty, Cindy Thorns, Katie Hoad, Robin & Steve Fullmer, Jack Martin, Katrin Schottke, Richard Aindow, Kirsten Rødsgaard-Mathiesen, Hayden Thomas & Anna Clark

to accompany numbers 13, 14 and 15. The first one from Brightwater Vineyards is understandably named Gold. What a colour! What a rich wine! "Like candy floss," says Steve Fullmer. But WildTomato designer Katie Hoad takes it a step further and exclaims: "I think I'm in love! It's so rich and with different levels of flavour. This is my absolute favourite."

The other two stickies are quite different to Gold. Number 14 from Johanneshof knocks everybody's socks off (except Katie's) and prompts comments like "elegant", "strawberry with icing sugar", "pear flan" and "beautiful... like sherbet".

Having come to the end of the tasting, all that's left to say is: "When is the next one?" It has been an evening of exquisite pleasure in the vinous department. After tasting \$803 worth of wine, everyone agrees that for a special occasion these wines are worth every penny.

Funnily enough, despite the current times of doom and gloom, some winemakers at this exclusive end of the market say they haven't felt the recession bite the way that makers of cheaper wine have. Quite the contrary, in fact.

Summing up, we find that the 15 wines are all of great quality, and that somehow it is too hard, almost unfair, to rate them. Yet our consensus is to do it anyway. Thus, we all name our top three personal favourites of the evening. You may have already guessed this, but the majority favours the John Forrest Collection Riesling, the Koru Pinot Noir and the Johanneshof Noble Late Harvest Riesling.

Cheers! And remember: life's too short to drink bad wine. And only drink what you like, not what others say you should.



"Chardonnay, more than any other variety, shows how appropriate care in the vineyard can result in high-quality grapes and wines with similar structure and pedigree to the fine white Burgundies. It is not an attempt to copy Burgundy but to achieve the same textural quality. Our Chardonnays are dry with a subtle wood influence."  
[www.frommwinery.co.nz](http://www.frommwinery.co.nz)

Neudorf Chardonnay Moutere 2007  
RRP \$55

"This is a slinky, silky wine. Poised and intelligent. A finely-textured entrée with toffee, lemons, butter cookies and ripe peaches roll through the palate and on the nose. The wine has a sense of wholeness, very subtle but intense and directional. Layers of flavours and glimpses of creaminess are held tight by that Neudorf minerality."  
[www.neudorf.co.nz](http://www.neudorf.co.nz)

## Pinot Noir

Auntsfield Heritage Pinot Noir 2005  
RRP \$90

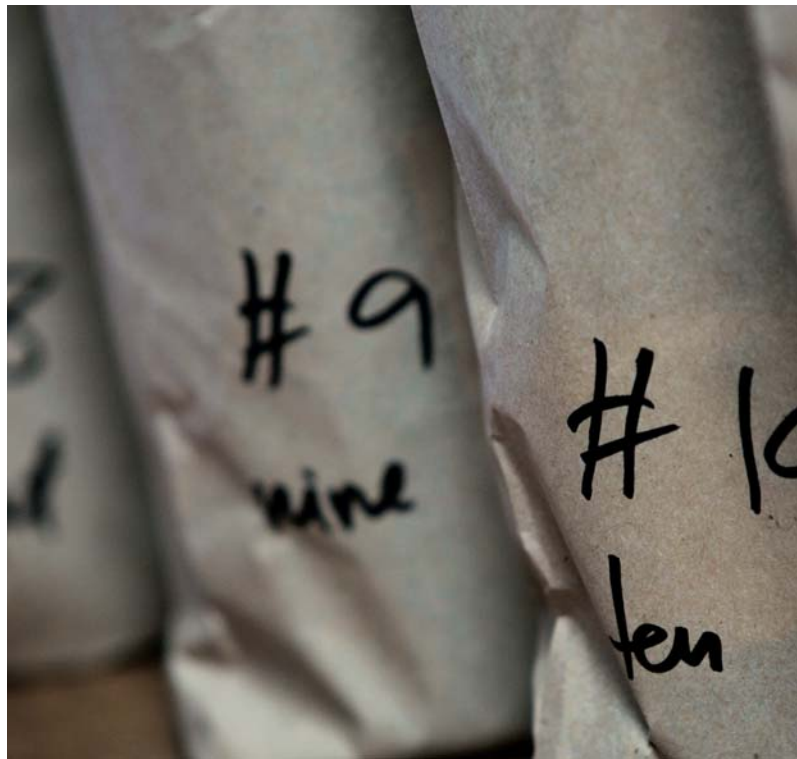
"This wine is only produced in exceptional years, when a selection of wine exhibits amazingly defined character. The aromatics are heady with complex fruit and earthy character. They seem to both tantalise and seduce, until the wine is tasted and the journey continues. The palate shows layers of silky texture, dark fruit and savoury flavours that reveal, evolve, express and continue."  
[www.auntsfield.co.nz](http://www.auntsfield.co.nz)

Koru Pinot Noir 2006  
RRP \$78-80

"Koru wines are handmade from vine to bottle with minimal intervention and are built to last 10+ years. The Pinot Noir is from a single, 1.1-hectare vineyard, which we believe is essential to really claim terroir and the one way it can truly express its specific site."  
[www.koruwines.co.nz](http://www.koruwines.co.nz)

Neudorf Pinot Noir Moutere Home Vineyard 2006  
RRP \$69

"2006 was an exceptional year and has produced a wine of finesse and poise. The nose is entrancing, and the initial impact is one of smoothness and femininity; silk swirling and flashing as the wine reveals the layers of its being. But the underlying strength and muscle of the wine soon becomes apparent."  
[www.neudorf.co.nz](http://www.neudorf.co.nz)



RRP \$64

"The 2006 vintage produced a full-bodied and deep, dark, cherry-coloured Montepulciano bursting with power, concentration and texture. With a heady nose, it displays flavours of cranberry and dark ripe plums underpinned by liquorice and savoury overtones. A voluptuous, smooth and delicate wine, it will age gracefully over the next 15 years."

[www.herzog.co.nz](http://www.herzog.co.nz)

Staete Landt Estate Grown Marlborough Syrah 2007

RRP \$55

"This is our first Syrah. It has an attractive nose of ripe black cherries and blackberries. On the palate, this wine offers white pepper, dark ripe plums and bay leaf liquorice. It is a well-balanced, complex and sophisticated cool-climate-style Syrah, with excellent structure and elegant tannins. Drinks very well now but will repay after cellaring for at least three to five years."

[www.staetelandt.co.nz](http://www.staetelandt.co.nz)

## Dessert wines

Brightwater GOLD 2004 Noble Sauvignon Blanc

RRP \$50

Made from naturally botrytised Sauvignon Blanc berries. Extremely rich and succulent, with hedonistic nutty and manuka honey fragrances. Only 90 bottles have been produced, each one individually numbered and its purchaser recorded at the winery."

[www.brightwaterwine.co.nz](http://www.brightwaterwine.co.nz)

Johanneshof 2007 Noble Late Harvest Riesling

RRP \$39.95

This is a delicious dessert wine, comparable to the great 'Beerenauslese' of Germany. Dried pineapple and apricot create a heady bouquet followed through with raisin, cardamom, honey and quince flavours, and finishing with a snappy acidity."

[www.johanneshof.co.nz](http://www.johanneshof.co.nz)

Framingham Noble Riesling 2008

RRP \$30.90

"Framingham Noble Selection is a botrytis-affected dessert-style wine made from Riesling grapes. Winemaker Dr Andrew Hedley is passionate about Riesling wines, specifically those made in a Germanic style. He produced several different ones in the 2008 vintage, and this is the sweetest one with 195g residual sugar."



Wine tasting is a serious business



Hayden Thomas & Anna Clark

