

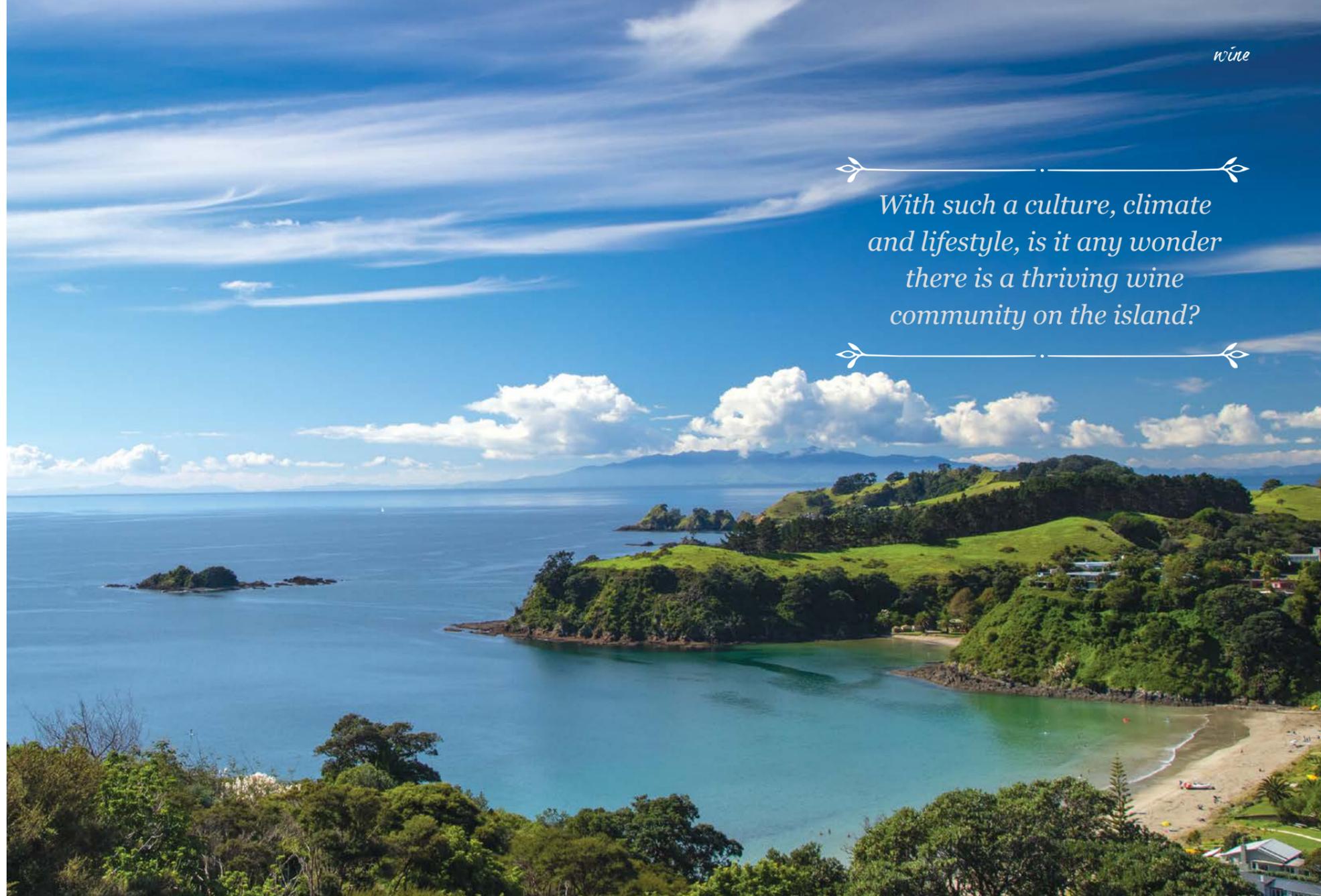


Tapas, Rosé and Waiheke – Catalan Style!

By Neil Allanby

Located in the Hauraki Gulf, a 35-minute fast-ferry ride east of Auckland, is one of New Zealand's most beautiful and serene places, Waiheke Island (waiheke.co.nz). Sheltered from Auckland's cold and wet prevailing west-to-southwest winds, Waiheke is blessed with its own warm, dry microclimate, sandy beaches, stunning views and bohemian lifestyle. It has long been a favourite escape destination for those united in the love of the good life. Artists, wine lovers, foodies and free spirits mingle with the rich and famous on this blissful island. >>

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With such a culture, climate and lifestyle, is it any wonder there is a thriving wine community on the island?

Waiheke boasts a diverse population of 8,700 permanent residents plus 3,400 holiday homes. The creative sector – artists, scientists, writers, actors, musicians – is well represented. Recent strong demand for Waiheke's more relaxed lifestyle has seen property prices soar. There is a plethora of quirky galleries and craft stores derived from the island's hippyish past.

With such a culture, climate and lifestyle, is it any wonder there is a thriving wine community on Waiheke? There are now around 30 boutique wineries on this hilly island, many with tasting rooms, great restaurants and breathtaking views. The ancient Jurassic soils are predominantly clay but varied in form, and vineyard site selection is important to obtain the best microclimates.

Vines for growing grapes suitable for winemaking (*Vitis vinifera*) were first planted on Waiheke in 1977, and its maritime climate soon proved to be perfect for Bordeaux varietals. Remember, the rule of thumb is that

cabernet grows best when it can see the ocean. Since the late 1990s there has been a substantial increase in plantings of syrah (often called shiraz in Australia), to the point that syrah is now the most widely planted varietal.

New Zealanders have coined the term 'lifestyle wineries', for established wineries purchased and run by educated middle-aged couples with access to funds generated from another career. Such wineries are more for prestige and appeal than a source of income. We can assume that Waiheke would be an ideal location for such lifestyle wineries.

Miro Vineyard (casitamiro.co.nz) is located on Waiheke Island overlooking stunning Onetangi Bay. This 4.2 ha vineyard is owned by Bond Estate and is also home to one of Auckland's top restaurants, Casita Miro. Paying homage to the famous citizens of Barcelona – artist Joan Miró and architect Antoni Gaudí – the

vineyard has a distinctly Catalan feel with its mosaic tiled walls, Art Deco terraced restaurant and cuisine of tapas and raciones. It is fun, relaxed and social dining, ideal for a bright, sunny and calm winter's day.

Miro Vineyard has been a labour of love, certainly not a lifestyle winery. "My parents planted the first vines by hand 26 years ago after clearing the land," says George Bond. "They definitely felt the financial pressure whilst nurturing these young vines over the four years until they bore the fruit for their first wines and thereby generated some income. It was really hard getting started."

George grew up on the vineyard and, after a short period away, has now returned home.

As a prelude to our lunch, we commence with an open-air degustation of Miro wines with George, on the upper terrace overlooking Onetangi Bay; his father's Gaudí-esque mosaic tiled walls line the hillside.

Having viewed the lunch menu, what better match could there be than a crisp dry Provençal-style rosé? George explains that this rosé is predominantly merlot for the fruitiness, mouthfeel and structure, with some cabernet to give extra aromatics. "The rosé is direct made, not derived by bleeding off some juice from the early ferment red wine. There is a short skin contact to keep the colour pale. We use special yeast cultures to augment the aromatics, fermentation taking place over ten to 15 days at lower temperatures in stainless steel tanks." He adds, "We then do a cold settling over six months and don't fine, which provides such great clarity in the wine."

The rosé is not launched to the market until 12 to 16 months after harvest – quite a long period of time for a rosé in today's market. This is an excellent example of a crisp dry rosé. >>



The vineyard and restaurant are distinctly Spanish yet the wines are French varietals

It gives aromas of strawberry, rose petal and guava with a soft, rounded mouthfeel, good balance and a crisp finish. George says there is one to two grams of residual sugar, which is below the detectable limit on the palate, however it supports the rounded mouthfeel.

Globally, rosé wines are certainly trending. Rosé sales in France have tripled in the last decade and, in 2015, wine sales there were 50% red, 33% rosé and only 17% white. Australia and New Zealand are following suit as we emulate the Mediterranean lifestyle.

Lunch is served in the Art Deco pavilion restaurant and comprises *charcuterie* with homemade bread and extra virgin olive oil from the estate, followed by Hauraki Gulf snapper croquettes, then lamb and fig tajine. Produce is sourced locally where possible for extra freshness. Our rosé is confirmed as the perfect match on this bright sunny day.

The wines of Miro Vineyard are sold almost exclusively through Casita Miro Restaurant and from the cellar door following tastings – so, when in Auckland, it is absolutely worth the ferry trip. There are some online direct sales but no sales to other restaurants. After making the best wine possible, George admits, “We don’t have to market our wines too much. The rosé we produce will cover sales in the restaurant for about ten months of the year. Our clients are disappointed when we need to supplement the last two months with an imported Spanish rosé.”

The vineyard and restaurant are distinctly Spanish yet the wines are French varietals. George admits that this is because the classic French varietals of cabernet and syrah do so well on Waiheke. “No one seems to mind that much, provided they have a great wine with a memorable lunch. Our cuisine is described as from Spain and the wider Mediterranean rim. The choice of Provençal-style rosé matches perfectly, Provence being on the Mediterranean. Nevertheless we have just bought some albariño vines to plant as an experiment in increasing our Spanish varietals.”



And as for the future? George says, “We won’t be going for too much growth; we will be keeping the venture small, maintaining the status quo. We will concentrate on upgrading the olive groves and continue with the mosaic tiled walls.”

As a parting comment, George says that they do make one barrel of reserve syrah. Next time I come back to Casita Miro, he says he will offer me a bottle to try. Going from today’s experience, I would love to take him up on this offer – I can’t wait to return! ♣



IMAGES

 Page 47–48: open-air degustation at Casita Miro • Page 48, clockwise: degustation hosted by George Bond • Miro Vineyard • Neil Allanby (right) and friends at Casita Miro • Page 49: Onetangi Bay, Waiheke Island @ Adobe Stock, Dan Eady • Page 50, top: entrance to Casita Miro Restaurant • bottom, left to right: lunch at Casita Miro Restaurant • mosaic tiled wall. All other images in this article © Graham Seggie