



Divine wine: (far left) St Clair monks promote their wine.

In the groove: (middle left) part of the crowd at the festival.

Booze snooze: (left) taking a siesta.

Tent city: (below) the festival grounds at Brancott Winery.



Kiwi fruit of the vine

THE sharing of wine has long been a pastime designed to bring friends together, promoting conversation, laughter and a sense of wellbeing.

New Zealanders are no different. They're hospitable folk and enjoy a good chinwag over a fine drop.

The country has 530 wineries producing 132 million litres of wine a year, half of which is exported.

Wine and food festivals are held almost monthly.

The Marlborough Food and Wine Festival, in New Zealand's premier wine-growing region on the South Island, has been serving up local wine and cuisine for the past 24 years.

Held at Montana's Brancott winery, 10 minutes from Blenheim, the festival is the ideal platform for the region's 60-plus wineries to show their products.

The Marlborough Wine Festival is a blend of partygoers and enthusiasts, writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash**

The region, known for its sauvignon blanc, is home to Allan Scott wines, Cloudy Bay, Framingham, Huia, Lake Chalice, Seresin Estate, Stoneleigh and Foxes Island.

It's also famous for the Marlborough scallops found in the stunning inlets, bays and coves of the deep waters of Marlborough Sounds.

The Marlborough festival attracts two types of folk — those looking for a party and those looking for good wine.

Blend them together, add a music line-up of jazz, funk and retro cover bands in a stunning country setting of vineyards reminiscent of Tuscany, and watch the crowd become one.

Within the first hour we encounter four hens' parties in various codes of dress: the bridal babes in white; the Girls on Tour in heavy-metal black who had made the trek from Bluff in the far south of the island; the princesses in pink on a girls' day out; and the chicks in matching leopard-skin dresses.

WINE in the great outdoors seems a licence for fancy dress, including the St Clair monks who promote their wine in full monk outfits.

The older folk, and those wishing to chill, set up camp in the mid-lawn area with picnic rugs and deckchairs, close enough to the

stage to enjoy the music but far enough away to avoid stomping feet in the mosh pit.

Serious wine folk take in the Pinot Envy tutorial with vintner Matt Thomson, recipient of the 2005 Pinot Noir Air New Zealand Supreme Trophy with his Delta Wine Company.

He's followed by Ant Mackenzie, from Spy Valley wines, who shares his thoughts on riesling, pinot gris and gewurztraminer.

Wine and food match competitions ensure that gourmands are well catered for, with whitebait matched to Clifford Bay Estate Single Vineyard Riesling, Lovat venison with Isabel Estate Marlborough Pinot Noir 2004 and burgundy snails cooked in garlic butter with a Spy Valley chardonnay.

Starting the day with a Nautilus Estate cuvee brut, we stick to bubbles for most of the morning, the highlight being the Huia Brut 2001 served up by buffed, blond men.

We're on to the Lake Chalice Platinum Chardonnay by the time Kiwi funk band Rhombus take to the stage and the grassed dance floor gets pumping.

The retro sound of the Beat Girls and the crooning of Greg Johnson have pre-pumped the crowd.

It's only fitting to finish the way we start, with bubbles, indulging in Pernod Ricard's signature Deutz Marlborough Cuvee.

It's a stumble to the bus, with invitations to various parties in the region offered by new-found friends.

It's the sign of a good festival when you come home with more friends than when you arrived.

COMPETITION



PREPARE to be serenaded under the stars this summer at a series of

opera concerts planned for around the state.

Australian Music Events' Opera in the Alps at Beechworth, Opera by the Lock at Mildura and Opera in the Market at the Queen Victoria Market will feature stars including Yvonne Kenny (below), David Hobson and Marina Prior.

Travel has a package of two A-Reserve tickets to the first event, Opera in the Alps, and a night of stylish accommodation for two with breakfast at LindenWarrah Country House Hotel to give away. The event will be held on January 19 in the sweeping, historic grounds of Beechworth's La Trobe University campus, and will feature Kenny, *Operatunity Oz* tenor Roy Best, a 100-voice choir and a 50-piece orchestra conducted by Benjamin Northey.

LindenWarrah Country House Hotel (www.lindenwarrah.com.au) overlooks a working vineyard and mixes modern decor with country hospitality at Milawa, a town famous for its gourmet food and wine.

To enter ph: 1900 999 110 or SMS the word OPERA, your name and address to 1993 3300.

For more information about the summer concerts, visit www.australianmusic.com.au
Competition calls cost 55c (including GST). Higher from public or mobile phones. Competition closes midnight today. Winner announced in next week's *Travel*.



DOLLAR BUYS

CHINESE RENMINBI	6.4175
EURO	0.6011
HONG KONG DOLLAR	6.8701
INDONESIAN RUPIAH	8260
JAPANESE YEN	98.30
MALAYSIAN RINGGIT	2.9114
NZ DOLLAR	1.1431
SINGAPORE DOLLAR	1.2673
UK POUND STERLING	0.4427
US DOLLAR	0.8797

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TRAVEL TEAM

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THE DEAL

➔ **Getting there:** The 2008 Marlborough Wine Festival is on Sat, Feb 9. Tickets \$NZ40 (\$35). Daily Air New Zealand Melbourne to Blenheim flights via Wellington. www.wine-marlborough-festival.co.nz

➔ **Staying:** The colonial homestead, Sennen House, in Picton is the ideal base for exploring. From \$NZ330 (\$289) a night. www.sennenhouse.co.nz

➔ **More NZ feasting:** Hawkes Bay Wine Festival, Feb 2,3, www.hawkesbaynz.com Devonport Wine Festival, Feb 16-17, www.devonportwinefestival.co.nz The Food Show (Christchurch, Mar 28-30; Wellington, May 16-18; Auckland, Jul 31-Aug 3), www.foodshow.co.nz



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