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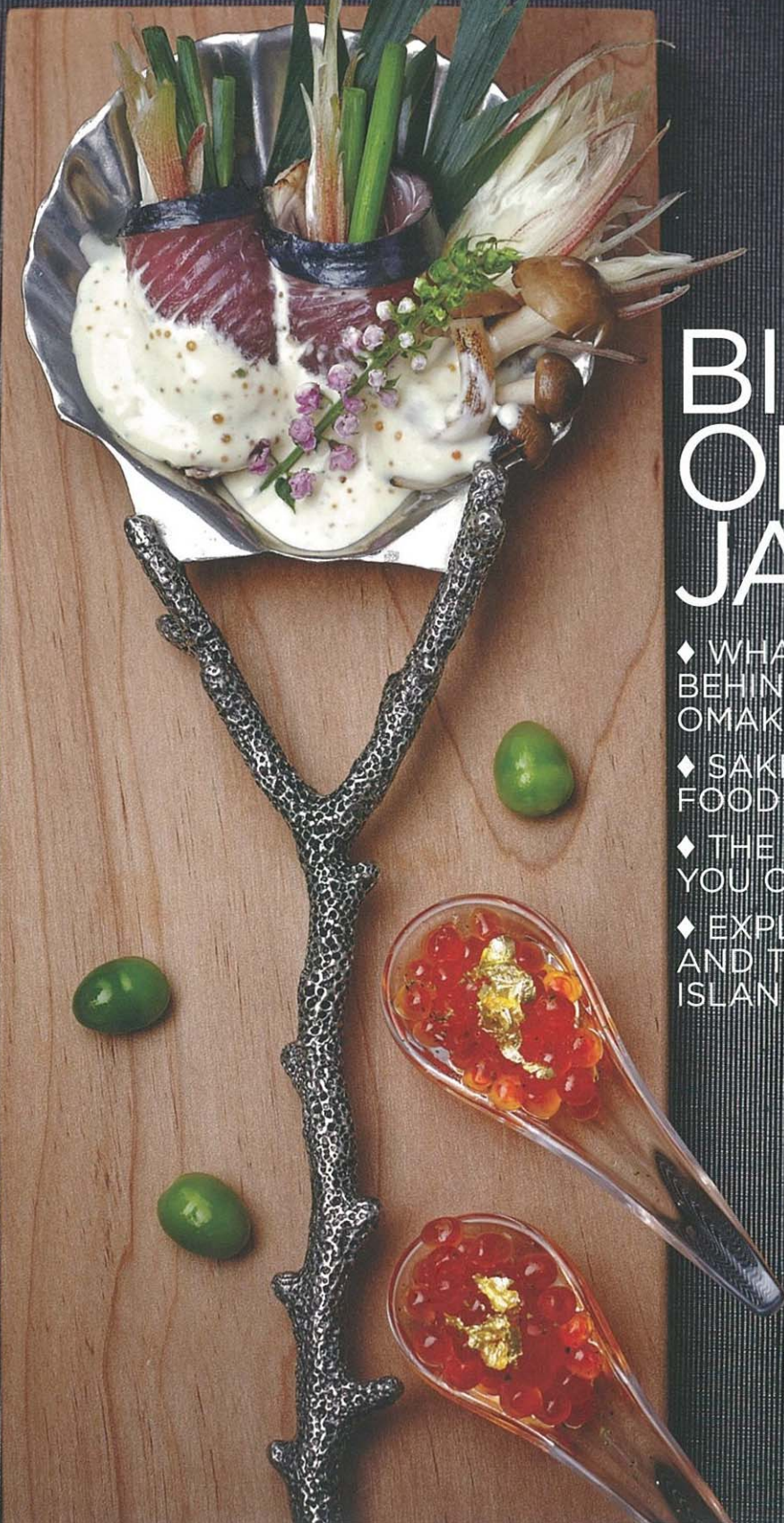
CULINARY POP-UPS: HIPSTER FAD OR HERE TO STAY?

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DINING GUIDE

Variety is the spice of wine

Saint Clair Family Estate's Hamish Clark, New Zealand Winemaker of the Year 2012, produces up to 12 varieties from countless small parcels. June Lee finds out how Marlborough's iconic Sauvignon Blanc stacks up as more grapes come of age.



Hamish Clark

Pinot Gris and Gewürztraminer are the latest grapes that Hamish Clark has been getting hands-on with. These, in addition to Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Riesling, Grüner Veltliner, Pinot Noir, Syrah and Merlot, occupy his time at Saint Clair, one of New Zealand's largest family-managed labels. It's this Kiwi's first time in Singapore, where he hopes to extend the reach of the boutique winery.

Clark has worked at Saint Clair since 2001, a 14-year run, in which he rose up the ranks from cellar hand and lab manager to helming the 2006 vintage as senior winemaker, which was also the year when a new state-of-the-art winery was inaugurated. He works together with chief consultant and flying winemaker Matt Thomson, who has been instrumental since the label's inception in 1994.

A GAMBLE ON GRAPES

As Clark explains, while Old World winemakers had centuries of past experience to turn to, Marlborough's relatively new winemaking industry has reached world-class standard within 40 years. "Even within one vintage, you get to see how different parcels are performing and how varied the wines are, when made by different winemakers. Winemakers in Marlborough are aligned in getting the best expression of Sauvignon Blanc, through better understanding and appreciation of its style," he says, noting though that while freshness and vibrancy is key, there are other textures and techniques in play, as evidenced in styles such as the heavily oaked wines. "The boundaries are still being pushed!"

Sauvignon Blanc is Marlborough's calling card, a variety that dazzles with its herbaceous gooseberry characteristics when grown in the region's cooler climate and rich soils. But this wasn't always the case. It was only in the 1970s that this South Island area was secured for grape plantations by the Montana (now Brancott Estate) company. Large scale plantings of Müller Thurgau and Chenin Blanc first took hold, before Phylloxera affected the region and vines were pulled out in favour of the promising Sauvignon Blanc grape.

There are more than 100 wineries in Marlborough today, with over 23,000 hectares under vine. Previous crops, such as apples and barley, have long been given over to grape. Clark, who grew up nearby in urban Bleinheim, worked in microbiology, zoology and forensics before returning full circle to wines. By chance, he joined Saint Clair through family connections. Though only started in 1994, Saint Clair was already growing a reputation under Neal and Judy Ibbotson, who planted and sold grapes for other wineries since 1978.

One of the more daring – and perhaps controversial – moves has been the introduction of Pioneer Block wines. “The vineyards are carved into subplots, and each wine is graded separately,” Clark explains. For instance, in 2014, they rated 300 tanks of Sauvignon Blanc to establish tiers of quality – the grading included looking subjectively at vintage conditions, viticultural practices and answering tough questions on what works or doesn’t. About one percent of harvest goes to make the Reserve, while some are designated for the Pioneer Block range. The bulk of high quality juice goes into the Premium core range with the balance making up the Vicar’s Choice (entry level) label as well as white-label wines for large U.K. retail brands such as Tesco.

Launched in 2005, Pioneer Blocks – essentially wines from specialist single vineyard parcels – are made only when the quality is good enough. There are blocks that are now “retired” as the fruit hasn’t performed up to par, while other blocks



have consistently scored gold medals. The process allows the winemakers to learn more definitely about terroir and identify new areas for each grape type. They’ve managed to dispel certain myths as well, such as showing that vine stress can be detrimental to quality.

There’s no way of predicting what consumers want to drink in the next 10 years, but Marlborough is seeing promise with its superb Pinot Noirs and distinctly aromatic Gewürztraminers. “There’s still so much to learn about Marlborough’s terroir,” reflects Clark. “From the early days when producers were reluctant to plant Sauvignon Blanc, the grape has now become the door opener for other varieties.” **e**

❖ SAINT CLAIR PIONEER BLOCK 14 DOCTOR’S CREEK PINOT NOIR 2012

Grape variety: Pinot Noir

Taste: The Pinot Noir from this parcel – enjoying cooler nights and a longer ripening period – produces fragrant, pretty aromatics. Silky ripe cherries, violets and red plum on the nose, with good acid balance and a toasty finish. Clark raves about its match with duck confit, oilier fish such as tuna, and seasoned salmon. \$59

❖ SAINT CLAIR RAPAUHA RESERVE MERLOT 2012

Grape variety: Merlot

Taste: This Reserve range Merlot is made only when the grapes ripen enough to exhibit rich, concentrated aromas of blackberries, plums



and dark chocolate. Though Merlot represents only a small part of the portfolio, Clark notes that when it’s good, it’s really good. To drink right away or cellar carefully for 15 years. \$59

❖ SAINT CLAIR GODFREY’S CREEK RESERVE NOBLE RIESLING 2013

Grape variety: Riesling

Taste: At just 10% alcohol, this delicate yet complex dessert wine refreshes with its palate of creamed white clover honey. Good natural acidity, from warm days and cold nights, balances out intense apricot and orange peel flavours – an ideal match with blue cheese and fruit pies. Not cloying. \$42 (375ml)

Wines available from Cornerstone Wines,
www.cornerstonewines.com