



Get to know Kiwi wines before 2010 fest

Tim Pawsey, Special To North Shore News

One of the smartest things the Vancouver Playhouse Wine Festival ever did was to come up with the idea of regional spotlights.

Celebrating a different region each year offers a chance for the regular festival-goer to travel the world of wine vicariously.

This year's choice of a pair of smaller but still significant regions provides an intriguing opportunity to compare two southern hemisphere regions – New Zealand and Argentina – that in actual fact may prove to be quite complementary.

However, to make the most of that ticket, you'll want to hit the tasting room a little bit prepared. Like what winds up in the glass itself, wine producing countries are never homogenous but rather a sum of contrasting smaller regions. Over the next few weeks we'll take some time to explore in New Zealand, in particular – and meet some of the personalities behind the wines, many of whom will be traveling to Vancouver in April.

When it comes to varieties, sauvignon blanc is synonymous with New Zealand – which is not surprising, considering that the variety makes up 57 per cent of the current vintage. However, while Marlborough (on South Island) may have the lion's share, "savvy" from other regions – even from neighbouring Awatere Valley – can be distinctly different.

Then there's all the buzz about pinot noir, especially from Central Otago and its sub regions, many of whose wines continue to

win international acclaim. Key names to look for at the festival include Gibbston Highgate, Two Paddocks, Chard Farm and Waitiri Creek, as well as neophyte Ostler Vineyards, from in North Otago.

Former doctor and pinot noir perfectionist Jim Jerram and Jeff Sinnot searched far and wide before settling on his limestone streaked site in the wind-swept Waitaki Valley. Nor is Ostler only about pinot. While the lifted dark cherry, earth and savoury spice of Ostler Caroline's '06 pinot noir may capture your heart, don't miss the Blue House '08 pinot gris, with its stonefruit and mineral tones in a perfectly balanced package. True pioneers, Ostler, in the hands of Jerram and his wife Anne (Sinnot's sister) is certainly one to watch.

Pinophiles will also want to take note of the presence at the festival of Wairarapa, a small region tucked away behind a coastal range on the southern tip of North Island, which is producing some pretty stellar drops – including the 2009 Air New Zealand Wine Awards Championship Wine, a 2008 Pinot Noir from diminutive (but now very well known) Julicher Vineyards, made by Finnish winemaker

Early in the Kiwi alpha line-up you'll come across the shared table of Ata Rangi and Paddy Borthwick, from Martinborough and nearby Gladstone, both in Wairarapa – a perfect chance to compare superb Pinots from similar but differing sites within the same region.