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# BEYOND THE VINES

Long celebrated for its sauvignon blanc, Marlborough reveals a deeper, more indulgent side – where boutique lodges, hidden restaurants, heli-flights and sea-to-table feasts offer a luxurious taste of New Zealand's sunniest region

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WORDS BY TATYANA LEONOV



There's something irresistibly alluring about a secret door. To me, it suggests the space beyond holds stories untold... maybe even a touch of magic. And right now, I'm beginning to feel that magic stir.

After being whisked away from Blenheim Airport in a sleek car, we roll through the grand entry gates and crunch down the gravel path of The Marlborough Boutique Hotel & Vineyard just as the sun begins to dip below the horizon. Autumn leaves are out across the country's South Island, and vivid yellows and oranges glow in the golden, dappled light.

## SUNSHINE MOMENTS

This dreamy estate is my base for four days of exploring what is not only New Zealand's largest wine region, but also the sunniest region in the entire country. My room is as lavish as they come, with a plush king-size bed, a bathroom bigger than my bedroom at home, and French doors that open onto a courtyard. But beyond the room, it's the personalised service and attention to detail that make this boutique hotel particularly special.

The main building dates back to 1901, when it was originally constructed as a convent for the Sisters of Mercy. For decades, it was a place of quiet reflection, and traces of that serene past still echo through the halls. Owner Angela Dillon purchased the property in 2016 and lovingly restored it over a two-year period, resulting in a lodge that blends ecclesiastical heritage with modern luxury.

Back to that secret door. It is actually a cleverly disguised sliding panel that opens at the press of a button to reveal the hotel's acclaimed one-hatted restaurant, Harvest – the

only space across the grounds open to the public. The venue flows seamlessly from the intimate indoor dining room to a light-filled orangerie, then spills out onto a generous deck overlooking manicured lawns and the kitchen gardens beyond that encompass the 6.5-hectare estate. Seasonal produce grown here inspires head chef Wieland Matzig's farm-to-table creations, alongside ingredients sourced from local suppliers.

When I check in, the hotel has recently introduced both a personalised wine flight and cooking demonstration for guests, and one afternoon I get the chance to watch Matzig prepare one of the most unexpectedly addictive dishes on his menu: charred estate cabbage with chive crème, *pangrattato* and purple sage butter, fried until just blackened in the Mibrasa oven.

Sommelier Neil Kapadia begins my accompanying flight – perfectly tailored to my personal taste – with a crisp Family Estate Cuvée No.1 NV, followed by a smooth 2020 merlot malbec from the hotel's own vineyard. The Marlborough Estate Sauvignon Blanc aside, this region's red wines – particularly pinot noir – have gained increasing international recognition in recent years, and as the malbec cuts through the chive cream to reveal subtle layers in the cabbage, I can see why.

**ABOVE** The drama of Marlborough Sounds  
© Mike Heydone

**OPPOSITE** Dining alfresco at Harvest  
© RBP Photo

**OPENING PAGE A**  
wine tasting with a view at Yealands © Sophie Pearcey

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## NATURE'S WINE MAP

Marlborough spans four distinct valleys: Wairau, Awatere, Te Hoiere (Pelorus) and Tōtaranui (Queen Charlotte).

Wairau's warm, gravelly soils suit vibrant sauvignon blanc and ripe pinot noir, while cooler, windier Awatere yields more structured reds and mineral-driven whites.

Coastal Pelorus and Queen Charlotte are cooler and wetter, better known for bush walks and calm waters than vineyards.

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## CLOUDY BAY CALLING

No visit to Marlborough would be complete without a visit to world-renowned vineyard Cloudy Bay. While tastings are the highlight, I start with a private tour of the estate, discovering its subtle shift toward sustainable viticulture, from organic vineyard practices to mindful water management and biodiversity conservation.

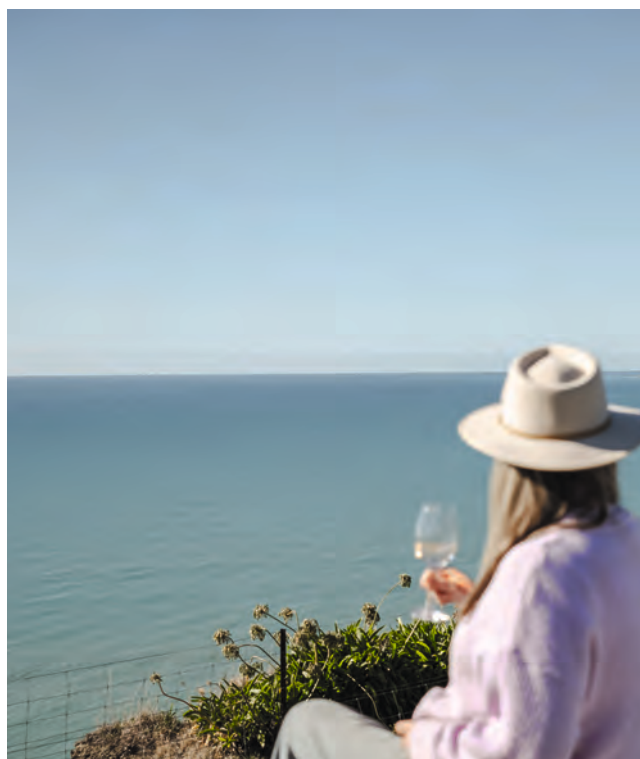
There's a calm precision to everything that's done here, a kind of considered beauty – you feel it in the land, and you taste it in the glass. The 2023 Te Koko Sauvignon Blanc is bursting with passionfruit and gentle spice, while the 2024 Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc is crisp and vibrant with grapefruit, lime zest and a flinty edge. Then the 2022 Pinot Noir, savoury and elegant, lingers long after the final sip. This is Marlborough at its finest: layered, patient and quietly world-class.

## BY LAND, SEA AND AIR

While wine is reason enough to stay anchored, Marlborough's mesmerising landscape begs exploration, and just a five-minute walk from Cloudy Bay you can take it all in from above on a tailor-made flight with Precision Helicopters. From the air, the landscape unfolds like a living map as tidy vine rows give way to rolling hills, then melt into the glinting waters of Marlborough Sounds, stretching in every direction. A dazzling maze of inlets and islands wrapped in dense bush slips into the blue-grey haze beyond.

Touching down at The Marlborough Hotel's helipad, there's a definite spring in my step as I stroll back through the entry hall, helmet hair and all. That spring quickly turns into a skip the next day as my adventure returns to Marlborough Sounds – this time on the water with Grant Orchard, local skipper, chef and the brains behind Katabatic Charters.

The day is clear as we cruise through the glassy waters of the Sounds aboard Orchard's impressive boat – most of which he built himself. He places his own smoked tuna on the table to start, then dives overboard before resurfacing with abalone and sea urchin, prepared and served to us in pillowy *bao* buns. There's freshly caught fish, too, grilled and presented with slices of butter-drenched sourdough. It's fresh, wildly flavourful and utterly interactive dining – the kind of lunch that ruins regular meals forever.



## SLOW SIPS, LONG LUNCHES

Luckily for me, regular meals aren't on the itinerary. I snack my way around Marlborough, lingering for casual bites at Frank's Oyster Bar and Eatery (the triple-fried potatoes are life-changing), Brazilian flavours at Gramado's, and a degustation at Arbour that's genuinely something to write home about. The hats are well-earned.

One of my favourite meals isn't in a traditional restaurant at all – it's in a sleek pod that feels like a tiny home, perched high on a hillside. The Yealands VIP container is more designer hideaway than dining room, cantilevered above the vines with sweeping views across the valley. But what makes the lunch – a spread of smoked salmon, tender lamb and crisp garden greens paired with estate wines – even more memorable is the journey here. From the cellar door, I hop on an e-bike and follow a gravel track winding through vineyards and coastal bluff, with the Pacific shimmering in the distance – a perfectly Marlborough experience.

**ABOVE** Soaking up the stunning view at Yealands © Sophie Pearcey

**OPPOSITE, TOP** Dining at Arbour © Richard Briggs

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT** Marlborough Sounds

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT** Chef Matzig in the Harvest gardens



### A TASTE OF MARLBOROUGH'S SOUL

'Perfectly Marlborough' is otherwise hard to put into words. But spending a day with Richard Ellis, better known as 'The Marlborist' – an arborist and natural storyteller working with Explore Marlborough – brings me closer to uncovering the quiet magic of this region. We join Ben Cowley, director at the region's oldest vineyard, Auntsfield, on a hillside with a bottle of his 2021 Heritage Pinot Noir – followed by a pour from Richard's own 2023 Marlborist Pinot. It's 10am, but somehow sipping reds at this hour in a region famous for its whites doesn't feel wrong – it feels like an invitation to slow down and savour it all.

By the time the day winds down at Mahi Wine, the clock no longer matters – it's all about the company and what's in our glass. With Max Bicknell pouring, barrel samples flow, old vintages surface like hidden treasures, and the conversation drifts to patience, risk, wild ferments and the art of restraint. It's warm, unpretentious, and a reminder that in Marlborough, it's the people and moments that bring the wine to life.

### JOURNEY NOTES

Plan your visit to Marlborough at [marlboroughnz.com](https://marlboroughnz.com).

Rates at The Marlborough Boutique Hotel & Vineyard start at NZ\$1,500 (about AU\$1,400) per night. [themarlborough.co.nz](https://themarlborough.co.nz)

*"From the air, the landscape unfolds like a living map as tidy vine rows give way to rolling hills, then melt into the glinting waters of Marlborough Sounds, stretching in every direction."*



**OPPOSITE** The Marlborough's Chapel House Bar © RBP Photo

**TOP, LEFT** Cycling through Yealands © Sarah Watkins

**TOP, RIGHT** The Marlborough is one of the South Island's most scenic estates