

Arneis in Marlborough

Tessa Nicholson

Currently there are 4.5 hectares of Arneis growing in Marlborough – which ensures this variety falls very much into the “alternative” category for winemakers.

Master of Wine Perspective with Emma Jenkins MW

Another Italian native finding a happy home in the Antipodes, Arneis has been grown for centuries in Piedmont with the most distinctive wines originating in the Roero hillsides northwest of Alba. Traditionally, Arneis was used in the flagship Barolo DOCG to soften the fierce tannins of Nebbiolo (hence its synonym, Nebbiolo Bianco) and the two varieties were often planted as a field blend, with the bonus of Arneis' heady, sweet scent attracting birds away from the more valuable Nebbiolo bunches. However, the fashion for 100% Nebbiolo Barolo saw Arneis plantings decline to the brink of extinction - by the 1970s, only two producers were making varietal Arneis wines (one of whom, Bruno Giacosa, still produces amongst the best examples). Fortunately, a renaissance in Piedmontese whites saw vine numbers increase and there are now around 700 hectares in Italy, nearly all in the Roero and Langhe DOCs, as well as international plantings in California and Oregon, Australia (mainly Victoria) and New Zealand.

Regarded as somewhat challenging to grow with its low acidity, propensity for over ripeness and susceptibility to powdery mildew, it's perhaps no surprise Arneis' name means 'little rascal' (obviously a tempting moniker for producers). Better understanding of the variety and clonal improvements have helped, as has discovery that chalky sandy soils (such as Roero's) help provide more acidity and structure while vines planted in sandy clay soil result in more exotically aromatic fruit. Generally dry, fullish-bodied and subtly scented, classic Arneis characteristics are ripe pears, apricot and almonds. Wines are occasionally fermented and/or aged in (old) oak, which typically mutes aromatics but adds body and texture. It is best drunk within a year or so of vintage.

First planted in the Clevedon Hills in 1998, interest from producers of all shapes and sizes means New Zealand currently sports around 35 hectares of productive vines,

predominantly in Hawke's Bay, Gisborne and Marlborough. Our cool climate and marked diurnal variation help to preserve acidity and showcase Arneis' varietal character, suggesting good potential for this particular rascal.

Viticulture

John Forrest is one who has a small plot dedicated to this Italian grape. He says his interest came from trips to Europe, where he liked the wine, its aromatics particularly. Forrest Estate's original plantings of Arneis were six years ago, with 1 hectare in the mid valley in the Wairau. More recently he has planted another small block in the Brancott Valley.

“It seems to grow quite happily on the light sandy soils in the Wairau and in the Brancott.”

While crops have yet to be harvested from the Brancott, Forrest says the yields from the Wairau indicate it will be a moderate cropper, on the two canes they have pruned to.

“It is not nearly as vigorous as Sauvignon Blanc and Gruner Veltliner. Thus far we have cropped it around 7 – 8 tonnes per hectare, that is where it seems to want to sit naturally. It doesn't require much shoot or crop thinning. It is what I call a medium upright canopy, more so than Pinot Noir but quite similar to Chardonnay in terms of vigour, crop level and canopy.”

He describes it as a mid-early ripening variety, certainly not late.

“It seems to be physiologically in terms of taste, quite modest in sugars, 21 or 22 (brix). It carries quite a gentle acidity, so it is a nice relief from the assault of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc or Riesling. More like a Pinot Gris in terms of its acid profile, which means it has a pH of 3 or 4 and just over 7grms of acid.”

Winemaking

Forrest says Arneis is not a fiddly wine to make and requires very little intervention. It doesn't seem to suit oak as it is aromatically delicate. The acid is low and it doesn't require malo or oak, it just wants a clean stainless steel ferment. We use one of our best Pinot Gris yeasts to enhance the texture a bit, give it a light lees contact and stirring for two to three months and then bottle it in October or November.

“I would describe it like Pinot Gris. We don't need to de-acidify as it is already low in acid.”

In terms of matching this wine, Forrest says he enjoys it as an after five drink, which doesn't require food to bring out the flavours, and it also doesn't need to be excessively cold.

"It is a very pleasant medium bodied, softer aromatic white. Sort of like a Pinot Gris without the sweetness. It doesn't appear to suit sugar, it wants to be dry. In fact it seems to be balanced at lower residual sugar."

In its home country, Arneis is often referred to as "the little rascal" due to some difficulties in terms of growing. Forrest says that is not the case in Marlborough.

"I don't see anything difficult about it. It seems to be no more than medium vigour, crop levels are pretty reliable, not excessive. I would rate it as a good match for Marlborough. I don't think it needs to be in any warmer climate, because you wouldn't be able to keep enough acid in it."

So if it is a good match for this region, should there be more planted than the current 4.5 hectares?

"I can't say to anyone, plant it because there is a ready market for it. Because there's not. I haven't as yet managed to get it into Italian restaurants, where I felt we might get some traction. People are very reticent to try new varieties, it has to be said."