

## Uncorked: Grape harvest no picnic, but payoff's tasty



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STOKESDALE --

Over lunch, Claire Allan, a New Zealand winemaker, hears my tale of Merlot picking. She asks: "What's a yellow jacket?"

We compare notes on bothersome bugs (New Zealand doesn't have many), on clay (New Zealand's is a light, blowsy soil, different from Dixie's gluey muck), on our two different worlds turned upside down.

Years back, on her first visit to the Triad, Allan asked her hosts about the dollop of Southern culture on the plate before her: What's a grit?

To this day, Allan can't get grits out of her mind.

On this day, Allan has returned to the South to showcase wines from her Huia Vineyards, at the northern tip of South Island, the famed Marlborough region. We taste through a 2002 Brut sparkler, a 2007 Pinot Gris, a 2007 Sauvignon Blanc, a 2007 Gewurztraminer and a 2006 Pinot Noir.

Allan, in intoxicating accent, speaks of sustainable farming and her commitment to a clean, green, 24,000-case operation. Huia wines -- \$20 and above -- hit high-end retail and restaurants in the Triad.

Each is a textbook example of grapes from a cooler climate, influenced by maritime conditions and nearby rivers. I remark how New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc reminds me of grapefruit. As the grandson of a Florida grapefruit grower, I mean it as a compliment.

Allan says she hopes to mitigate that experience by limiting crop yields. So, maybe, I think, she doesn't take my observation as much of a compliment.

New Zealand is renown for Sauvignon Blanc, a style unlike any in the world. Huia's is crisp, balanced, a little floral, a little lemon-lime and a little melon ball.

What I'm not getting is gooseberry -- the most common descriptor of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. My research reveals that gooseberry -- a popular wine term -- is a wild berry indigenous to the British Isles, Scotland, Norway and parts of southwestern Asia.

I've not visited there, so the gooseberry has me at a disadvantage.

Allan, too, has me at a disadvantage.

When I say her sparkler reminds me of the yeasty aroma thrown by my home bread maker, she conjures the more specific "brioche."

I might have added, "has a chewy bite like a slow-cooked grit" and meant it as a compliment.

Allan, I suspect, might not have taken it as such.

Given the top-shelf quality of Huia's Sauvignon Blanc, I do know this: Allan sure knows grits from gooseberries.

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