



## Simon Says

**Winemaker Simon Fell on the vino down under—and where to get a taste in Atlanta.**

| *By Katie Kelly Bell* |

Kiwi wine has its exotic charms, but most of us don't reach for a Bordeaux blend from New Zealand when we want to impress someone. Simon Fell, winemaker for Villa Maria, New Zealand's most awarded winery, insists that's a mistake. During a recent lunch here in Atlanta, he tasted us through Villa Maria's more couture labels—wines now appearing on shelves and on local restaurant wine lists. Most are familiar with the widely available Private Bin label, but it's his single vineyard and reserve labels that merit a special trip to the store. Here, he gives some sage advice.

**NEW ZEALAND WINES ARE SMASHING VALUES. THEY CAN TAKE ON ANY CALIFORNIA PINOT AT HALF THE PRICE.** We have the climate that beats all, pure maritime; so N.Z. can grow just about any grape well, but pinot noir is king. It grows well in every single wine region down here.

**NOT ALL N.Z. PINOTS ARE THE SAME.** In Central Otago you get rich, dense, more tannic versions compared to the elegant, more feminine pinots from Marlborough.

**IMPRESS ANYONE WITH OUR TAYLORS PASS SINGLE VINEYARD PINOT NOIR.** She's a finely balanced beauty with a sensual lemon-basil perfume on the nose. (\$37, available in retail stores this spring)

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**WE HAVE SOME OF THE WORLD'S FINEST BORDEAUX BLENDS, BUT PEOPLE DON'T ALWAYS KNOW THAT.** Our single vineyard Gimblett Gravels cabernet sauvignon/merlot blend can easily hold its own against the big boys from Bordeaux and Napa. It has stunning acidity, notes of coffee, dried mint and ripe berry, and it pairs beautifully with every food imaginable. Here's the best part. At \$34.99 a bottle, it won't require a mortgage to be enjoyed.

**THE SCREW CAP IS THE IDEAL WINE CLOSURE.** Villa Maria pioneered the screw cap in New Zealand, and today, we can argue with confidence that our wines have a fresher quality when opened. We did a tasting comparison of several 10-year-old wines, some sealed with cork and some with screw caps, and the screw cap wines were just more bright and vibrant all around.

**MY WINEMAKING STRATEGY** is to source excellent fruit and just steer wine down its natural path.

**I FOLLOW THE DALAI LAMA AND BEAR GRYLLS** on Twitter.

**THE SHARKS DON'T BOTHER ME WHEN I'M SURFING.** They are part of the landscape in New Zealand—so you get used to it.

**TASTE GIMBLETT GRAVELS' RESERVE CABERNET SAUVIGNON MERLOT.** It's at Feast in Decatur, Eagle's Landing Country Club and Thrive in downtown Atlanta. ■