



Wanaka Winery's vines grown by the lake.

A Down Under Adventure

IN EARLY FEBRUARY OF 2019, 16 people set out from Chicago and/or Nashville for a month of wine and food adventures in New Zealand and Australia. After taking different flights we met up in Auckland and continued to Queenstown. We checked into our new home, The Rees Hotel, and went to dinner. An abbreviated dinner it was as some of us had been traveling for 36 hours. The food and wines were very good, but sleep was beaconing.

After a restful night followed by breakfast and a driving tour of Queenstown, we departed on a great adventure. For many years Shotover Jet company has been offering a chance to experience an invigorating jet boat ride to remember. It blends a breathtaking ride at 60 mph through pristine natural landscapes while coming within inches of the canyon walls. We were



Wooing Tree Winery is located in Central Otago in New Zealand.

all mystified, terrified, stupefied, and finally glad that we had put our lives in potential peril after it was over. Except for the vocal hoarseness and some black and blue body marks resulting from the high speed 360° turns just missing the canyon walls, we were fine and very happy we took the risk.

We returned to Queenstown and had a great lunch and wine in a restaurant overlooking the lake. After the morning thrill, we decided to use the

funicular to go up the mountain by the city and use the elevation to better orient ourselves. The vistas were fantastic from the top and seemed even better after sipping several glasses of local wine. After a time to rest we went to dinner at the hotel. The food and wines were rated among the best of the South Island and it proved true.

The next day we drove north to Lake Wanaka to visit what I consider to be the most beautiful location I've ever seen for a winery. Wanaka Winery is located on the lake itself with commanding views of the lake and surrounding mountains. All the wines tasted were good to excellent, but I believe almost any wines served in such surroundings would be overwhelmed by the beauty. Our hostess was excellent, and a good time was had by all.

A STOP AT WOONG TREE WINERY

The next stop was the Woong Tree Winery—a new one for me. We tasted outside, shielded from the sun. The setting was beautiful. Every wine was very good to excellent and local cheeses were served to enhance their enjoyment. The entire experience, hosted by a charming wine statesman, was made even more memorable because we had no prior expectations. We finished the wine day by stopping at a place that poured almost all of Central Otago's best wines—very impressive. On the return we visited Gibbston Valley Winery for some great Pinot Noir tasting.

A ONCE IN A LIFETIME EXPERIENCE

The day's greatest adventures still laid in wait. We returned to our base and departed in three 'stealth' helicopters for an unforgettable sky ride to a glacier in the Southern Alps. It was located somewhat near Milford Sound from which there were unbelievable 360° views. After a game of tag through the passes we landed on the glacier and spent a half hour or so tramping on matter where no one had been before. This was one of the quietest, most exhilarating experiences any of us had ever had. Talk about a once in a lifetime memory!



Jim Bryant enters the helicopter that flew to a glacier in the Southern Alps.

After another great dinner at our hotel, we rested and departed for Blenheim in the Marlborough region which is New Zealand's most famous area for Sauvignon Blanc. We had ample great food and wine over the next two days, but the highlight was the Marlborough Icons tour, combining two winery tours and a seafood cruise in the Marlborough Sounds. We visited Framingham Winery for a short tasting of several Sauvignon Blancs (all excellent) and then went to Saint Clair Winery for a superb lunch accompanied by several of their great wines. We were very content at this point and then left for the trip through the Sounds which were unforgettable. We went out of harbor for about 45 minutes to the Greenshell Mussel Farms as well as oyster farms. The entire time in and around the "farms" we were feasting on 'all you can eat' greenshell mussels cooked onboard in front of our eyes. Some of us must have eaten non-stop for a half hour. Accompanied by some of New Zealand's greatest Sauvignon Blancs, we were in 'wine/food' heaven. This was an appropriate closure to an unforgettable experience. A vôtre santé! U



A greenshell mussel farm in the Marlborough Sound.

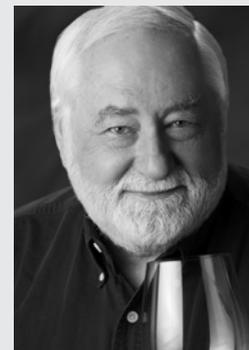


PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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