



Subtleties of flavour
on the fine wine trail



With its 15 wineries, Waipara Valley is for those who love a drop, writes **Briar Jensen**.

THERE is something decidedly decadent about wine tasting, especially when you're guided by the vineyard's assistant wine maker at a sunny garden table spread with delicious antipasto platters. The fact this sommelier was young, handsome, well-travelled and so knowledgeable merely added to the pleasure.

I was at Waipara Springs, a boutique vineyard and winery in New Zealand's Waipara Valley, North Canterbury, about 50 minutes north of Christchurch.

It is one of 15 wineries in the area which form the Waipara Valley Wine Trail, perfect for a day trip or weekend away.

We drove out from Christchurch, stopping for morning tea at Pukeko Junction Cafe, famed for its home baking. While my friends wisely shared a sweet tart, I chose a warm herb scone which, smeared with melting butter, tasted just like my Mum's. Despite a gallant attempt, it was too big for me to finish.

The combined cafe, gallery and wine shop claims to carry every label, variety and vintage of Waipara Valley wines, and offers savings on mixed vineyard cases. It makes a great one-stop-shop if you're short on time.

The Canterbury region is well known for its cool-climate wines, and Waipara Valley, blessed with



Bumper crop: Navigating through a vineyard in the Waipara Valley region (above), Waipara Springs Winery (left) and sampling the local fare at Waipara (below right)

its own microclimate, is rapidly gaining a reputation of its own.

Although benefiting from the Pacific Ocean just 10km away, which tempers extremes of heat and cold, it is protected from the prevailing easterly winds by the Teviotdale Hills.

The soils are a rich blend of claypan over alluvial limestone, derived from a prehistoric lake bed in the valley floor. Combined with the old vine stock, this, says out host Frank Manifold, is what gives Waipara Springs' wines their depth and intensity.

The 26ha estate has some of the oldest vines in the valley, with chardonnay first planted in 1982. Now, the vineyard includes riesling, sauvignon blanc, cabernet sauvignon and pinot noir, together with some young plantings

of merlot and gewurztraminer. Because all grapes used for production are grown on the estate, quality can be controlled from vine to bottle.

We listened enthusiastically as Frank spoke of the estate's new Premo range — wines with distinct, structurally driven flavours. However, my inexperienced palate couldn't detect all the subtleties of flavour he described as we swirled, sniffed and sipped the different wines and vintages, but the sav blanc was definitely my favourite.

Waipara Springs is owned by the Moore and Grant families. Jill and Bruce Moore have lived on the property since buying it from her parents in 1941. When irrigation came to the valley, they looked for other crops to replace

their wheat and sheep and started growing grapes for Corbans Wines, before establishing their own winery in 1990. Bruce, who is as gnarled as his vines, is the viticulturalist, son Andrew general manager, and Jill wine-bar manager.

There's a restaurant/cafe with both indoor and outdoor seating and the menu, prepared by chef Charlotte Whittleston, is extensive, with regularly changing dishes of the day.

We selected the Springs Platter, which included smoked salmon, spicy sausages, salami, olives, dips and delicious deep-fried mushrooms. There's even a children's platter of savouries, fairy bread, fruit and marshmallow kebabs.

Although tempted to linger all afternoon, Frank had other commitments, and so did we — a helicopter transfer to Hanmer Springs Thermal Pools and Spa.

Taking off from the front pad-dock, we skimmed low over the immaculate rows of vines, giving a stunning view of the estate, before heading towards the distant, snow-tipped Southern Alps.

With 190-degree views from the front seat, we saw the valley in perspective; regimental rows of vines surrounded by sheltering trees, snuggled under the protection of rolling hills.

Eventually, vines gave way to farmland and rivers. You could almost feel their glacial coldness. As forests of dark-green pines came into view, Waipara Springs disappeared behind us.

■ The writer was a guest of Christchurch and Canterbury Tourism.

Waipara Valley, NZ

Getting there: Jetstar (www.jetstar.com.au) or Pacific Blue (www.flypacificblue.com.au) to Christchurch. Waipara Valley is a 50-minute drive north. Hanmer Springs Helicopters, (64 3) 315 7758, www.hanmerhelicopters.co.nz

Stay: The Classic Villa, a five-star boutique hotel in the heart of Christchurch, (64 3) 377 7905, www.theclassicvilla.co.nz

Visit: Waipara Springs, State Highway 1, Waipara, www.waiparasprings.co.nz Wine tasting \$3 per person for groups. Wine can be bought by the glass, bottle or case. Lunch bookings are recommended for weekends. Pukeko Junction, State Highway 1, Leithfield, (64 3) 314 8834.

Details: Canterbury and Waipara wine trail maps from tourist bureaux or Pukeko Junction. Extend your wine tour by heading north through Kaikoura, Marlborough and Nelson.

More: www.christchurchnz.net, www.waiparawine.co.nz

