

An unadulterated paradise of the sort usually found only in Lyon or Strasbourg

Herzog's does not promise much from the outside. Shrubs flutter in the breeze, flowers beam benignly; the restaurant's building might be a headmistress's sea-side retirement home. Smug vineyards surround it.



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Upon entry, however, another world beckons. It is the world where Michelin food guide inspectors climb the oxygenated highest peaks to assess the talents of monastic chefs and the contents of commodious wine cellars. Immaculately laid tables and starched linen table cloths reflect only the superficialities of a serious eatery. Herzog's chef Louis Schindler's cooking resolutely puts the kitchen in the *trois étoiles* category. If this is not the finest restaurant in New Zealand I am Rachel Hunter.

Therese Herzog, front of house, introduces her husband Hans. In his shy way, in the reserved manner of someone from German-speaking Switzerland who has had to imbibe English from the polished floor up, it slowly becomes apparent that the vines outside are his. Hans Herzog makes wines. Indeed, the sensitive taster is quickly made aware as s/he tastes that no-one is making better wine in the whole of New Zealand than Hans Herzog.

He uses wild yeasts, that is to say the yeasts nature has deposited on the skins of the grapes and wafted around the winery. His vines, on just twelve hectares, receive no chemical fertilizers, fungicides, or pesticides. His yields are low ("one bottle of wine per vine", he tells me). He does not leaf pluck his vines, so they have natural shelter from the cruel UV light. His methods are traditional, old-fashioned, and representative of pure committed craftsmanship. His luscious liquids are as good, if not better, than anything that has ever passed my lips as great New Zealand wine.

Herzog Chardonnay is composed of complex, smoky melon and a touch of soft fruit. I rated the 2001 19 points out of 20. The Viognier has classic apricot richness and will age beautifully. The Pinot Noir has fine tannins and dark cherry fruit. His "Montepulciano" is so stunningly concentrated as to make one choke with pleasure. The Bordeaux blend – Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Malbec – offers liquorice, nuts, fine-toned berries, and smooth tannic power.