

The Rise and Rise of Kiwi Pinot Noir

by *Bob Campbell MW*

Many countries produce Pinot Noir but only a handful can boast “First Division” status. It’s hard to say when New Zealand gained entry to the elite group that somehow manage to make magnificent wine out of this thin-skinned, genetically unstable grape variety but it would certainly be in the past decade. That represents extraordinary progress when you consider that the history of premium Pinot Noir in New Zealand began in 1982.

In the beginning

In 1982 Canterbury winery, St Helena, produced its second commercial vintage. A Pinot Noir from that vintage boosted the new winery’s fortunes by winning a gold medal at a local wine show. Wine enthusiasts who snapped up the few hundred bottles discovered a wine of power and complexity. By today’s standards it was a fairly average Pinot Noir but at the time it stood head and shoulders above its peers. St Helena 1982 Pinot Noir was an inspiration to the handful of producers who were trialling the variety in the early eighties.

The first record of Pinot Noir vines in New Zealand dates back to 1869 when Joseph Soler planted a one-hectare vineyard near Wanganui. Vines planted included Black Burgundy, Black Morillon and Black July – all synonyms for Pinot Noir according to wine historian, Keith Stewart. It seems likely that Pinot Noir cuttings may have been



included in a shipment of 50 vine cuttings imported from Sydney by James Busby in 1833. Busby was New Zealand’s first winemaker and is also regarded as the Father of the Australian Wine Industry.

If indeed good Pinot Noir was made in the late part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century it didn’t survive phylloxera, a neo-prohibition movement and a general ambivalence toward quality table wine.

I credit jet aircraft and the growing affluence of baby-boomers with a growing interest in premium wine that sparked in the seventies, smouldered in the eighties and raged in the nineties. Jet aircraft allowed easy passage to Europe while a growth in disposable income made the fare affordable. Young New Zealanders headed north in droves to gain “overseas experience”. Those that returned brought with them a taste for good wine.

Martinborough’s scientific start

In 1979 soil scientist, Dr Derek Milne, published a study which detailed the similarities between the soil of Martinborough’s climate and those of premium French wine regions. Four wine enthusiasts, including Milne himself, planted vineyards in Martinborough producing their first wine in 1984. Others followed, including trained winemaker Larry McKenna, a man now widely known as “Mr Pinot Noir”.

Martinborough is one hour’s drive east of Wellington. It offers a readily identifiable Pinot Noir style thanks to the region’s relatively small size, its homogenous gravelly soils from a single river terrace and the length of time it has been making top examples of Pinot Noir. In fact vine age may also make a contribution to consistency as well as the concentration and rich texture of Martinborough Pinot Noir.

Martinborough was the country’s Pinot Noir capital until around 2005 when the brash, new Central Otago region rudely snatched the crown from Martinborough’s head.

Top producers: Ata Rangi, Martinborough Vineyard, Dry River, Craggy Range, Escarpment, Kusuda,



Jason Flowerday busy in the winery at Tē Whare Ra Wines, Marlborough.



Winter in the vineyards of Aurum Wines, Central Otago.

Central Otago wears the crown

Resentment at this loss of status still simmers in the Martinborough region although Central Otago's winemakers are blissfully unaware of it. Their isolated region is after all bigger with twice the vineyard area. It has majestic scenery with snow-capped mountains and azure lakes. It's an inland region with a continental influence in contrast to the rest of the country's coastal maritime wine regions. Central Otago is the world's most southerly wine region. Nearly two-thirds of Central Otago's vineyard is devoted to Pinot Noir which, in a good vintage, can be very good indeed. Central Otago makes the country's most distinctive Pinot Noir. To be best in the world of wine it is not enough to be very good, you also have to be distinctively different.

There is something about the plump, ripe fruit character of Central Otago Pinot Noir that makes most stand out in a

crowd. Add to that the occasional signature of wild thyme character and they couldn't be from anywhere else in the world. I write "most" because the cooler sub-regions of Gibbston, Wanaka and much of Alexandra produce wines on the edgier end of the style spectrum. These can often be more interesting and complex than the more sensual, easy-to-love,



fruit-bomb styles of warmer districts, particularly when the wines have benefited from a little bottle age.

Top producers: Felton Road, Mt Difficulty, Amisfield, Akarua, Rockburn, Quartz Reef, Burn Cottage Vineyard, Pisa Range, Grasshopper Rock, Doctors Flat, Valli,

Marlborough offers a bargain

Marlborough boasts 60% of the national vineyard and has 50% more vineyard area devoted to Pinot Noir than Central Otago, which comes a distant second.

Marlborough was a slow starter in the quality Pinot Noir stakes. Although over-cropping has been cited as the likely reason for early failure I think the move away from lighter, bonier soils to the clay-rich soils in the so-called Southern Valleys at the base of the Wither Hills played a more significant role. Quality also received a boost when Pinot Noir vineyards were established on hillside sites rather than the valley floor.

This large and vibrant wine region now makes some of the country's best examples of Pinot Noir. It offers fertile ground for Pinot Noir bargain hunters because the region is unfairly perceived to be in the shadow of more fashionable areas such as Martinborough and Central Otago. It's also hard to pin down a Pinot Noir style in such a large and diverse wine region. "Supple, elegant wines with flavours suggesting red fruits" is my stock response when asked to describe a regional style. I can think of many exceptions.

Top producers: Fromm, Dog Point, Churton, Villa Maria, Terravin, Nautilus, Cloudy Bay, Seresin, Auntsfield, Herzog, Clos Henri



Dom Maxwell, winemaker at Greystone Wines, Waipara Valley.

Nelson – a region of two halves

Nelson's two most prominent wine growing areas are the Waimea Plains and the Moutere Hills.

Pinot Noir from the Moutere Hills is, in my view, more structured, intense and often more austere than its accessible cousin from the flats. I detect a suggestion of chalky minerality in the Moutere wines although that impression may be slightly heightened by the knowledge that the mostly clay soils on the hills are reasonably rich in limestone. They are high energy wines boasting a backbone of taut acidity, a factor perhaps in their ability to age well.

Top producers: Neudorf and Woollaston on the Waimea Hills; Greenhough and Waimea on Waimea Plains.

Waipara – head for the hills

Like Nelson, Waipara has two distinctly different sub-regions; the lighter and often more gently aromatic wines grown on sandy soils and the richer, bolder and more intense wines grown on soils with a higher clay (and often limestone) content.

A short 15-minute drive west of Waipara is a chalk-rich area called Pyramid Valley. Only two winemakers are making wine there but have demonstrated an ability to produce outstanding Pinot Noir. Pyramid Valley Pinot Noir could be the “next big thing” although the limited availability of land and a fairly marginal climate means that wine is likely to remain scarce.

Top producers: Pegasus Bay, Greystone, Muddy Water, Glasnevin, Mountford, Black Estate; Pyramid Valley: Pyramid Valley Vineyards, Bell Hill.



Vynfields, Martinborough.



Awatere Valley, Marlborough vineyard at dawn



Harvest time at Dog Point Vineyard, Marlborough.

Where to from here?

New Zealand Pinot Noir has a reputation for being deliciously accessible upon release raising the question "how does it age?" The top wines of our most serious Pinot Noir makers, such as Ata Rangi and Felton Road Block 5, age extremely well. They are often less accessible when young but with bottle age develop great complexity and silkier textures. It is no coincidence that these producers tend to use a higher percentage of whole clusters during fermentation. Whole clusters boost the extraction of tannins to produce firmer more astringent wines that develop well and gain greater complexity with bottle age. An increasing number of wineries are now using whole clusters to add extra depth and increase the ageing potential of their wines.

Vine age, better vineyard site selection and the development of promising new regions such as the limestone-rich Central Hawke's Bay and Waitaki Valley in North Otago promise to drive the growth in Pinot Noir quality as well as promote greater diversity.

The wines of today are significantly better than the wines made a decade ago. I confidently predict that the Pinot Noir produced in ten years time will have advanced at a similar pace.

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