

Vineyards between
Lake Dunstan and
Carrick Range in
Bannockburn

— FEATURES —

WINE TALE

GRAND CENTRAL

Central Otago's barren beauty and extreme climate have produced a tenacious bunch of winemakers. EMMA JENKINS discovers how the pioneers of the world's southernmost wine region make Pinot Noir to rival that of Burgundy.



Above: Mt Difficulty estate takes its name from the distinctive-shaped mountain that overlooks the vineyard
Below: The spectacular snow-capped Southern Alps lie to the west of the Central Otago winemaking region



It was the feather earring that did it. Long, black and distinctly fluffy, it hung from the ear of one of Central Otago’s pioneering producers, a man revered not only for helping to shape the region and mentoring current winemakers, but also for crafting serious, age-worthy, world-renowned Pinot Noir. Rudi Bauer of Quartz Reef is a sensible Austrian by birth. Yet there, brushing the collar of his dinner jacket, the earring – not to mention the hint of an impish smile – suggested there might be more to New Zealand’s Central Otago winemakers than first meets the eye. As Duncan Forsyth, winemaker of Mount Edward, says: “It’s all about having fun . . . being taken seriously, but not taking yourself too seriously.”

Central (as the locals call it) is increasingly being taken very seriously by a great many wine lovers and drinkers – and not just for its wines. Any traveler stepping off the plane in Queenstown cannot help but feel a thrill when first glimpsing that dramatic scenery: the towering immediacy of the snow-capped mountains; the startling glacial blue of the rushing rivers; the poignant bleakness of the crumbling stone gold-miners’ huts of centuries past. The place is a veritable treasure trove of travel-writing clichés. There’s also no denying that this singular, spectacular landscape produces wines as evocative and compelling as the local environment. Spend some time here, though, and you soon learn it’s as much about the people as it is about the place. Indeed, the camaraderie and humor with which the wine community goes about its business are features as defining to the shape of its wines as the landscape and climate.

The marginal nature of the Central Otago viticulture is not for the fainthearted. It’s intriguing to ponder what those first, visionary growers glimpsed here that convinced them of the potential greatness for wine. At 45 degrees south, this is the world’s southernmost wine region. The landscape, while incredibly beautiful, is also remarkably barren, verging on lunar in places, and the harsh climate runs from shimmeringly hot in summer to bone-chillingly icy in winter. That the pioneering producers saw past this to envision a place that could make Pinot Noir that would one day be mentioned in the same breath as the Côte de Nuits’ hallowed communes almost beggars belief.

Yet barely 30 years later, one can stand glass-in-hand in a sophisticated tasting room overlooking that glorious vista of vineyards perched between mountains and lakes, and talk to those self-same pioneers. What these dedicated protagonists have coaxed from barren ground in just a few short decades is nothing short of staggering, and one can sense the wonder they still feel at this magical environment. The gold that was once delivered down its rivers now comes in vinous form from hillside vines.

Early names such as the Mills family of Rippon, Alan Brady of Gibbston Valley Wines and Verdun Burgess of Black Ridge were among a tiny group who set up the Central Otago Winegrowers Association in 1987 when there were barely enough growers to justify it. The prevailing industry view at the time was clear: grape-growing in Central was nothing but folly.

Too cold, too barren, too rugged, too remote, too many rabbits . . . the list went on. Perhaps it was this skepticism that drew the original Central vintners closer together; to this day they share a strong sense of solidarity, seeing themselves as competing against the world as much as each other. This cohesion also helped to cement the region’s success as a brand.

Rudi Bauer, aka the man with the feather earring, sums up this spirit of community and commitment. “Each of our lands, our sites, our philosophies is different,” he says. We couldn’t make the same wines even if we tried, so we don’t need to compete with each other. It’s better that we work together to make the whole region better.” There may be something, too, in the rugged isolation, the enduring commitment to overcoming the odds that sees people come together to discuss what has worked, and what hasn’t, what they have learnt, and what they still want to discover.

It’s no secret that New Zealand’s long, cool growing season with plentiful sunshine means a number of other regions produce critically acclaimed Pinot Noir – witness Martinborough, Nelson, Marlborough and Canterbury/Waipara. But it was Central that captured the world’s attention, providing a remarkably sympathetic and expressive home to that most fussy of varieties. While there is a surprisingly large range of grapes grown here (from Syrah to Grüner Veltliner), Pinot is king, accounting for more than 70 percent of production. This focus may in some respect detract from the impressive array of white wines that emerge here, but it has also made it easier for people to understand and navigate the region.

Central Otago Pinot has also delivered surprisingly good value and accessibility, particularly when compared with Burgundy. The vivacity and opulence of the regional style make it an immediately attractive wine, which is generally consumed young. While the best of the 2007 vintage are drinking beautifully now, it is difficult to obtain mature examples of Central Otago Pinot Noir, because there is a culture of releasing and drinking wines young in New Zealand. For the few who have cellared the wines, the optimum drinking window has typically been five to eight years (though that estimate is based on the short history of Central Otago Pinot Noir). The wines are gaining greater depth as the vines mature and winemakers gain experience, and as such that window now seems more likely to stretch for 10 years, possibly more.

The best wines of the region may not have attained the heights of the best Burgundies, but then New Zealand’s experience with Pinot Noir spans just three decades, not three centuries. And while the highs may not be quite as high in Central just yet, the lows are generally much more palatable. Central Otago’s fruit expression is bolder and sweeter than that of the Côte d’Or and much of its Pinot sits at the riper end of the variety’s flavor spectrum, offering predominantly pure black cherry and damson plum, rather than red fruits. While Central Otago Pinot can display herbal aromas such as rosemary and wild thyme,

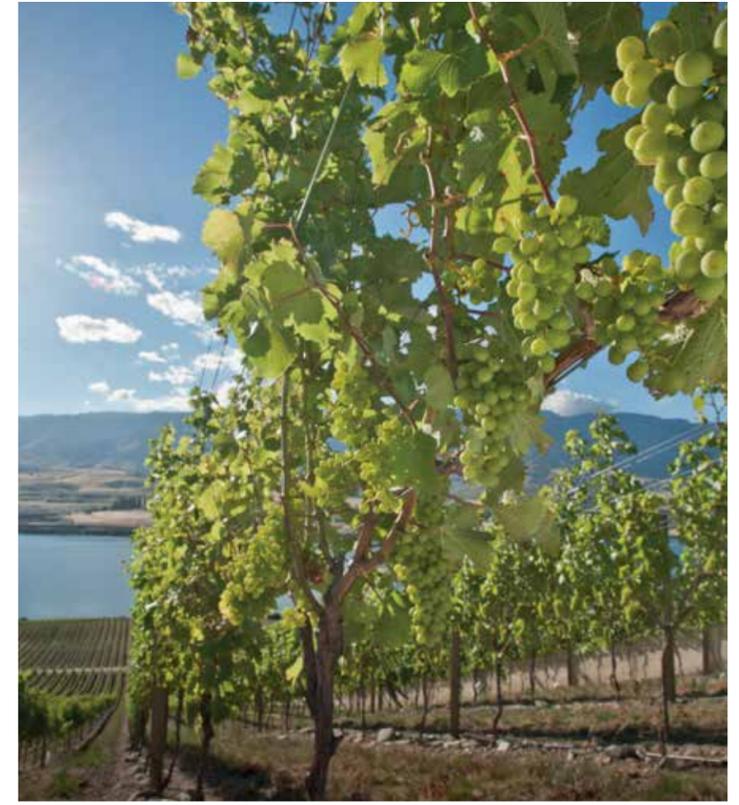
“It is a key part of the appeal of any region that the wines will not only hold up but deliver something more if they are cellared for a few years – and the best of Central Otago can certainly do this.”

— Jasper Morris, author, *Inside Burgundy*

PHOTOS: TOP: DAVID WALL/LALAMY; PREVIOUS PAGE: DAVID WALL



Left: Domain Road Vineyard, Bannockburn in the fall
Right: Lake Wakatipu, Queenstown
Far right: Misha's Vineyard in Bendigo
Below: Rippon Vineyard overlooks Lake Wanaka



Shaping Central Otago's Signature Style

Sunlight: The region has an exceptionally clear atmosphere, and receives 11 percent more solar radiation than the same latitude in the northern hemisphere. The grape skin thickens as a result leading to deeply colored Pinot Noir.

Diurnal variation: Central Otago can see significant temperature fluctuations (up to 20 degrees Celsius is not uncommon), which heightens aromatic expression in the glass.

Inland desert: Hot summers, cold winters and low annual rainfall (typically 350-450mm compared with a national average of 600-1,600mm) means Central Otago is officially classed as a semi-desert. Located in the Southern Alps' rain shadow, it is New Zealand's driest region, encouraging ripeness and concentration.

Long growing season: The period between flowering and harvest tends to be about two weeks longer on average than it is in either Oregon or Burgundy. The extra time on the vine is conducive to aromatic complexity.

it remains quite unlike the deep mushroomy earthiness of the Côte de Nuits. "Earthiness would be my first comment on what the Côte de Nuits has, and Central Otago does not," says Jean-Christophe Poizat, a Lyon native now selling French wine to New Zealanders through his Auckland-based merchant business Maison Vauron. "Central Otago wines like [Felton Road's] Block 3 have clear-cut fruit characters – they don't have that in Europe, [where] the wines are a lot more mysterious."

It is also fairly typical to read a Central Otago back label stating the alcohol content at 14 percent – a much less common occurrence in Burgundy. While the alcohol is more often than not in balance, it brings an extra richness and body that one seldom finds in most Burgundies. The timing of the harvest has become an increasingly common topic of discussion in Central Otago, with earlier picking dates sought in order to keep potential alcohol levels lower and retain freshness (although this is only possible if the tannins have already shed their green edge).

Both Felton Road and Burn Cottage are proponents of picking earlier rather than later in a bid to find more elegance and precision. Ted Lemon, best known for his Sonoma venture Littorai, is consultant winemaker at Burn Cottage. "We pick [when the grapes are] considerably less ripe than most producers in Central Otago and we made a commitment not to acidify. We feel really strongly that we should seek to avoid acidifying if possible. The wine is a little tighter than many Central Otago wines [as a result]." Felton Road's winemaker, Blair Walter, explains that his team increasingly finds itself picking up to 10 days before many of its neighbors – pre-harvest discussions between Walter and viticulturist Gareth King center on just how early they dare go.

Looking to the New World, Oregon – and perhaps the cooler parts of Sonoma – rivals New Zealand in the quest for great Pinot Noir while offering a very different expression of the grape. Oregon Pinots are much lighter in color, displaying a pale red-cherry hue, whereas Central's output is striking in its depth, attaining an almost opaque, black-cherry color in some instances. The Oregon palate is generally also much more open in its soft red-fruit flavors, and the wines are not as vibrant as those of Central Otago.



Central Otago has the highest proportion of **organic and biodynamic producers** in New Zealand (about 20 percent), assisted by the dry climate and arid landscape. Aligning with the region's focus on terroir-expression and careful land stewardship, these production methods also pay dividends when it comes to maintaining organic matter in the area's barren soils.

PHOTOS: RIGHT: CORNERS IMAGES. ABOVE: KIERAN SCOTT. LEFT: DAVID WALL



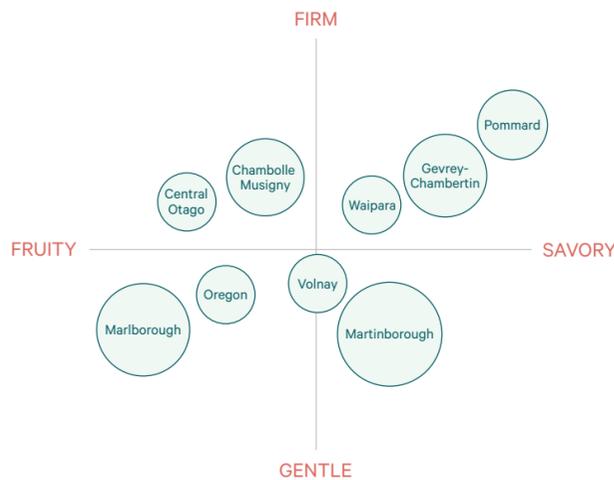
However, Oregon has attracted some famous Burgundians to the region to make wine, unlike Central Otago. The New Zealand region may have lured François Millet of Domaine Comte Georges de Vogüé to make a cuvée this year, as well as plenty of young winemakers from Burgundian domaines for harvest time, but no Burgundians have invested there. Have the wines failed to impress? It is more likely that the region is too remote, and with domestic consumers numbering a mere 4.5 million, it is not nearly as attractive as the United States, the world's biggest wine market.

Are comparisons of Central Otago with Burgundy really necessary, or even valid? The regions both undoubtedly deliver fine quality and varietal expression with unique character, but they are also centuries and hemispheres apart in style and structure. It seems reductive and even simplistic to expect otherwise – perhaps instead it's better to regard them as elements of the wider Pinot Noir kaleidoscope rather than competitors. Jasper Morris, author of *Inside Burgundy* and Burgundy director of United Kingdom wine merchant Berry Bros & Rudd, isn't convinced of the need to compare the two. "I don't at all follow the line of whether or not New Zealand or Californian Pinot can challenge Burgundy . . . They are separate animals. However, many of our best Burgundy customers have looked at Pinots from elsewhere, and Central Otago is the number one destination in the UK. It is a key part of the appeal of any region that the wines will not only hold up but deliver something more if they are cellared for a few years – and the best of Central Otago can certainly do this."

Indeed, the area stands on its own merits as a world-class Pinot Noir region. Its winemakers may have originally borrowed Burgundy's techniques and focus on the land, but these days their wines speak of their own place in the world – and with an increasingly clear voice. The times, too, are changing. Many of today's Pinot Noir drinkers did not cut their teeth on Burgundy and do not necessarily even see the region as their reference point for the grape. Chuck Hayward, wine buyer at key US

Character Study

New Zealand Pinot Noir regions compared with other key producers of the varietal around the world



“Central Otago wines have clear-cut fruit characters... wines in Europe are a lot more mysterious.”

— Jean-Christophe Poizat, wine merchant

retailer J.J. Buckley, says today's Pinot Noir consumers try many different regions in their "quest for the next 'fix' of great Pinot" and Burgundy is just one among many. "For them it is a different paradigm and they are more open to newer regions and taste profiles," he says.

The maturation of Central's wine industry is reflected in the charting of its sub-regions. Central Otago is arguably at the forefront of this in New Zealand, and the distinctive patchwork pattern of vineyards lining the valleys that snake through the mountain ranges has made it relatively easy for critics and consumers alike to gain a firmer grasp of the geography. Producers have been teasing out the nuances of the terroir for some time now, with many refining certain areas of their vineyards (Felton Road's Block bottlings and Mt Difficulty's Single Vineyard wines are noteworthy examples) or producing wines that showcase the sub-regional differences (such as Valli's vividly evocative range).

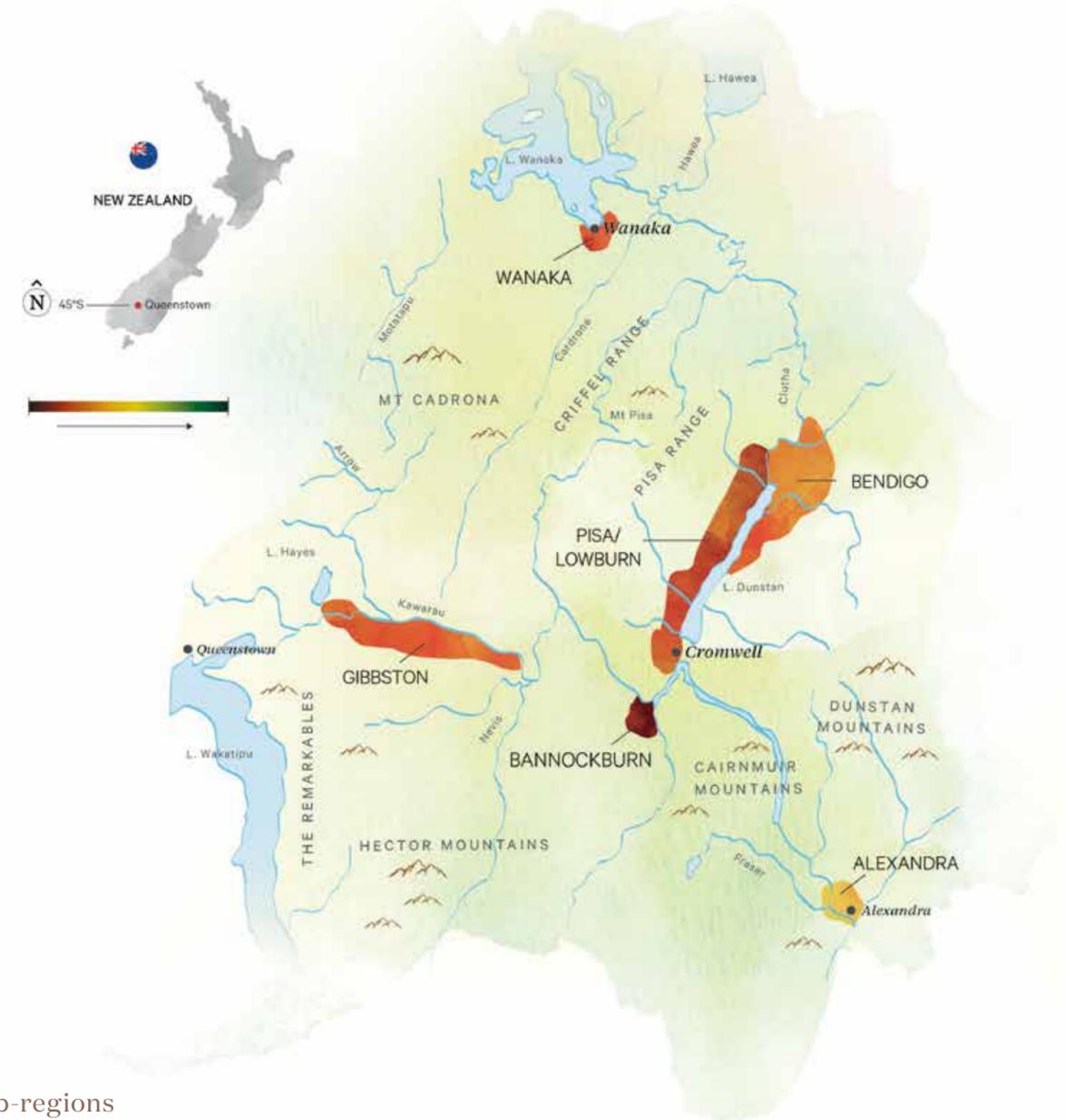
This increasing depth has inspired wine drinkers, too, with Felton Road winemaker Blair Walter admitting he finds himself "amazed" by the detail of sub-regionality that many enthusiasts have drilled into. "They want to know about the soils of Bannockburn to a detail that they get from Burgundy. We've only just planted and started farming these vineyards, so we are still learning about them ourselves, let alone having the time to chronicle it in detail."

Claire Mulholland, general manager and associate winemaker of impressive newcomer Burn Cottage, admits: "We're all on a voyage of discovery." That voyage may yet move beyond the delineations of sub-regions to take in differences in soil. While there are undoubtedly contrasts between, say, wines from the cooler, higher vineyards of Gibbston and those of the hot, dry, exposed Bendigo sites, the sub-regions are to a degree based on historical geography as much as vine-growing. Another, nascent, area of exploration for the region is the marked differences in soil ages and types, resulting from the slow multi-millennial ebb and flow of glaciers. This sees vineyards mere kilometers apart separated by up to 600,000 years in soil age, and many winemakers believe this will become more important than the mesoclimatic focus of sub-regionality, such is the potential impact on texture and aromatic expression.

We are conditioned to see terroir-defining fine wine through the lens of the physical land. While this has an undeniable impact, and there's no doubt that Central Otago's spectacular environment has an indelible effect on its wines, it can be easy to overlook the other side of terroir – the people shaping the wines. The search for quality, with character, remains the driver for all of the 'Centralistas'. "How good can this wine be?" is the question they keep asking of themselves, each other, and, ultimately, us.

Burgundy remains the benchmark to which all quality Pinot Noir regions aspire, but it is notable that in recent years Central Otago producers speak less of such comparisons and more of their own terroir. Burgundy has yet to be overtaken by this Southern Hemisphere rival, but it would do well to keep a close eye over its shoulder. 🍷

Central Otago: The Terroir



Sub-regions

Alexandra: The southernmost area. It has a dry climate; marked diurnal temperature variation yields exciting varietal Pinot Noir that is scented and finely structured.

Bannockburn: One of the warmest, driest sub-regions, with diverse soil types. Home to many of the best wineries, such as Felton Road and Mt Difficulty, making complex and age-worthy wines. Outside producers have scrambled to buy land along Felton Road.

Bendigo: Stony soils and north-facing, sloping vineyards capture the baking-hot summer sun, producing a powerful style; the cold, clear nights help retain aromatic s and varietal character.

Cromwell/Lowburn/Pisa: A relatively large area that runs from the township of Cromwell up the western shore of Lake Dunstan. There is a range of house styles but the wines are generally ripe, soft and aromatic.

Gibbston: Home to Central Otago's first commercial winery, this is the highest, coolest sub-region resulting in later ripening. The wines have a distinctive elegance and delicacy, and lifted aromatics.

Wanaka: The most temperate of the sub-regions. It receives a little more rainfall from wet westerly fronts, while Lake Wanaka mitigates the risk of frost. Pinots here are elegant, red-fruited and expressive.