

ACROSS THE DITCH

is
**CENTRAL
 OTAGO
 PINOT**
 as good as it gets?

CENTRAL OTAGO IS A PHENOMENON IN THE WINE WORLD – IT’S A REGION THAT PRODUCES AN INFINITESIMAL AMOUNT OF WINE IN THE GLOBAL SCHEME OF THINGS, BUT IT’S NOT INSIGNIFICANT IN TERMS OF ITS REPUTATION. NEW ZEALAND PRODUCES ONLY ABOUT THREE-QUARTERS OF 1% OF THE WORLD’S ANNUAL WINE PRODUCTION AND CENTRAL OTAGO, THE WORLD’S MOST SOUTHERLY WINE REGION, CONTRIBUTES ONLY 2% OF NZ’S GRAPE HAUL. BUT IN SO MANY OTHER WAYS, CENTRAL OTAGO IS BIG!

Misha’s Vineyard in Central Otago. Photo: Tim Hawkins.

Misha Wilkinson

Of the 700 New Zealand wineries, 115 are from Central Otago – that’s 16.5% and it’s beaten only by Marlborough with 145 wineries. Ten years ago there were 45 Central Otago wineries out of a total of 382, and if we go back to 1991, Central Otago had just six wineries and was just 4% of the 150 national total. So over the past 20 years the number of NZ wineries has grown 366% but the number of Central Otago wineries has grown more than 1,800% and nearly 80% of what is grown is Pinot Noir.

Why? Is it just that Pinot Noir has won the palates of increasingly knowledgeable consumers? Or has the romance of drinking the spoils from Middle Earth – one of the most spectacular places on earth – won the hearts of consumers? Or was the staggering growth in vineyards simply because they seemed like a good option in which to ‘invest’ one’s ‘baby-boomer-corporate-world’ surplus cash before the GFC hit?

Why anyone would invest in a vineyard rather than something more sound is because “it satisfies the inner need for magic”, according to Robin Dicey, a viticulturist in Central Otago who has set up more vineyards for ‘investors’ than any other viticulturist in the area. Dicey is one of the region’s most infamous viticulturists and a founding shareholder of Mt Difficulty. He’s candid about the cause of the region’s second ‘gold rush’ after the Chinese dug for their original treasures in the late 1800s. “If we look back in economic history to over 15 years ago, people had made money and wanted to invest their disposable cash and discretionary incomes – they wanted to invest in something with the X factor, something with panache,” says Dicey. “If you combine Pinot Noir with Central Otago and money, you have a happy combination – vineyards have the wow factor.”

As to why Central Otago has an unfair share of NZ’s Pinot Noir vineyards, it’s straightforward, says Dicey. “Central Otago has the rare ability to produce quality Pinot Noir,” he says, although pointing out that just because you can grow quality Pinot Noir in Central Otago, it doesn’t mean they all do! Dicey says Central Otago will only have a season that fails roughly one in 10 years, whereas its nearest rival in terms of quality perception, the Wairarapa/Martinborough region, has a year that fails one in four to five years. He doesn’t dispute there are a few really premium producers in Martinborough, but as far as he’s concerned, why would you be in Martinborough when Central Otago offers a consistent and arguably better crop overall? “The region has special climatic attributes

that no other region has,” he says. In terms of Pinot Noir from Marlborough, he thinks it’s “always somewhat back footed by the big elephant in the room – Sauvignon Blanc”.

Taking a step back and asking why Pinot Noir is so popular: is it really the next big thing? “Yes – it probably is,” Dicey says, adding the rush to plant Pinot has been a direct response to “the Australian baseball bat approach to red wine”.

“People don’t want to drink those hairy-chested monsters so much any more – they have become more discerning. There has to be more delicacy and Pinot can provide that,” he says. He argues that all over the world people are turning to cool climate Syrah and Pinot Noir but says, with Pinot Noir’s pedigree, it’s not surprising that it’s playing a leading role in the new wine revolution. He explains that it’s not just the Australian reds that Pinot Noir is responding to, but all the New World Bordeaux styles and those big American Cabernets.

So how is Central Otago’s reputation in a global context, and are the wines really that good? Cameron Douglas, NZ’s only master sommelier, spends a lot of time in the Northern Hemisphere with the Sommelier Guild, Court of Master Sommeliers, as well as lecturing. He believes that when people in the trade overseas hear of NZ they think of Pinot Noir and then Central Otago comes to mind quickly. He says a lot of this is due to great marketing by the Central Otago Winegrowers Association. “No other region in New Zealand is doing what they’re doing,” he says.

As to whether the marketing hype equals the quality, Douglas is emphatic it does. “Central Otago wines have a real energy and focus – they’re identifiable, exciting and memorable wines,” he says. In fact Douglas believes it’s hard to find “ho hum” wines from the region. He points out that undoubtedly there are differences in the sub-regions but he still finds there is a general Central



Cameron Douglas MS



Bob Campbell MW



Stunning backdrop to the vineyards in Central Otago. Photo: TIm Hawkins.



Winemaker Rob Cameron

Otago stamp to a lot of the Pinot Noir. “It’s that schist, quartz-laden soil, the elevation of the region and its semi-continental climate that all make it an amazing place,” he adds.

Douglas sees the only danger to the region being the odd producer trying to turn up the intensity of the wines and overdoing them. He believes that any negative comments about Central Otago are bound to be based on envy rather than disappointment. “There’s camaraderie in Central Otago and people put positive effort into their product – people are enthusiastic and they’re not overplanting or over-cropping,” he says. “There’s also a consistent quality so things should continue to be great as long as people don’t start resting on their laurels.”

NZ MW Bob Campbell believes Central Otago has a comfortable lead in terms of awareness amongst knowledgeable wine drinkers around the world. “To a fairly sophisticated wine audience off-shore Central Otago heads the field with Martinborough/Wairarapa second, Marlborough a close third, then Waipara and finally Nelson–Hawke’s Bay, is a distant last,” he says.

In terms of recognition Campbell thinks Central Otago comes out on top – but does he believe the quality is also at the top? “If you match the top 10 Martinborough wines blind against the top 10 Central Otago wines (as I did a year or so ago) I would expect Martinborough to win (as it did in my tasting) assuming similar vintage conditions, i.e. not a disaster in either region. The answer therefore is ‘no’”, he says.

However, he does think Central Otago has been successful. “And that’s because of the sheer volume of production, the drop-dead gorgeous scenery, superior regional promotion and consistency of wine style and quality,” Campbell says.

He believes there should be an education process to help people understand the different wine styles in the various districts of Central Otago. “The strong

and central message should be ‘all Central Otago Pinot Noirs are not equal’,” he says. He believes this message should at first be restricted to a fairly exclusive audience (writers, fine wine retailers, sommeliers etc.) then aimed at a progressively wider audience. “It would be productive to form a collective comprising an elite group of Pinot producers to jointly promote their wine at a premium price point,” he says. While this would be an elitist and divisive strategy, he believes it would help consolidate the premium position of the region while strengthening the central message.

The only negative Campbell can think of with the region is to do with price. “I call it the ‘Waiheke syndrome’ – some wine drinkers are reluctant to subsidise the lifestyles of high-worth individuals who are making an uneconomic volume of wine,” he says. “I recall attending a tasting of wines at

New Zealand House in London some years ago where I overheard a buyer for a large wine group taste a Felton Road Pinot Noir and say something like, ‘Felton Road ... at that price I’d say it’s the end of the road’. That was before Felton Road had established its reputation – but that same sentiment will be expressed when lesser known wines with precocious prices are tasted around the world.”

Campbell is also impressed with the cooperation across the region.

So is the view of Central Otago different from the other side of the ditch? Montgomery ‘Monty’ James is New Zealand Winegrowers’ man in Australia. He says that from an average Australian wine

drinker’s perspective, it’s more a case of thinking NZ Pinot Noir than attributing it to any region. James says that’s because Australians have a higher than average interest in wine (and oddly enough a higher than average consumption), they’re familiar with both Marlborough and Central Otago.

James notes the great job Central Otago has done

in getting its region and wines in front of trade and consumers in Australia, through both regional and national marketing initiatives. “Central invest heavily in getting key people to their region as well as getting on planes and working their key markets – they are notably proactive in this regard and this has produced impressive results in terms of their regional brand identity,” he says. “The winemakers from the region are warm, friendly and inclusive and this character is an asset best exploited in the market. Not surprisingly, they tell their story best.” James believes the excitement of the wines matches the buzz the region has created and there is more to be excited about as it matures and the flavour profiles from the various sub-regions evolve.

Not only are Central Otago wineries producing Pinot Noir, but wineries from all across NZ are cashing in on the brand the region has created. Timbo Deaker, who offers viticultural management and grape broking services, says the demand for Central Otago fruit from wineries outside the region is largely because, “it’s easier to sell a bottle of Pinot Noir if it has Central Otago on the label”. While many local wineries dislike the idea of selling fruit to outside the region, Deaker sees it differently. “We’re selling to companies that have bigger

Given Cameron’s focus is on export markets, he says “the brand identity of each region we make wines from is very important”. When he first looked at making a Pinot, he was looking for a region that had the ability to make “exciting premium wines; good supply of contract vineyards; a region with exciting potential; and consistent quality year after year”. He says this narrowed it down to Marlborough and Otago. “But the flavours from Otago are potentially more diverse due to the much more varying landscape and so we felt there was more potential to make complex wines down south,” he says. “I’ve heard of the comparison between Central Otago and Priorat in Spain. Both are relatively new areas and have had huge amounts of press in being the next great world wine region, so the perception is there that Central is one of the premium Pinot producers in the world, particularly in the UK market.”

Cameron says it’s hard to know if the quality matches the perception but he is certainly happy with his wines and feels there’s still a great deal to learn. “The top wines in the region are extremely good – and getting better. The region and volumes produced are so small that not everyone is going to taste one of the ‘great wines’ of Central, but that

“The perception is there that Central is one of the premium Pinot producers in the world, particularly in the UK market.”

distribution channels and can build greater awareness and drive even more demand for Central Otago,” he says. So his theory is he’s helping to increase the size of the ‘cherry’ pie for Central Otago rather than stealing a piece. Deaker says his grape buyers are knowledgeable on the Central Otago sub-regions with Bendigo and Bannockburn being the most prized addresses, particularly when people are looking for a small volume of high end fruit. Again the message of cooperation comes through from Deaker. He says the collective approach happens naturally because of the dynamics you get with first generation producers who are not hampered by appellation laws and who are energetic and excited.

One of the people sourcing fruit from Central Otago is Rob Cameron, winemaker for INVIVO Wines, a boutique brand based in Auckland who focuses on making wines from the best regions.

doesn’t take away from the perception they are good – it may even add to it in an exclusive way,” he says.

Cameron’s view on marketing as a group is different to the others: he feels it’s up to the individual companies to justify their positioning with the best wines possible and excellent marketing.

Creating the Central Otago brand has been successful from all accounts. And as Monty James says, “It doesn’t hurt to have a region like Central that is so blessed in terms of its stunning beauty. In many ways it’s a wine marketer’s dream – an extraordinarily exciting landscape producing extraordinarily exciting wines.”

And does Central Otago live up to its name? “It did, it can and it will,” says Dicey.

MISHA WILKINSON owns Misha’s Vineyard in Central Otago. www.mishasvineyard.com



Mt Difficulty winemaker Michael Herrick. Photo: NZ Winegrowers.