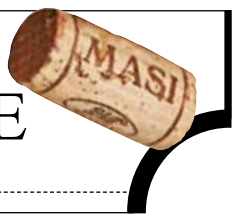


FINE PALATE



REIGN OF TERROIR

Alex Lai discovers top pinot noir producers from opposite ends of the earth

PINOT NOIR is very much terroir sensitive. Some say the grape flourishes best in Burgundy, but other parts of the world are capable of producing top-class pinots.

Two examples came to light recently when Misha's Vineyard from New Zealand and Merry Edwards from California presented their pinots in Hong Kong.

Speaking of the difference between the pinot noir produced by Misha's Vineyard and other vineyards in New Zealand and Australia, Oliver Masters, consulting winemaker for Misha's Vineyard, said: "Misha's Vineyard pinot noir comes from a great range of aspect, soils and altitude – all within one unique vineyard. This gives great complexity and structure whilst retaining fruit power."

Misha Wilkinson, marketing director for Misha's Vineyard, said of her New Zealand venture: "Being so far south at 45 degrees latitude, the most southerly wine-growing region in the world, the climate in central Otago is unique in

relation to its broad temperature range and average rainfall, which is less than 400 millimeters annually."

"The climate is continental versus every other New Zealand growing region and the majority of Australian growing regions, which are maritime climates."

Misha's Vineyard is one of the most sun-drenched sites in central Otago, with slopes facing the western sun soaking up the heat during the day and retaining it in the schist rock soil.

"We also have diversity through the range of altitudes on the vineyard that go from 205 meters above sea level at the lakefront up to 350m at the top of the vineyard. This provides a range of growing conditions and allows us to harvest over a longer period of time, getting a broader range of flavors in the grapes and providing more complexity in our wine."

Masters said passion and attention to detail – from choosing the vineyard site, right through to the distributor – are all that the wines need.

For Wilkinson, it was the other way around.

"Unlike most vineyards, we started our business with a marketing plan. Our initial focus was on producing a range of premium wines that would suit the palates of both our Asian markets and the markets of Australia and New Zealand.

"We sought to capitalize on the unique ability of cool-climate wines from Central Otago to express themselves with purity and intensity. Choosing the right site took more than two years. Vineyard development, team

selection and wine production have all been based on our philosophy of no compromise."

And from California, the Merry Edwards Winery produced the first vintage of its pinot noir in 1997. *Wine & Spirits Magazine* named Edwards one of the most influential winemakers in the world in 2004.

That honor comes as no surprise in the industry.

Throughout her 33-year winemaking career, Edwards has been perfectionist to a fault, constantly refining her vineyard practices, wines and techniques.

She studied winemaking and earned her degree at the University of California, Davis, in the early 1970s, and was one of

only three women in the master's program. She moved to Sonoma County in the mid-1970s, where she was taken both with the area and the distinctive pinot noir grapes grown there.

"Consistency is what I have always been aiming at," she said, while presenting the Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 2007, Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, 2007 and Meredith Estate Pinot Noir 2006, each of them showing the unique result of the microclimate and the terroir.

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Misha Wilkinson



The High Note Pinot Noir 2008 is ruby in color and features hints of dark chocolate, black tea and exotic spice on the palate.



Merry Edwards takes pride in producing her favorite pinot noir in the Russian River Valley and Sonoma Coast regions, with 2007 being a particularly good year.

By Diogenes (diogenes.ts@gmail.com)

LIQUID GEOGRAPHY

AFTER A few years working in any field there is a tendency to settle into a comfort zone surrounded by perceived truths that fashion the way we see the world around us. For those in the wine business that means an understanding of how wine is made, the key winemaking regions and the characteristics of the main grape varieties, at the very least.

Every so often someone comes along to challenge those perceived truths and shake you out of that comfort zone.

This can be a challenging, even unsettling, experience, but for those interested in expanding their horizons and furthering their knowledge it is an essential part of professional development.

So it was with keen anticipation, mixed with a certain trepidation, that I sat down to lunch with Mike Weersing, winemaker and owner of Pyramid Valley Vineyards in the Canterbury region of New Zealand's South Island.

We started by discussing an idea I had heard Weersing float at a dinner a few days previously. He had challenged the whole idea of varietal character in wine, claiming instead that the role of the grape variety is to act as a vector, or messenger, to express the nature of the terroir where those grapes are grown.

Wine is liquid geography, he claims, an idea that becomes all the

more plausible when argued with deep conviction by someone with a great depth of winemaking experience gained in many parts of the world.

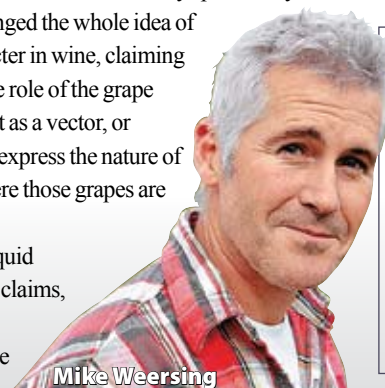
I raised the idea that an alternative to wine as an expression of terroir was an extension of the winemaker's personality.

He claimed that due to his insecurity and self-loathing he is more likely to trust the combination of soil and grape to dictate the style of the wine.

I do not think he was entirely serious.

"I see the grape not as a blank canvas for me to paint on but a window which affords a view of where that grape was grown. I am not a painter, I am a window cleaner," he said.

With a parting shot about the use of commercial yeasts as opposed to natural yeasts – "Why can you bring in yeast manufactured in another country when you can't do that with grapes? Commercial yeasts upset the hell out of me!" – it was time to wrap up, with plenty to consider from our lively conversation.



Mike Weersing

Pyramid Valley Eaton Family Vineyard Pinot Noir 2007

HK\$330 from Altaya Wines
www.altayawines.com

While waiting for their own vineyards to mature, the Weersings sourced fruit from favored areas such as this vineyard in Marlborough. Shows red cherry, strawberry and spice aromas with lush, flamboyant fruit on the palate.

