

Making the Case for New Zealand Reds

BY REBECCA GIBB MW | MARCH 02, 2021

Almost a century before Pinot Noir found its feet in Central Otago and Martinborough, a Croatian-born viticulturist toured New Zealand to assess the potential for making wine. In 1895, Romeo Bragato visited the country's fledgling vineyards, tasting the fruit and delivering his thoughts on the suitability of the climate and soils. In his *Report on the Prospects of Viticulture in New Zealand*, he declared that Central Otago, the Wairarapa and Hawke's Bay were well adapted to wine production. In a later publication Bragato suggested that the most suitable red grapes were Syrah, the two Cabernets, Dolcetto and Pinot Noir. However, the brakes were slammed on New Zealand's development as a wine-producing nation. Bragato's report coincided with the rise of a strong temperance movement, which led to a close-run vote on prohibition in 1919 and ushered in a slew of restrictive measures on wine sales, some of which endured for the best part of the century. Voters continued to be asked if they were in favor of staying wet or going dry at every general election until 1987. In that same year, the first commercial Pinot Noir was produced in Central Otago, as was the first inaugural Gimblett Gravels Syrah. It had taken 92 years but some of Bragato's predictions had finally come true.



Te Muna Road is about four miles from Martinborough's centre but activity is growing here with Craggy Range increasing its holdings and Australian winery Torbreck acquiring Escarpment.

Marlborough

However, Bragato didn't stop in Marlborough. The region now represents 70% of the country's total plantings, but in the 1890s, you didn't need the fingers on one hand to count its wine producers. Given its present-day dominance, it is unsurprising that Marlborough accounts for half of all New Zealand's Pinot Noir; although it might not be as renowned for the variety as Central Otago or Martinborough, that's a holdover from its past. Vines were planted on the alluvial, free-draining valley floor, often with the Swiss clone 10–5 (ten bar five), resulting in wines with little depth and structure. There is still plenty of fresh, fruity and forgettable Pinot Noir produced on the valley floor for drinking young, but the opening up of the so-called Southern Valleys to viticulture in the early Noughties has significantly raised the bar in Marlborough.

Duncan Souler, chief winemaker at Giesen, explained: "If you look at Marlborough Pinot Noir 15 or 20 years ago, it was probably the wrong clone in the wrong place. It was cropped high, had low anthocyanin development and your job as a winemaker was to extract every living grain you could out of every berry. Then we figured it out and started planting the right material in the right places, like the Southern Valleys, and started getting more structure. It's fair to say, though, some have not adapted."

The Southern Valleys are not one but five valleys: **Ben Morvan, Brancott, Fairhall, Omaka** and **Waihopai**. They spread like fingers from the palm that is the Wairau Valley floor and currently represent approximately one-quarter of the Marlborough vineyard area. On these dry, north-facing hillsides, the soils are richer clay-loess. There is a variety of UC Davis and Burgundy clones planted (typically 114, 115, 667, 777) as well as New Zealand's Abel clone. Combined with the increasingly mature vines, Marlborough Pinot Noir is developing depth, structure and genuine complexity.

It's not only the development of these sites that is starting to make Marlborough a place for Pinot lovers to watch. There is a group of producers in their thirties and forties who have mustered the courage (and the funds) to ditch their day jobs and go their own way, often focusing on small parcels, bottled as single-vineyard wines. This new generation is a collaborative, supportive and dynamic bunch with sights firmly set on elevating Marlborough from a fruity white wine production area to a region known for fine wines. Not only do they share knowledge, they even go as far as sharing winery space: the former Seresin winery, for example, is now a bijou contract facility named The Coterie. This collective winery project was the idea of ex-Wither Hills winemaker Ben Glover, who produces his own brand, Zephyr, here. He has been joined by Mike Paterson at Corofin among others; Seresin continues to use its former facilities too.

Turning to the **2019** season, the months leading up to harvest in Marlborough and the country's east coast were very dry and warm, causing drought conditions. However, the growing season started inauspiciously. Cool, wet and cloudy weather affected Pinot Noir flowering and fruit set during the spring and early summer. Low sunshine hours and regular rainfall put the dampers on Christmas party season, too. As the new year hit, the rain clouds disappeared and stayed away, in contrast to the soggy, cyclone-hit 2018 harvest period. The water reserves in the soil soon dried out during the third warmest summer on record and drought conditions were declared in parts of the country. While New Zealand grape growers are able to irrigate their vines, that's only possible if there is sufficient water available, and in the summer of 2019, there wasn't enough. Will Hoare of organic producer Novum is no stranger to dry farming but noted that this season had its own particular challenges. "We are lucky because we can irrigate, but the wells started drying out so the irrigation systems were being shut off. If you have a little vine stress, you can make good wine, but when it's really stressed you are in trouble. The challenge is, when you spray sulfur on the vines that's not getting washed off for lack of rain, it can be a cause of stinky fermentations, so you have to be really careful."

The very dry run-up to harvest meant that the low yields became even smaller, explained Mike Paterson of Corofin, a single-vineyard Chardonnay and Pinot Noir specialist. "The irrigation got turned off on all the vineyards we work with but [on the hillsides with their clay/loam moisture-retaining soils] they hold water well [compared with the free-draining alluvial valley floor]. We probably lost about 15% berry moisture weight in the last two weeks. The bunches fit in the palm of your hand, averaging around 70 to 80 grams, whereas normally they'd be around 100 to 120 grams. As a result, there's the potential for overextraction, so we didn't add any whole bunches. I think most people backed off [because of the small berries]. Last time we used clusters was 2016, when we had 150-gram bunches and we wanted more structure." However, in 2019 not all wineries were successful in their handling of tannins; some produced Pinots that seem fruity and juicy on first impression but conclude dry and chewy.

Beyond tannins, the high skin-to-juice ratio also means that the depth of color in 2019 New Zealand Pinot Noir is incredible. One Marlborough producer joked that the fermenting wine looked more like Barossa Shiraz than New Zealand Pinot Noir, and it's easy to see why. Dr. Damian Martin, a researcher with New Zealand Plant and Food Research, co-authored a paper on Marlborough Pinot Noir in 2019. The findings showed that wine color was two to three times more intense in 2019 compared with the 2018 vintage - which, in fairness, was a rather anemic year. Martin noted that the color was incredible even taking into account low yields and small berry size in 2019. "We don't have a single explanation as to why, but most likely contributing factors are lower vine nitrogen supply and moderate vine water deficits mid-season, and greater diurnal variation during early ripening in 2019," he said. There are a few very fine examples that aren't so richly colored, but that's typically a result of very limited extraction in the winery and short cuvaison.

Two thousand nineteen in Marlborough - and New Zealand - produced the most intensely colored, richly fruited wines that offer hedonistic drinking from the off. The best are dense and structured without heading into extracted territory. The wines are, in some instances, incredibly attractive and bold. I do wonder if the warmer season has meant some loss of the very fine Pinot detail that cooler seasons and longer ripening imbue.



Vineyards and mountains rise above the waters of Lake Dunstan, Central Otago.

Central Otago

Following an oddball season in 2018, Central Otago returned to form in **2019**. The growing season brought record temperatures, summer rainfall, disease pressure and the earliest harvest on record, to name but a few challenges. While there are some highly recommended 2018 Pinot Noirs on the market from producers including Prophet's Rock, Akitu and Burn Cottage, the vintage will go down as solid rather than awe-inspiring. However, if the region had been faced with this season even a decade ago, there would have been far fewer successful wines due to picking and winemaking decisions. Jen Parr, Valli's Oregon-born winemaker, admitted: "The 2018s were a throwback to the ripeness of the early days but without the extraction we would have pushed back then."

Indeed, the most recent expressions of Central Otago Pinot Noir are far removed from the start of the Noughties, when bigger, riper, oakier was thought to be better. This impressive, bold style put the region on the world wine map in the early 2000s. But things have changed since then: the pursuit of elegance and freshness rather than power is now the objective. Practically speaking, this can be achieved through picking a little earlier, fermenting at slightly lower temperatures, reducing the number of pump-overs or punch-downs, and pulling back on the percentage of new oak. Those decisions play a major role in the stylistic interpretation of this region's Pinot Noir. The use of whole clusters in Pinot is now a trend across the whole country, adding layers of floral and herbal complexity as well as a sense of drive. While I enjoy the aromas and sensation it provides, there is a danger of developing a cellar-created uniformity whether you're in Central Otago, Marlborough or Martinborough.

The 2019 Central Otago season was challenging for vineyard managers. In spring, early-budding sites suffered during the severe frost of October 12-13. At harvest, the mercury dipped below the freezing mark on three consecutive nights (April 6-8), which damaged many vines' leaves, hard-stopping photosynthesis. Harvest arrived earlier than forecast due to warmer-than-expected conditions in March. Phil Handford of Grasshopper Rock explained: "In February, we started to calculate when we would likely be harvesting. Then March came along and it was warmer than February, which is highly unusual. It's not something we have experienced in the 18 years that we've been here. We realized we were going to be about 10 days earlier than we had thought." For those local producers who hadn't already got on with picking, these three frosts gave them a firm shove in the back to get the crop into the winery.

Central Otago is home to the country's most arid spot, Conroy's Gully, which receives just 363mm of rain annually. The 2019 growing season will also be remembered as the wettest spring in more than a decade. And yet the vintage set a new record harvest for the region in terms of tonnage, despite frosts and spring rains. Gibbston Valley's winemaker, Christopher Keys, reported that its crop was down by around 30% due to the frost on October 12-13. Blair Walter, the long-time Felton Road winemaker, noted that flowering was more protracted due to the rains and cooler spring weather. "We didn't have large crops; they were naturally moderated rather than having to green-harvest. It caused us concern at the time, but it brought differing berry sizes and I think that has added complexity."

The latest Pinot Noirs are beautifully ripe, yet vibrant; they have a sense of freshness and tension, lifted fragrance, and finer definition than the 2018s. While the standard of Pinot Noir is high and some of the country's finest examples can be found in this mountainous landscape, there inevitably remains a range of quality levels and stylistic interpretations. A number of producers continue to make overtly ripe and oaky reds instead of letting the pure fruit sing. It's easy to get dark-fruit-filled wines here, but those that triumph walk the tightrope of ripeness and tension, exuding a sense of ease.



Central Otago is back on fine form in 2019, offering up vivid Pinot Noirs.

Martinborough

A number of the region's key names, including Ata Rangi, Dry River and Escarpment, will be releasing their 2019s much later this year; thus the region's current releases are a mix of 2018 and 2019. The 2019s, however, show the depth of color and seduction found in the rest of the country's Pinots in this vintage. Two thousand nineteen was Julian Grounds' first vintage as chief winemaker at Craggy Range. The winery is the area's biggest vineyard owner by a mile, possessing 120 hectares on Te Muna Road and purchasing the neighboring 132-hectare property in 2019. At last count, the entire Martinborough vineyard area covered less than 700 hectares, which demonstrates Craggy's scale. While Grounds said they managed to avoid the worst of the frost, cold soils and a wet spring reduced their 2019 Pinot yields by around 40%. "I started at Craggy in January. When I arrived there was lots of growth and green grass because there had been lots of rain before Christmas," he recalled. "Martinborough is also known for being really windy and it wasn't a particularly windy season. Being an arrogant Aussie, I was like, what the bloody hell are you talking about? But then we copped it in 2020! That wind shapes and structures the wines but the lack of it in 2019 has made these wines succulent." Indeed, there's a lot of flesh and ripeness. In the lower-priced wines, it's all generosity and juice, but at the higher end, the shape, savory character and structural frame that are a classic hallmark of Martinborough Pinot Noir becomes more apparent.

While I'm delighted to be moving on from 2018 Pinots in most instances, I can't say the same about Martinborough. If there's a New Zealand wine region that has managed to overcome the odds in the challenging 2018 season, it's Martinborough. There are a handful of outstanding Pinot Noirs that offer the depth, complexity and intrigue for which Martinborough has become renowned. They might not have the flamboyance of the 2019s but they are charming and finely crafted.



The first vines weren't planted on Gimblett Gravels until 1981 but this former riverbed is now home to some of the country's most respected Bordeaux blends and Syrahs.

Hawke's Bay 2018

While Pinot Noirs might be New Zealand's most exported reds, the country's North Island is better suited to varieties that thrive in a warmer climate. Sitting at the same latitude relative to the equator as Ibiza (39th parallel), but without the heady nightlife, Hawke's Bay is the home of classic reds including Bordeaux blends and Syrahs. It's also on the corresponding parallel to Sardinia, but its chances of success with Vermentino or Cannonau

are pretty limited. Surrounded by the cooling South Pacific, and separated from Australia by the treacherous Tasman Sea, New Zealand's isolated location and maritime climate mean its summers are cooler than the human-drawn latitude lines on the globe would otherwise suggest.

Taking a look at comparative climate data, Bordeaux and Hawke's Bay share a number of similarities despite being more than 12,000 miles apart. When it comes to average growing season temperatures, Hawke's Bay sits at 16.3°C while Bordeaux is 16.5°C. The difference in growing degree days between the two regions is also pretty small: 1,334 versus 1,387 (Anderson, J.D. *et. al*, 2012). The situation is obviously more complex than the data suggests, but it does provide a reference point in a sea of wine climates.

Influenced by La Niña, **2018** was the hottest summer since records began in 1935. Dry, warm weather around flowering and fruit set meant volumes were up on the previous vintage, but that wasn't hard. The 2017 harvest had been a bit of a wet weekend, leading to one of the lowest crops of the decade. The vines were tracking 10-14 days earlier than the average.

The 2018 curveball came in the form of a late February cyclone, rain in early March, and high humidity throughout the month. The warm days and warm nights of March, combined with the effects of the remnants of the cyclone, put pressure on the earlier-ripening Pinot Noir in Marlborough, on the condition of the Merlot bunches and, to a lesser extent, the Syrah crop. The thicker-skinned, later-ripening Cabernets managed to withstand the elements and were able to hang out until drier weather prevailed. Most producers pulled their Merlot crop in the early to mid-20s of March. These dates were earlier than ideal, but disease threat was mounting. There are some wines that show their earlier picking date in their green-edged nature, lacking the midpalate plushness that makes Merlot so resplendent.

As summer turned to fall, the weather became both drier and cooler, and Cabernet Sauvignon was generally picked in the first five to 10 days of April, which is a little earlier than normal. Villa Maria's Hawke's Bay-based winemaker Nick Picone explained: "It was a harvest of two halves. There was weather pressure early on but then we had a beautiful spell. Coming off the back of a warm season, we had plenty of ripeness and during that settled period, it was just about shedding that water." The resulting Cabernet Sauvignon is fully ripe and perfumed, with flesh to fill out the variety's frame, while the Merlot can be a little lean, particularly the 800-odd-hectare subregion of Gimblett Gravels. On free-draining, stony soils a 20- to 25-minute drive inland from the Pacific coastline, the proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon in the finest blends is comparatively high in 2018, with some shunning Merlot altogether. Jenny Dobson, who spent 13 years as cellar master at Château Sénéjac in the Médoc, and now consults to six local wineries, including Squawking Magpie, said, "2018 was the first year that I made Squawking Magpie 100% Cabernet Sauvignon. It has flesh. I did try blending it and I looked at my notes and they simply said, 'better on its own.' It wasn't a warm end to the season, so we didn't get high sugar accumulation and ripening was slow. Whereas the Merlot didn't have enough time to mature fully." However, she did note that due to disease pressure, she did not risk an indigenous ferment in 2018.



However, the threat of disease was still considerably lower in 2018 than it was in 2017, which was marred by periodic rainfall and low sunshine hours in the weeks leading up to the harvest. While producers claim to be delighted about the quality of the 2018s - rightly so, in some cases - our impressions of a vintage can be influenced by what has come before. It's important not to get too excited about 2018 simply because it's better than its predecessor. Yes, it's a good vintage, but it's not exceptional, though it will offer pleasurable midterm drinking. In what must be a headache for the wineries' sales and marketing teams who have the 2018s to sell, winemakers are already championing the yet-to-be released 2019 and 2020 vintages.

Two thousand eighteen is a solid year for Syrah, with the usual suspects making successful wines, although results are varied. Site and picking dates were crucial. Some producers were forced to pull their Syrah off early, but fruit that successfully negotiated the mid-March rain and humidity yielded soft, gently spiced wines. This is not a blockbuster year for Syrah: it is fleshy and supple, with ripe fruit, providing pleasure in the short to medium term. The characteristic black-pepper character (more elevated in cooler vintages) often seen in Hawke's Bay Syrah, derived from a compound called rotundone, is evident but subtle due to the warmer season. What's more, the heat allowed producers to use a proportion of whole

bunches in the fermentation, if they desired. For example, Trinity Hill included around 25% whole clusters in its flagship Syrah, Homage, as did Elephant Hill with its Stone Syrah.

There are just 400 hectares of Syrah in New Zealand, equivalent to 1% of the nation's vineyard area. While there are some important plantings on Waiheke Island, a 40-minute ferry ride from Auckland's central business district (CBD), the majority of the country's Syrah is located in Hawke's Bay. The region produces a distinctive style, although in the 2019 Master of Wine examination, most candidates placed the two Hawke's Bay Syrahs in the northern Rhône, overlooking the quality that can be produced at the bottom of the earth. That lack of recognition was potentially a reflection of limited availability in global export markets. However, it is an important style in the world of Syrah and, unlike the Cabernet blends and Chardonnay produced in New Zealand, has a distinctly Kiwi twang. It shows the open fruit of the New World, and offers ripe blackberry, a floral twist, a sprinkling of black pepper and savory, smoky base notes. There's always bright acidity and moderate alcohol levels, reflecting the fact that Hawke's Bay does not provide warm-climate growing conditions. While you'd think this was as far south as Syrah could stretch its tendrils, you'd be wrong. There are also a number of Marlborough producers getting in on the act, more than 200 miles to the southwest. Admittedly, it can be too cool to ripen Syrah in some seasons, but in warmer years there are a handful of quality-oriented growers, including Fromm, Giesen, Novum and Te Whare Ra, that are producing Marlborough Syrah with success. The wines combine richness with tension and fine aromatic detail derived from a cool, lengthy ripening period. These are styles that provide great pleasure. However, the dominance of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc means the country has developed a reputation as a producer of fresh, aromatic whites, not savory reds. Fine wine lovers – who are a small drop in the world's wine-drinking populace – might have New Zealand Pinot Noir on their radar, but Syrah remains relatively undiscovered, which is a shame. While Romeo Bragato suggested that Syrah should “be at least one half of the vineyard” of New Zealand, it's fallen a long way short of his ambition. More than a century later, it's time to wake up and smell the Syrah.

The wines were reviewed at my home, in December, 2020 and January, 2021 in the north-east of England with countless Zoom tastings with winemakers in New Zealand. Let's hope the situation improves so that I may conduct the tastings in situ next time.