

PINOT CENTRAL

A METEORIC RISE

Although barely 30 years old, Central Otago has already earned a stellar reputation for its exotic and distinctive wines – most importantly, Pinot Noir

BY JANE SKILTON, MW | PHOTOS COURTESY OF AUBURN AND COPNL

Queenstown is the Adventure Capital of New Zealand and attracts visitors from all over the world, keen to experience extreme sports. But increasingly, many wine lovers are coming to sample first hand the local Central Otago wines.

The rise of Central Otago, which has quickly become one of New Zealand's most important wine regions, is nothing short of meteoric. Although it always had a reputation for producing high quality fruit, traditionally, this was stone fruit such as cherries and apricots. At the end of the 1980s, only a handful of producers had been brave enough to experiment and plant grapes. Yet in the last couple of decades, the region has boomed. In 2000, there were 703 hectares of vineyards and only 39 wineries whereas in 2012, there were 1,543 hectares and over 120 wineries.

The development of the region

Why has Central Otago wine become so popular? Firstly, the unique climate favours the production of wines of unparalleled purity. The defining feature of great Pinot Noir is its haunting aroma and there should be a good degree of floral notes too. If the region is too warm, the grapes ripen but at the expense of these lifted perfumes and the resulting wines are said to be soupy and dull. But with a semi-continental climate, Central Otago has a relatively late but short growing season. Daytime summer temperatures can reach 30°C but the nights are cool, often dropping as low as 6°C. This large difference in daily temperature is known as diurnal variation and is thought to be one of the main factors that help to preserve acidity and keep these all-important vibrant fruit aromas and flavours pristine. The quality of UV light is another reason for the lively fruit characters. Winemakers believe that the purity of light magnifies the effect of the sun's rays, leading to riper tannins earlier in the season. Grapes can be picked with fully ripe tannins yet with the fruit still very fresh and alive. Importantly, the riper fruit tannin structure offers excellent

potential for the wines to age well.

Secondly, when it comes to making red wines, Central Otago has focused primarily on Pinot Noir. Admittedly, this may be because in such a marginal climate, the chance of ripening other varieties is slim. But perhaps, in the same way as Marlborough pioneered a new style of Sauvignon Blanc, so Central Otago found that its richly fruited,



few vintages, it has already carved out an enviable reputation for wines of supreme quality.

Central Otago is still exploring and developing its wine industry. Not content to produce only superlative Pinots and mouth-watering aromatic whites, wineries are investigating other styles too. Quartz Reef Brut has long been regarded as the region's superlative sparkling wine but is facing stiff competition from Akarua, which released a couple of outstanding methode traditionnelle wines in 2012.

Central Otago has a dynamism and energy that is infectious. If you decide to pay a visit, most likely you'll encounter local winemakers skiing, kayaking, mountain biking or bungee jumping as soon as the day's work is finished. But make no mistake. Underneath their rugged, sporty exterior, they are just

Sense of Place | Sub-regional characters of the wines are possibly more a reflection of altitude than soil type.

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opulent, almost exotic Pinots were quite unlike those produced anywhere else.

In September 2012, the local regional body, Central Otago Pinot Noir Limited (COPNL), hosted a special 25th anniversary celebration where invited media were asked to assess over 75 newly released wines from the 2011 and 2010 vintages, all blind-tasted. As one of the invited guests, I found it fascinating to assess and judge each wine without reference to its identity. Once the wines were unmasked, it was intriguing to see the emergence of definite sub-regional styles.

Sub-regional evolution

These sub-regional characters are possibly more a reflection of altitude than soil type. Leaving Queenstown

on State Highway 6, the first region reached is Gibbston Valley, home to some of the longest established wineries. Here, the vineyards lie at an altitude of around 480m and whereas this can be a disadvantage in cooler seasons, it does mean that when the conditions are right, Pinots from Gibbston have a lovely ethereal fragrance with a real delicacy of flavour. However, most wineries based here have realised that they need to source fruit from other more reliable Central sub-regions areas to be guaranteed of success in most years. Established producers such as Gibbston Valley, Chard Farm, Peregrine and Mount Edward can be relied upon to produce excellent wines. Newer wineries such as Coal Pit, Brennan and Wild Irishmen are also worth seeking out.

From Gibbston, State Highway 6

winds through the dramatic Kawarau Gorge until it arrives at the small town of Cromwell whose kitsch monument of giant plastic fruit pays tribute to the orchard industry that was one of the main sources of income for the town.

Today, grapes are the town's claim to fame. The wider Cromwell Basin, which includes the sub-regions of Bannockburn and Bendigo, has vineyards lying between 250m and 350m, which creates a more sheltered, warmer environment for the grapes. The wines of Cromwell have a darker fruited character with more exotic, opulent notes and always a certain lushness of flavour. Many of the region's most high-profile wineries such as Felton Road, Quartz Reef, Mt Difficulty, Akarua and Carrick are here.

From Cromwell, visitors can

continue on State Highway 6 to Wanaka, whose reputation as a quality wine region was established by a single producer. Established in 1982, Rippon pioneered biodynamic winemaking in the region. Today, it produces wines of immense character. Newer entrants such as Maude Wines have also shown that there is real potential in this region.

Alternatively, take State Highway 8, which goes through Clyde and on to Alexandra, which is the southern-most Pinot Noir winegrowing region in the world and the lowest lying of the Central Otago regions. Until recently, Alexandra wines have arguably not enjoyed the prestige of those from Cromwell vineyards, but this has been addressed the last couple of years with wineries such as Judge Rock and Two Paddocks winning gold medals in national wine shows and Grasshopper Rock taking out Champion Wine of Show at the 2012 Air New Zealand Wine Awards.

Consumer engagement

The youthfulness of the wine industry and the associated absence of winemaking tradition prevalent in more established regions have allowed

Central Otago to evolve perhaps more quickly than most. The formation of COPNL was an important step in the development of the region. Tasked with promoting the wines on home and overseas markets, producers worked together to raise the profile of the region's wine hosting events such as the Central Otago Pinot Noir Celebration (held in January every two years and open to all) and E'Sensual, which is an invitation-only, trade focused tasting.

Although Pinot Noir created the reputation of Central Otago, the recent arrival to the market of some stellar whites shows that the region is no one-trick pony. In the last few years, aromatic varieties such as Pinot Gris and Gewurztraminer have caught the attention of critics and consumers.

Racy Riesling

But it is with Riesling that the region excels. The climate seems to amplify the crystalline, succulent characters that are the hallmark of the variety. Auburn Wines is New Zealand's only winery focusing solely on Riesling, and although it has released just a



as passionate and dedicated to their craft as any. And with each passing vintage, the vines mature, grape growers get a better understanding of their vineyards and winemakers gain more experience with the fruit.

Central's Pinots can be favourably compared to red Burgundy in terms of quality, but these wines are not pale imitators. The product of one of the most stunning viticultural areas in the world, their depth and complexity is a fitting testament to the dramatic Central Otago landscape. 🍷

FROM FAR LEFT | GRAPES ENJOY THE WARM DAYS AND COOL NIGHTS | CENTRAL OTAGO IS STILL EXPLORING AND DEVELOPING ITS WINE INDUSTRY | CENTRAL IS, QUITE LITERALLY, TOO COOL FOR CABERNET