

# The Many Faces of New Zealand Pinot Noir

By Laurie Daniel

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Consumers tend to lump all New Zealand pinot noir into one category. But just as pinot noirs from, say, the Russian River Valley are distinct from those of Santa Maria Valley, New Zealand pinots vary throughout the country. A seminar at the recent World of Pinot Noir event, near San Luis Obispo, illustrated some of those differences.

New Zealand has ridden pinot noir's wave of popularity. Ten years ago, pinot noir was the country's fifth most widely planted grape variety; today, it's No. 2, behind only sauvignon blanc.

The largest plantings are in the Marlborough region (better known for sauvignon blanc) and Central Otago, both on the South Island, although early plantings of high-quality pinot occurred on the North Island in the mid-1980s, around Martinborough.

Winemakers' stylistic decisions about ripeness and use of oak play a role, of course, as do such vineyard factors as which clones are planted and how large the yields are. But each of New Zealand's major pinot-growing areas produces wines that are quite different. Given the different climates and soils in each region, that's not surprising.

At the seminar, six regions were highlighted: Martinborough and Gisborne on the North Island; Marlborough, Nelson, Waipara and Central Otago on the South.

Martinborough is the top pinot area on the North Island, and Larry McKenna of Escarpment Vineyard is one of the area's pioneers. Martinborough experiences more vintage variation than some other regions. The area is exposed to cold winds from the south, so the weather can be unpredictable.

The 2006 vintage was an excellent one, while the crop size in 2007 was very small. Martinborough pinot noirs often have an earthy, meaty, savory component, and Escarpment's pinots are good examples. The 2006 Escarpment Pinot Noir (\$37) is quite elegant, with juicy raspberry and a spicy, savory overtone; the 2007 (\$37) is similar but more muscular.

The hard-to-find 2007 Millton "Clos de Ste. Anne" Pinot Noir (\$40) is from Gisborne, a region where most of the small amount of pinot that's grown is used for sparkling wine. Millton is the exception, and the wine is on the earthy side, with tart cherry and some floral notes.

Pinot noir is more common on the South Island. Marlborough, for example, offers a huge range of pinot noirs in all price ranges. Marlborough growers are finding that the best places for pinot are sites with more clay in the soils, rather than on the stony riverbed soils that are common in the region's main valley.

Winemaker Clive Jones of Nautilus Estate represented the region at the seminar. The 2007 Nautilus Pinot Noir (\$19) is dark and rich, with cherry and raspberry flavors and a long finish. While 2007 was difficult in Martinborough, in Marlborough it was "a dream vintage from a winemaking point of view," Jones said.

Nelson isn't far from Marlborough, but it's in a banana belt of sorts, with mild, sunny weather. **The 2006 Woollaston Estates Pinot Noir (\$28) from Nelson is dark and spicy, with an herbal note and firm tannins.**

There's some excellent pinot noir produced in Waipara, about an hour north of Christchurch, but not much of it finds its way here. The area is fairly dry and sheltered. Belinda Gould makes some outstanding pinot at

Muddy Water. Her 2006 Muddy Water "Slowhand" Pinot Noir (\$40) is dark, lively and just a touch earthy, with firm structure.

Central Otago is the current darling of pinot-philes. It's the most southerly wine region in the world, and at those latitudes, the summer days are very long, with intense sunshine. That's important, because the growing season tends to be short. Frost is a threat both in the spring, when the vines are coming to life, and during the fall harvest.

Central Otago actually has several well-defined subregions but, in general, the pinots are ripe, deeply colored and rich.

Winemaker Dean Shaw, who makes a number of brands, brought wines from two of them, Nevis Bluff and Kawarau Estate. The 2006 Nevis Bluff (\$30) — from Gibbston Valley, the coolest Central Otago subregion — is dark, juicy and supple, with raspberry and wild thyme flavors, while the 2006 Kawarau Estate (\$22), from the warmer Lowburn area, is more structured, with some earthy and floral notes.

The wines are made in a similar fashion, Shaw said, so they offer a good illustration of the differences to be found even within just Central Otago.

Shaw expanded on that theme a few days later with a tasting in San Francisco. All the wines were Central Otago pinots from the 2007 vintage, some of which haven't arrived here yet.

From the cool Gibbston Valley area, the 2007 Two Paddocks "First Paddock" Pinot Noir (\$45 for the current vintage, 2006) is dark and aromatic, with lovely texture, a hint of thyme and a long finish. The 2007 Rippon Pinot Noir (\$52 for the 2006; the 2007 arrives in a few months) — from Wanaka, which is slightly warmer — is quite elegant, with bright raspberry, some minerality and fine tannins.

From Lowburn, the 2007 Rockburn Pinot Noir (\$19 for the 2006) offers lush fruit, some spiciness and — like the Kawarau Estate, also from Lowburn — firm structure. Bendigo, which is also warm, is the source of the 2007 Quartz Reef Estate Pinot Noir (\$35, arriving in a couple of months), which is a bit earthy and still very tight, with firm structure.

Bannockburn is also a warm area, and it's the point of origin for some of my favorite Central Otago pinots. Case in point: the 2007 Felton Road Pinot Noir (\$50), which is bright and lively, with plump, spicy raspberry flavors and firm structure.

**SOME BUDGET CHOICES:** Although many New Zealand pinots are quite pricey, there are some affordable options, especially from Marlborough. The 2007 Goldschmidt Vineyards "Boulder Bank" Pinot Noir (\$18) is racy and fresh, with raspberry and wild thyme notes.

The 2008 Matua Valley Pinot Noir (\$14) is juicy and smooth, with bright cherry and raspberry and a slight herbal nuance. From Central Otago, the 2007 Wild Rock Pinot Noir (\$20) offers dark cherry and raspberry fruit, firm structure and a lot of concentration for the price.