

**TOP 20 NEW
CENTRAL
OTAGO
PINOT NOIRS**



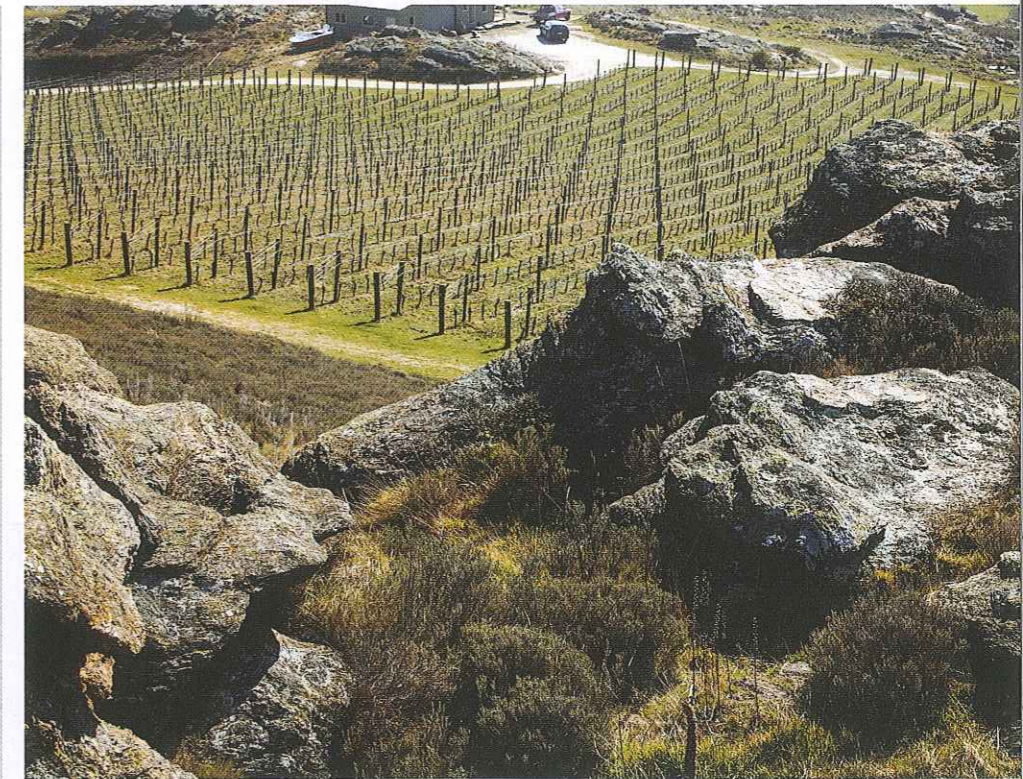
Every spring, the wineries that belong to Central Otago Pinot Noir Limited (COPNL) host writers to attend a tasting of their newest reds; it's a tough job, but *Editor Joelle Thomson* leapt at the chance to try 79 new wines

Do I have to spit?

THE SIX year old Pinot Noir in my big burgundy glass at 11.26 in the morning tastes so elegant, so fresh and so sensational in the Central Otago sunshine with Angus from Grasshopper Rock Vineyard that I don't want to spit into the green bucket. But this is a job. Even when it tastes this good. And Jacqui Murphy from Sam Neill's vineyard arrives and off we go.

Next stop, Sam Neill's piece of paradise; Pinot Noir vines at his Last Chance Vineyard in Earnsclough, Alexandra. The early settler ruins meld into the rocky landscape on the drive through Clyde to arrive at this exposed hillside that is carpeted in wild thyme; a constant reminder of those pioneers who inadvertently brought it with them from the UK all those moons ago in the mid to late 1800s. Their hope was to find gold, but the treasure trickling out of these hills today is a deeper colour; ruby hued Pinot Noir.

Central Otago is the world's most southern wine region and is home to a higher proportion of Pinot Noir vineyards than anywhere else on Earth. Over 80% of the grapes planted in Central are Pinot Noir. It is easy to overlook the outstanding Chardonnays, promising Pinot Gris and vastly underrated Rieslings that also come from here and my belief is that the whites will begin to gain greater recognition over the next decade because their quality is exceptional.



Sam Neill's mother, Priscilla, is honoured at a special little vineyard planted high up on a hillside in Earnsclough, near to Alexandra.

But like most visits to Central's wineries, this one is all about Pinot Noir. It began with the annual spring tasting of new Pinots on 5 September. This year there were 79 of them and all had their identities concealed. This gives the tasting a greater degree of credibility than if the visiting writers tasted them with their labels on display.

The 79 Pinot Noirs were presented by wineries that belong to Central Otago Pinot Noir Limited (COPNL), so there are some wineries that are not represented. This year the wines were tasted at Northburn Station and they came from three different vintages; mostly from 2013 with smaller amounts from 2012 and 2011. The wines tasted are all 'new' on the market – or about to be released for sale.

This annual tasting is a chance for wineries to gauge the reaction of critics while it provides those of us who write with a chance to get a picture of wine styles in the years presented. This is especially interesting in a place where the climate

plays such a crucial role in wine style as it does in Central Otago. Because it is the world's most southern wine region, frosts are a certainty in some sub-regions here. This does not always impact negatively on wine quality but it can determine the profitability of the vineyard's production, which can be compromised if frost destroys a large portion of the grapes at any stage of their growth cycle.

Most of the wines at this year's spring tasting were from the 2013 vintage, which was generally exceptional throughout the country. The summer was long, relatively dry and mostly free of disease risk for grapevines.

That said, it is often easier to look at wines when they are three years old – as many at this tasting were – because they have softened and settled down in the bottle. But even the 2011 Pinot Noirs from Central Otago are relatively youthful right now. It is always challenging to make strong proclamations on red wines when they are this youthful because it takes time for their tannins to soften after they have matured in oak, whether it is small 225 litre barriques or larger oak barrels. The latter are growing in popularity

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because they can promote a more subtle taste in red wine. Speaking of which, I feel that too much new oak destroys the elegance and essence of what Pinot Noir is and should be all about, namely fresh acidity and succulence. This is a personal view. It is also reflected in the wines on the following page, which stood out for me because of their overall balance and subtlety as well as their power.

The vast majority of these wines are sealed with screwcaps, which can be a double edged sword. Screwcaps are an

almost flawless seal in terms of preventing most major wine faults, but red wine can take a long time to come round when sealed this way. One answer is to decant it. A decanter works wonders, but large glasses or a water jug with a wide rim do the job just as well. The aim is to expose the wine to air and to let the wine warm up and come to room temperature; this opens up its personality and character. The following wines are my top 20; it was impossible to limit it to a top 10.

The stand outs

2013 Felton Road Calvert Pinot Noir

This wine comes from an organically farmed vineyard on Felton Road and is medium bodied, but its pronounced aromas make up for this with flavours of earth, cardamom, almonds, cloves and spice; very complex with rich cherry fruit integrated beautifully in this style. This wine was a standout and also a style departure thanks to the oak integration. It tastes like it has a long life ahead.

2012 Mount Edward Pinot Noir

Mount Edward Winery was established by Alan Brady, who still lives next door but has now sold it to a group that is headed up by winemaker Duncan Forsyth, who grows grapes in three different sub-regions of Central Otago, drawing on at least a couple of different vineyards to make this

outstanding Pinot Noir. It is a consistent top place getter at these blind spring tastings, thanks to its firm, smooth tannins, which add interest and texture in the mouth while the brightness of fruit - macerated cherries, stewed raspberries - and spice with cloves, cedar, cinnamon and a savoury earthy undertone all stack up to create a Pinot that kicks ass. Not to put too fine a point on it.

2012 Rippon Tinker's Field Pinot Noir

Here is the outlier – the wine from Wanaka, where the climate, weather patterns and the style of wines all add up to a different style of Otago Pinot Noir. Tinker's Field is a fascinating vineyard which was planted by the late wine pioneer Rolfe Mills and is now managed by his son, Nick, who heads up the winemaking team. This is smooth, full bodied and has a long juicy finish. It drinks well now and its intense concentration of

flavour gives it the potential to age well for up to (possibly beyond) 10 years from now.

2011 Prophet's Rock Pinot Noir

Iron fist, velvet glove, deliciously good; this wine is one of Central's super stars with its intense spice aromas - pronounced cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg and even a hint of licorice - driving the fruit to interesting flavoursome places. It is full bodied with big smooth tannins, a long finish and a long life ahead.

2011 Surveyor Thomson Single Vineyard Central Otago Pinot Noir

Here is another outstanding and consistent top shelf Pinot Noir, which is driven by elegance - red cherry flavours, a medium body and a lightness on the palate - but a surprisingly muscular finish, which gives it the clear potential to age extremely well for up to a decade, possibly beyond. If it lasts that long.

Sam Neill's new vineyard

The Fusilier Vineyard is a 5.6 hectare side that tumbles down a sunny, north west facing hillside at Long Gully, which is a sunny corner of Bannockburn; just along the road from big names like Mt Difficulty and Felton Road. The Pinot Noir grown on the Fusilier Vineyard used to find its way into bottles branded Desert Heart. Sam Neill's purchase of this site gives him more grapes as he grows his Two Paddocks brand. But it also helps him to spread the risk in Central Otago's sometimes marginal grape growing climate because he now owns vineyards in three of Central's four main sub-regions: Gibbston, Bannockburn and Alexandra. The climates and soils vary in each area. Frost is more of a risk in Gibbston and Alexandra; at both ends of the season – spring and autumn – while Bannockburn tends to be warmer. He named this vineyard after his father's military background (the Fusilier) while his mother, Priscilla, is honoured at a special little vineyard planted high up on a hillside in Earnsclough, near to Alexandra.



The top 20

2013 Aurum Madeleine Pinot Noir	\$85
2013 Aurum Estate Pinot Noir	\$35
2012 Chard Farm Tiger Pinot Noir	\$85
2013 Felton Road Calvert Pinot Noir	\$65.50
2013 Felton Road Pinot Noir Block 3	\$92
2012 Folding Hill Orchard Block Pinot Noir	\$55
2012 Folding Hill Pinot Noir	\$45
2013 Gibbston Valley Pinot Noir	\$45
2013 Grasshopper Rock Central Otago Pinot Noir	\$32
2013 Felton Road Block 3 Pinot Noir	\$100-110
2013 Maude Pinot Noir	\$36
2013 Maude Kid's Block Pinot Noir	\$45
2012 Mount Edward Pinot Noir	\$45
2011 Prophet's Rock Pinot Noir	\$48-50
2012 Rippon Tinker's Field Mature Vine Pinot Noir	\$95
2011 Surveyor Thomson Single Vineyard Pinot Noir	\$45
2012 Terra Sancta Jacksons Block Pinot Noir	\$48.95
2012 Terra Sancta Beach Pinot Noir	\$48.95
2013 Two Degrees Pinot Noir	\$37
2013 Two Paddocks Estate Pinot Noir	\$50

Super seconds

2013 Akarua Rua Pinot Noir	\$28.50
2013 Coal Pit Tiwha Pinot Noir	\$42
2012 Doctors Flat Pinot Noir	\$46
2013 Earth's End Pinot Noir	\$29
2013 Gibbston Valley China Terrace Pinot Noir	\$65
2013 Gibbston Valley Reserve Pinot Noir	\$120
2013 Gibbston Valley School House Pinot Noir	\$65
2013 Lowburn Ferry Home Block Pinot Noir	\$55
2013 Lowburn Ferry Skeleton Creek Pinot Noir	\$45
2013 Mud House Pinot Noir	\$24.99
2013 Valli Bannockburn Pinot Noir	\$65
2013 Valli Bendigo Pinot Noir	\$65