

Rosemary George MW enjoys the words and wine of Nigel Greening and Sam Neil at the CWW tasting on 28th May at the Naval Club, London.

Central Otago has certainly come of age

I never cease to be amazed by the speed with which things seem to happen in New Zealand. Central Otago has achieved in a couple of decades what it has taken Burgundy a century or two to accomplish. When I wrote my book on New Zealand wines, nearly 20 years ago now, neither Felton Road nor Two Paddocks were producing wine in any quantity, and were not on my list to visit. And today they are both rated amongst the leading producers of Central Otago.

This tasting was fun. It was immediately apparent that Nigel Greening and Sam Neil are great friends and there was a good rapport between them, with some perceptive observations about the state of the wine industry in Central Otago. They described themselves as co-conspirators with Pinot Noir, “but it is not a competition”. Sam observed: “It is odd being a wine grower and an actor. Acting can open doors, but not necessarily the right door, and a door may close when they realise you are the actor from the film they didn’t like. Actors are not necessarily taken seriously.” But he assured us that he was very serious about making the best possible wine.



First we enjoyed a pair of white wines, Two Paddocks Riesling and Bannockburn Chardonnay. The consensus is that Riesling is the most successful white variety of Central Otago, but it is so difficult to sell, with consumer resistance to the variety. The Riesling cuttings for Two Paddocks came from Nigel’s vineyard. Pinot Gris is still important in Central Otago, but Nigel has pulled his up in favour of Chardonnay.

Nigel then talked about the stylistic changes for his Chardonnay. He used to give the fruit a long hang time, but now picks earlier, and his Riesling too. The Bannockburn Chardonnay enjoyed 80% new oak, with wild ferments and malo, no lees stirring and 15 months in the barrel without any fining or filtering. As a Chablis girl, I’ve had reservations about New Zealand Chardonnay in the past, but this was lovely, with firm acidity and fresh leesy fruit.

The other six wines in the tasting were inevitably Pinot Noir, and delicious they were too. There is very little new planting in the region now, and of the 1600 hectares about 1000-1100 are Pinot Noir. Apparently there is not much good land left to plant. Intensive dairy farming has taken over the top half of the Cromwell Valley, to provide dehydrated milk powder for Chinese baby food. Land prices are now about the same as in Marlborough.

One clear theme of the tasting was the diversity of Central



Scenes from the tasting. Photos by Colin Hampden-White.

Otago. There is enormous variety between the different areas. The heat summation is similar to Chablis, but that is not a good measure. There is much more sunshine, with stronger sunlight, and colder nights. Central Otago has both some of the hottest and coolest vineyards, in the Alexander Valley, with extremes of diurnal temperatures. Spring frost can be an issue. Gibbston Valley can be the hardest place to make Pinot Noir. One year out of three can be a catastrophe and one in three completely sublime. In 2014 Gibbston produced a very good crop, whereas Alexandra was a catastrophe. Nigel was insistent that he prefers the cooler years in Bannockburn.

With the evolution of the sub-regions has come a better understanding of viticulture, with a greater appreciation of the different sites, resulting in more confidence. Another consideration is vine age. The average is barely in double figures; another ten years will make an enormous difference. Phylloxera happily is not much of an issue; it is present in Central Otago but they are cautiously optimistic about containing it.

Inevitably the topic of organic viticulture was raised. Nigel was more vocal, describing himself as a card-carrying biodynamic farmer. "But there is a point where you get off the bus. I got off three stops before Nicolas Joly." Sam considers his farming to be pretty similar. "We are not wild-eyed but all four of our vineyards are organic, and we have four cows whose sole purpose is to shit." For Nigel the best compost is the farmer's footstep; you have to live your land. He quoted Nick Mills of Rippon Vineyards talking of learning to negotiate with your land, observing that all love affairs that last need a lot of negotiation.

And what of the future? Central Otago used to be known for its 'fruit bomb wines', but with maturity has come restraint. Sam said that he was looking forward to consistency and harmony, now that they were past the first flush of youth. Nigel talked of taking a long perspective. He has just planted his last vineyard, on what was once a hazelnut orchard, which will be called McMur.

The tasting left us in no doubt that Central Otago has indeed come of age.



Sam Neill and Nigel Greening. All photos by Colin Hampden-White.

Thanks to Harpers for permission to reprint this article, where **Anne Krebiehl** talks to Nigel and Sam on

What makes a great Pinot Noir producer

Two of New Zealand's leading Pinot Noir producers, Sam Neill of Two Paddocks and film star fame, and Nigel Greening of Felton Road, set out what it is that has drawn them in to trying to create award-winning Pinot Noir from Central Otago.

When was the point you knew and decided you wanted to make Pinot Noir?

Nigel Greening: 1998. I had a moment when in fact one of Sam's neighbours, Dry Gully, had won a trophy and I thought I'm going to go and taste that wine. I went to Bill and Sybilla's house and I managed to buy a case from him. The interesting thing was, talking to Bill I found out that he had no experience. He just decided 'got bit of dirt, put some vines in, see how it goes'. So I came away thinking

'bugger, maybe anybody can do this, maybe you don't have to have a special qualification'. That was when the seed started, maybe I could? It was the same month Felton Road released their first wine with Stuart [Elms, Felton Road's founder and previous owner] and Dry Gully, they both released their 1997s in May 1998, and almost straightaway there were two wine shows and Felton Road won one and Dry Gully the other.

Sam Neill: It wasn't quite such a road to Damascus, it was a crawl to Damascus rather than a bolt out of the heavens. I realised I loved Pinot Noir in 1979 when I first drank Burgundy. And then Rolfe Mills [of Rippon in Wanaka] who was an old friend started to grow it and I thought this is really interesting, the wine I like best is being grown down

the road from me. [Neill is a Dunedin native, and had built a house near Queenstown in the mid 1980s]. We'd go and visit Rolfe and buy a couple of cases which got better and better each year and then in 1991 and 1992 we tasted the Rudi vintages.

Greening: Aren't they amazing? I still think those were the greatest Pinots from Central I've ever tasted.

Neill: Those were a real call to arms, those two vintages, and I thought, just like Nigel, maybe if Rolfe can do it I should be looking and I talked to Rolfe who was very encouraging and said absolutely, you should do that. I thought I'd plant in front of my house on a north-facing slope but he said no, look somewhere else. And that's when I bought my first land, planted it in 1993 and our first vintage was in 1997, released in 1998. While it would not have won a show that year we were amazed by how good it was, we weren't expecting that. [Nigel says 1997 was one of the toughest years in Gibbston Valley]. It had Pinot things about it and we all looked at each other in astonishment and realised we were good to go.

So pioneers had already done the work?

Greening: I think the first generation were established:

Anne Krebiehl at the Central Otago tasting.



Gibbston, Rippon, Black Ridge, Chard Farm, and the second generation really started with that 1997 gang: Felton Road, Two Paddocks, Mount Difficulty one year later, and Olssens had just started. This second wave started behind those pioneers.

As a Central Otago native, having seen it as very poor farming country, are you happy with what has happened to the region?

Neill: Look, I am slightly nostalgic for the days when it was just three rabbits and one and a half sheep, because it was sort of amazing, but now with irrigation and a whole lot of people who would never have considered growing anything like a vine it has been transformative.

Effectively this has given the world a new world-class Pinot Noir region, who would have thought that even 30 years ago?

Neill: Certainly not the government.

Greening: There was something between a warning and a policy statement.

Neill: I think this was in the 1970s, the government weren't interested. This distinguished professor of something or other said we don't think anyone should grow any wine at all on the whole of the South Island.

Greening: It has to be said in defence of those people that if we hadn't had Dr Richard Smart we probably wouldn't have ever been able to, because what he did in developing cool climate viticulture and his ideas for canopy management were really the basis for so many cool climate regions, including in Europe. It took new insights in viticulture as well.

So you both realised you could make wine, then you realised that your wine stands up pretty well next to numerous other Pinot Noirs in this world. In what way did your endeavours change?

Greening: It didn't. I think we always had an inner confidence about it, whether that was well-founded or not. The one thing that we didn't do early on was that we didn't really sign up to the idea that this is a venture that's going to take decades before it will show what it can really do, that is going to need absolute dedication to single sites and understanding them, learning them, expressing them. In the

early days we probably still thought the whole Burgundy terroir thing was a little bit of bullshit. As you work your own land, that opinion changes because if you get to know your own land and how it behaves you get to understand very clearly that your children are all different, so you change sides. But in the early days we weren't thinking that we were going to be setting up something that was the equivalent of a Burgundy domain which is the structure we have now.

And Sam, how did your endeavours change, from something that you could drink to a wine that is served in Michelin-starred restaurants?

Neill: What happens, as in so many things in life, you get an impulse and that impulse turns into blind, raging ambition which is never healthy and gets the better of you. It certainly got the better of me. What started off as a little, modest five acres on a back road has turned into four vineyards and my wife now barely speaks to me.

What has changed in your outlook because you both came to this from very different careers?

Greening: One big difference was that I gave up my day-job, so I had to make this work from day one, I had no other income stream at all and I had spent everything I had earned on earth buying it. So for me it was an absolute full-time, seven-days-a-week job from day one. It's only now that I am pulling back a little bit from that. I think when you're working on it flat out like that, you're much more focused on the now than the future. It really took us probably seven or eight years before we could really think we don't have to think is it all going to fall over this year. The training wheels are off, we're riding this thing now. Then you can turn your eyes ahead and start thinking longer term, actually, what are we doing this for, how are we going to be doing this in 30 years?

Neill: I'd say it's a bit like printing a photograph, in the old days we used to print our own photographs, put them into the bath and swish them around, then the image would become clear. So you go blind for a bit, feeling your way. Like Nigel, I've poured my whole life and every penny into this damn thing, so it'd better work. And then you realise when at best you are breaking even you must look for the

long run. That is where I am heading. I confidently expect to be in profit by the turn of the next century, in which case I'll keep my day job.

The tasting, which Greening dubbed “a news update with some refreshments” touched, as is usual when such imaginative, well-travelled minds meet, upon topics as wide-ranging as politics, playing music to wines, biodynamic zeal, ripening patterns as part of terroir, ideal picking windows, Chinese exports and characterisations of the different valleys and growing regions in Central Otago.

Greening explained that the average vine age for Pinot Noir in Central Otago is only just getting into double figures, remarking how young this region really is and how much there is to look forward to. Illustrating his long-term view and generational decision horizon, he told us of his just-planted McMurphy vineyard (next to Calvert) which Felton Road will not expect to use fruit from until its 20th year.

Showing their respective wines, among them a peony-scented, floral First Paddock 2010 Pinot Noir from Two Paddocks (Gibbston Valley), a spicy, savoury Calvert Pinot Noir 2012 from Felton Road as well as Felton Road's stupendous, brooding and lifted Block 5 2009 Pinot Noir, Greening said: “Central Otago is growing up. It was known for its fruit bombs. Do you see this here? No. We've all grown up. These wines show the tendency of Central Otago for elegance. With better understanding, vine age and more self-confidence in winemakers, nobody's trying too hard any more.”

Neill agreed: “I am looking forward to consistency.”
<http://www.harpers.co.uk/news/sam-neill-and-nigel-greening-on-what-makes-a-great-pinot-noir-producer/358029.article>



Mel Jones MW reports on the CWW Wine Faults seminar given by Bill Nanson, 15th May 2014.

Burgundy gets the (lady) bird



I was very keen to attend this tasting as I have often encountered a ‘peanut’ smell on Burgundy and I have ladybird infestations in my house and have found the same smell when I've inadvertently ironed one or swatted it on my face in the night.

Nanson has a scientific background alongside a love of Burgundy. In 2000 he moved to Switzerland and started to write his *Burgundy Report* in 2002. By October 2013 he was writing full time about Burgundy.

He explained that this is a wine fault that is little understood. A lot of people can't taste the problem and scientists haven't yet isolated the chemical involved. For those who mainly drink Burgundy, they have no reference to notice this. Asian ladybirds aren't the problem, but the traditional UK ladybirds.

Nanson began to notice the problem in 2004. When he started doing the harvest, the grapes looked dreadful – in the Côte de Beaune in particular. A few months later the wine tasted surprisingly good – fresh, sweet – and everything seemed fine. From 2006, however, the smell was noticeable on these 2004 wines. Looking back on his notes he kept writing ‘cedar’ about wines in barrel. Immediately after bottling the wine was fine but later about a third of the wines had this ‘cedar’ note. In January 2007 he wrote his first piece on the subject, on Robert Parker's forum. Some of his readers agreed, but some hadn't noticed the problem. In 2008, in London, he was discussing over lunch with friends and they tasted 20 wines which all had the same smell.

However, not everyone could detect it. Winemakers said it was pyrazines, but Nanson remembered there were a lot of ladybirds around at harvest and also in the cap during pidgeage. He wrote an article in 2004 entitled ‘à la coccinelle’. He made a link between the taint and the ladybirds but he was challenged – people said it was the stinky character, like Cabernet Franc. He thought it was like cold tar soap. Others suggested rot, mirepoix, gentian. Because of botrytis, some had used powdered tannins in 2004 and the wines smelt a bit nasty when they went into barrel. Some argue that the apparent difference in detection is merely bottle variation, but Nanson says it's that people are sensitive to different