

# PINOT NOIR: THE NEW PRETENDERS



The New World's many fledgling Pinot regions often look to Burgundy as the ideal to aspire to. But do any of them even come close in quality terms, asks **JASPER MORRIS MW**

**B**eing exposed to Burgundy – selflessly in the line of duty, of course – has made me a passionate devotee of the Pinot grape. I love it in its many Burgundian manifestations, and I have been sorely tempted by many different examples from various parts of the New World.

Pinot Noir and cool-climate viticulture go hand in hand. Certain parts of certain countries seem to be more favoured but, as ever with Pinot, local specifics rule – world-famous wines remain scarce. The crucial characteristic of Pinot Noir, which sets it apart from the other great red wine grapes of the world, is the thinness of its skin. Intense heat leads to sunburn and

stewed wines. Unsurprisingly, the pioneers in such districts as Napa and Hunter Valley wanted to try their hand with Pinot – and equally predictably, such enterprise failed.

But Pinot can do well in the right spot with suitable zealots determined to create an exciting wine. We know that a fairly cool climate is vital, but what else counts?



Burgundy's limestone subsoil is often cited as a crucial factor in the quality of the region's Pinots and some New World vignerons have started their search for the holy grail by planting on limestone outcrops. But the limestone deposits in, for example, parts of New Zealand and on the west coast of the US are much younger than the Jurassic park of Burgundy and Champagne, and the Burgundian model shows it is the subtle variations between different types of limestone which makes it possible for one vineyard to produce great wine while its neighbour may not.

Pinot has been grown in Burgundy since at least the 14th century, probably earlier. There is a wealth of plant material and today's vigneron can benefit from this rich heritage by taking cuttings

from suitable stock. However, New World Pinots are almost entirely produced from recent clonal material, despite the existence in both California and New Zealand of some 'suitcase clones' taken legally or otherwise from famous vineyards of the Côte d'Or.

Realistically, most New World Pinot industries are at a fledgling stage: there are few deep-rooted mature vineyards, the most suitable plant material is still being developed, and the best sites are only just being identified and planted.

North America and Australasia are the continents most obviously jockeying for position after Europe, where France's supremacy – via Burgundy – is unchallenged despite the skills of Pinot loving vignerons in Germany, Switzerland,

Austria and, most fledgling of all, England. (Most of our geological formations are tilted westwards unfortunately, unlike the escarpment of the Côte d'Or.)

## The US camp

Who in North America should wear the crown, California or Oregon? The latter has one advantage in that Pinot is the only red grape of real note in the state. Since Jim Lett's pioneering 1966 Eyrie Vineyards, Pinot has flourished throughout the Willamette Valley AVA, while various sub-districts are becoming better known, such as Yamhill or especially the Dundee Hills with their trademark red soil.

Thus far my impression is that winemaking decisions, notably the percentage of new oak, have had more effect on styles than precise location. Oregon's annual International Pinot Noir Conference has been invaluable in spreading the word for the local industry, even if temperatures at the end of July, when it is held, can sometimes belie the subtitle of cool-climate viticulture. I have had many excellent individual Pinots from Oregon but I would like to see more consistency.

The California Pinot industry is eight times the size of Oregon's, but that is not to say the wines are intrinsically better. Sonoma has the lion's share, including as it does part of Carneros in the south, as well as the Russian River and Alexander Valley AVAs. Carneros, at the foot of the Napa and Sonoma valleys, was one of the first Californian regions to gain credit for Pinot from its low-lying vineyards open to the cool air from San Francisco Bay, delivering stylish wines where fruit could ripen well without undue sugar levels.

Russian River and more recently the Sonoma Coast have attracted Pinotphiles with deep pockets. These Pinots can be deep coloured and headily impressive, but issues of high sugars and low acidities need >

**'I would pick out Oregon in the New World for Pinot Noir, because of its elegance. Growers understand that Pinot is not Syrah. If the winemaker is good, and if they work hard in the vineyard, there is great potential.'** Arnaud Mortet, Domaine Denis Mortet



**'I have the greatest respect for the winemakers of Oregon. But if I compare even their best wines with what comes out of the Côte d'Or today, I have to say that there is hardly a single wine which approaches premier cru level, and none which match up to grand cru. Terroir does make a difference.'** Clive Coates MW

Right: Canada's Okanagan Valley has potential for Pinot, but it is New Zealand (below) which leads the New World way

to be addressed in the cellar. Striking though these wines can be, they do not deliver the delicacy and fragrance which I crave.

Pinot was also being planted from the early 1970s in several locations along the central coast – Monterey, Edna Valley, Santa Maria County and the Santa Ynez Valley. Once again the key to success is cool air. Early bottlings tended to have an under-ripe tomato flavour, but better clones, more intelligent siting of vineyards and viticultural advances have paid dividends, especially in and around the Santa Ynez valley, where some complex, savoury wines have been made in recent years. Two years ago at Christmas I was about to choose a Clos Vougeot 1997 to go with the goose but something stayed my hand and I selected instead a 1988 Pinot



**'New Zealand makes my favourite New World Pinots, Central Otago in particular. The well made ones can compete with Burgundy. They don't have the same ancient culture, but they've learned fast'** Christophe Roumier, *Domaine G Roumier, Côte de Nuits*

some in the world's highest vineyard, 3,000m above sea level.

## NZ v Oz

South Africa has suffered difficulties in sourcing the best clonal material for Pinot. The variety has not been high profile (perhaps because of interest in their own Pinotage) but the cool-climate influence of Walker Bay has led to promising examples around Hermanus.

Most discussions of southern hemisphere Pinot, though, will focus on the Antipodes. First to attract attention in New Zealand was Martinborough in Wairarapa. Here some deeply coloured, dark-fruited, multi-layered Pinots with notable tannin structure have been made on the stony soils of the Martinborough Terrace. The most striking examples of mature wine (six to 10 years in bottle) that have come my way have been from Martinborough, when the tannic structure has softened to reveal complex layers of fruit.

At the top of the South Island the dominant player is Marlborough,

with over 40% of all New Zealand's Pinot plantings. The region yields many attractive wines with a bright red fruit character, but to date it has been hard to discern a specific Marlborough character – this may come as growers move off the valley floor and into the slopes above the southern valleys such as the Brancott and the Waihopai. Individual vineyard sites may yet prove to be the defining factor, but until then I reserve judgement. I have also had the occasional interesting Pinot from the small and relatively warm region of Nelson.

Central Otago has attracted most interest. The locals are quick to point out that it is the one NZ region with a continental climate, as in Burgundy. However, this is not all good news, as the crop is at risk from frost in spring and autumn. Either/or is bad enough but the possibility of both must be demoralising. Central Otago wines are often dark in colour but the ripeness of the fruit tends to vary with the location of the vineyard. The first plantings were in the relatively cool Gibbston Valley, but since then the warmer shores of Lake Dunstan (eg, Bannockburn) have attracted much investment. The region is still inconsistent and it remains to be seen whether the exceptional quality from one or two iconic wineries has not

from Sanford & Benedict vineyard. I could not have made a better choice.

Before leaving North America we should spare a thought for Canada, where several wineries in the beautiful Okanagan Valley have made Pinots of promise. Ontario also shows potential.

I have much less experience of South American Pinot Noir. Chile's valuable contribution to the world of Pinot has been to offer good supplies of affordable wine, introducing the grape to UK consumers at well under £10. The coastal Casablanca region shows promise, enjoying the effect of the Humboldt current from the ocean, while cool air descending from the Andes benefits Colchagua, Argentina, surprisingly perhaps, has more than 1,250 hectares of Pinot, including



## TOP NEW WORLD PINOT: DECANTER'S BEST



**Yarra Burn, Bastard Hill Pinot Noir, Yarra Valley, Victoria, Australia 2006**

**Silver medal.** Sweet plums and milk chocolate. Elegant, with grippy tannins. N/A UK; Tel: +61 359 671 428.

**Bald Hills, Pinot Noir, Central Otago, New Zealand 2005**

**International Trophy.** Sweet, ripe strawberry and cherry nose. Wonderful, silky fruit. Well integrated. Harmonious. A long, elegant finish. £21.99 (2002); Rae

**Leyda, Lot 21 Pinot Noir, Leyda Valley, Chile 2006**

**Silver medal.** Sweet red fruits, and soft vanilla oak. Delicate, soft palate with tinned strawberries and cherries. Nicely integrated oak. £14.95; GWW, Ply, WSo

**Cono Sur, Ocio Pinot Noir, Casablanca, Chile 2005**

**Gold medal.** Bramble fruits. Cherry and spicy herb and sherbet notes. Robust, with good concentration, nice red fruit and black cherry. £29.99; WSo

**Palliser, Pinot Noir, Martinborough, New Zealand 2005**

**Silver medal.** Soft dusky plum and raspberry coulis. Supple tannins. Long finish. Delicious! £12.97; J&B

**Cono Sur, Pinot Noir, Central Valley, Chile 2006**

**Silver medal.** Decent Pinot character. Notes of undergrowth and black cherry followed by a silky, sappy, clean finish. £5.99; Maj, Odd, Sai, Som, Tes, Wai

**Astrolabe, Pinot Noir, Marlborough, New Zealand 2005**

**Silver medal.** Warm cherry fruit. Savoury notes beginning to develop. Attractive, sweet fruit and good length. £14.15; RWn

**Delta, Hatters Hill Pinot Noir, Marlborough, New Zealand 2005**

**Silver medal.** Spicy raspberry and strawberry nose. Crisp and fresh with juicy fruit and excellent length. £13.99; Lib



**Hamilton Russell Vineyards, Pinot Noir, South Africa 2005**

**Silver medal.** Complex, earthy, spicy, leathery. Full-flavoured with red fruits, blackberries, hints of spice, wood, juicy concentration and depth. £26.49; Ave, F&M, Hal, HvN, Jer, Lay, Rbs, Swg

**King Estate, Signature Pinot Noir, United States, Oregon, 2005**

**Silver medal.** Ripe black fruit nose. Toasty overtones. Brisk acidity. Tar, spice for complexity. N/A UK; Tel: +1 541 942 9874

**Belle Vallée Cellars, Grand Cuvée Pinot Noir, Oregon, USA 2005**

**Silver medal.** Bright ripe fruit with good acidity. Tightly structured, silky textured. Oak shows, but will integrate. A serious wine. N/A UK; Tel: +1 541 231 7972.

*The above wines all won medals at this year's Decanter World Wine Awards. (Since Jasper Morris has commercial interests, we didn't ask him to recommend individual wines). For UK stockist details, see p80.*

character which comes with a marginal climate. Geelong is aiming to forge a reputation as a good source of Pinot, but with less definable character than the Yarra Valley east of Melbourne can claim. Here a number of wineries have been making internationally acclaimed Pinot for over 20 years. Yet I don't expect Australia ever to be a leader for Pinot, though individual wineries may earn a place on the international podium.

Have any Pinots been made in the New World which I have mistaken for Burgundy? Yes. Are there any New World wine regions regularly making Pinot Noir which could be mistaken for Burgundy?

No. Should they be trying to do so? No. Are there any New World Wine regions making Pinot which gives me as much pleasure as Pinot from Burgundy? Yes, you bet, absolutely. We do not yet see the consistent track record which will surely emerge when the right sites have been tracked down in each of the budding regions, the ideal plant material selected and the roots given time to dive down deep into the soil. But there is plenty to tempt us while we wait. **D**

*Jasper Morris MW is the Burgundy buyer for Berry Bros & Rudd. He has been a Burgundy specialist for over 30 years*



started a stampede of plantings which the region cannot quite sustain.

There are high hopes for a new district on the Otago bank of the Waitaki river, where a north-east facing limestone escarpment mirrors the south-eastern slope of the Cote d'Or. More established are the vineyards of North Canterbury, especially the Waipara district where low limestone hills show great promise. Wines from here often show a succulent black cherry character and I have a hunch that one end of Canterbury or the other may yet prove to be Pinot's most natural home in New Zealand.

Most of Australia is too hot for this sensitive grape. Though some fine Pinots have occasionally been made in various parts of Western Australia (Pemberton, Great Southern and Margaret River), and occasionally in the Adelaide Hills of South Australia, it is either side of the Bass Straits that most promise has been shown. Although in Tasmania much of the Pinot planting has been for the benefit of the thriving sparkling wine industry, some successful still Pinots have been made on both banks of the Tamar and indeed both ends of the island. It is early days but we should certainly expect to see a wider range of competent Pinots here in the future.

On the mainland, the cool Mornington Peninsula, between Melbourne and the ocean, has made some stylish wines though occasionally displaying the more herbaceous