

Anne Krebiehl unravels the Pinot puzzle

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The best thing about Monday's Pinot Puzzle was that all wines were served blind, having everyone guessing and trying to find common threads in the different country flights. London's wine glitterati (yes, they all turned up) were debating the comparative alcoholic heat, the integration of oak and the use of different clones in a spectacular line-up of Pinot Noirs from Oregon, Chile, New Zealand and Australia. Were those balanced, almost tender and pale wines at home in the Willamette Valley? Was the heat and power of one flight down to Californian, Australian or Central Otago sunshine? Did acidity and fruit-forwardness really point to Chile or was it Mornington Peninsula? Almost all got some flights spot on but mixed up others - also scrutinising bottles for clues via closures and bottle weight. The 66 wines were presented in Hardy's Brasserie, a small enough space to encourage lively discussion.

Astonishingly this was not a sponsored PR stunt, but the independent project of two wine PRs, Kate Sweet (of Hilltop Wines) and Jen McDonald (Mandarin Communications) and wine educator Angela Reddin. "This is not officially underwritten by any of the generic bodies or a client," says Sweet. "It is a hobby of Jen, Angela and myself who have an interest in Pinot Noir." Once word of the event got round, they had to turn away wines from Argentina, South Africa and Canada who also wanted their chance to shine. "It is just about looking at a snapshot of what the new world regions are doing with their Pinot Noir at the moment," Sweet explains. "We have tried to show a broad spectrum of wines. They are contenders, they are operational in the UK market and they are real alternatives to traditional styles of Burgundy. It demonstrates that new world areas are finding their feet."

The flights were revealed just before Gerard Bassett MW chaired a panel of winemakers to discuss the different countries' Pinot Noir traits which are finally emerging without constant, slavish comparison to Burgundy. Even Bassett confessed that he was "confused" after tasting the wines twice, especially since "each region has more than one style." Blair Walter of Felton Road in Central Otago reflected on the continuing evolution: "From a New Zealand point of view we have come a long way: the main developments have been viticultural. There's increasing vine age and a better understanding of how to farm our vineyards. We are more subtle on the winemaking side." He reckons that the new Pinot contenders in five years' time will probably be from South Africa and the Canadian Okanagan Valley. Mac Forbes of Woori Yallock in the Yarra Valley, Australia, made a similar point, saying that the right clones are ever more important for quality Pinot. As for winemaking, Forbes said there was "an increased confidence to be able to step back and allow the sites to express themselves more." Helen Masters of Ata Rangi in Martinborough, New Zealand was enthusiastic about all the wines: "Probably five years ago you might have seen more faults. You are able to see the countries and regions more clearly now. Overall, the quality made a huge leap in terms of what people are doing in the vineyard and the winery. People start to understand what clones, what rootstocks really suit their region. At the higher end it's actually harder because all the wines have such good quality, such good weight. In five year's time it's going to be even more exciting!" Many tasters commented, Christine Parkinson of Hakkasan emphasising that she was pleased to find "something delicate, something mysterious" in those Pinots.

The Pinot Puzzle showed how healthy it is to have one's ideas challenged. Tasting without preconception demonstrated the astonishing quality and variety of new world Pinot Noirs. The educational value of blind tasting was completely affirmed.

Some highlights:

Ponzi Reserve, 2008, Willamette Valley - Total definition of raspberry fruit on nose and palate with something more earthily aromatic in the background, ripe and fine tannins reveal their soft grip later. A wine of depth rather than power.

Ten Minutes by Tractor, 2008 Mornington Peninsula - Very pale, with savoury, classic Pinot varietal notes, reminiscent of the old world. Expressive elegance with structure, quiet power and spice.

Vina Leyda Lot 21 Pinot Noir, 2008, Leyda Valley - An atypical bouquet of fragrant, fresh fruit that almost turns into the perfume of dark conifers on the palate. Interesting despite a little too much extraction.

Marimar Estate, Cristina, 2005, Russian River Valley - Brick red colour, red-currants mingling with smoke and tar on nose and palate. Seductive, elegant power.

Felton Road, Block 3, 2007, Central Otago - Deep ruby colour, very fragrant and despite its heat a fine acidity and delicate spice. "This has some poetry," my tasting sheet scribbles say.