

THE GREAT
NEW ZEALAND



PINOT NOIR
CLASSIFICATION

the great new zealand pinot noir classification 2008

It has always struck me (Matthew) that there is much work to do with Pinot Noir in New Zealand. Having chased, supported and drunk many exemplary versions of this beguiling grape from New Zealand's hallowed shores over the last decade, it is an increasingly nagging problem for me that this hypnotic red grape is somewhat riding on

There is much work to do with Pinot Noir in New Zealand

the coat tails of the white success of Sauvignon Blanc without truly earning its spurs on the world market.

I don't doubt that New Zealand currently makes finer Pinot than South Africa. I realise that Californian and Oregon Pinot is a totally different can of beans. I adore some Aussie Pinots – Mornington is a hotbed of Pinot worship right now. But New Zealand has rushed, in some ways, into this tricky game, without really looking where it is treading.

I was lucky enough to be invited to speak and sit on various panels at the superbly conducted and very well-attended *Pinot Noir 2007* in Wellington. The Kiwi wines stacked up well against a fairly lightweight other-world opposition – as they should at an event of this sort. But (and this is a big, wide but) how well is this category really – truly – doing on the world stage? Are the winemakers and estates comfort-

able with their spotlight and are the wines really selling through?

To me (Tyson) it is apparent that New Zealand has the potential to secure a strong position among the great Pinot Noir producing countries of the New World. It could be argued that this ranking has already been won – although only thanks to the performance of its very best estates, and only over the past five years (A recent ten-year vertical covering the full life of Felton Road Pinot Noir demonstrated a staggering jump in the standard of this label from the first five years to the second, proving again the astronomical trajectory that this estate is currently riding).

The pointy end of New Zealand Pinot has risen like Mt Cook above a lake of mediocre wines in countless tastings this year, but most memorably for me during *Pinot Noir 2007* in Wellington, the *Mornington Peninsula Pinot Noir Celebration* and the *Stonier International Pinot Noir Tasting* in Sydney. These events showcased world-class Pinot from New Zealand's very best estates, but – and this point is crucial – there are only a handful of estates at the pointy end. Who are they? And what of the others?

This point is crucial – there are only a handful of estates at the pointy end.

I (Matthew) came up with a proposition for Central Otago Pinot Noir makers back in 2004. It was born from a desire to celebrate the better wines in the district and also encourage the newcomers to perform at the highest level. This might have allowed this relatively new wine region to showcase its wines abroad with confidence. After all, back in those



nods and winks

days they all wore the 'Central Otago Pinot Noir' label and were, to the unknowing consumer, seemingly all cut from the same cloth (and priced at the same, steepish level). To me this was confusing when I tasted through a range of wines with a massive variation in quality. Please bear in mind that when I taste I think of my readers – I write a weekly column for 9 million readers in the UK and I don't want to be buried in flak from disgruntled readers saying that some of these wines are not worthy of the £20-plus (\$50-plus) price tag!

A few were superb, of course, but most of the newcomers' wines were made from first or second crop vines and they showed awfully – clumsy, over-oaked and undernourished. This may have changed now (read on...) but at the time I wanted to devise a foolproof and credible mechanism to sort the wheat from the chaff.

A rolling, utterly fair and inclusive classification seemed to make sense. The Central Otago Magi at the time loved it, but it was apparently kicked out of court in a local meeting of winemakers because it seemed to favour the established estates (incorrect in every way, as it happens, but not to worry). The news spread to the NZ industry body and the response was 'no comment'... amid nods and winks of encouragement for us to pursue this theme.

Three years later, and a crucial change across the New Zealand Pinot Noir scene has prompted us to awaken this idea and to widen the brief to include all New Zealand Pinot Noirs. The new kids on the NZ

A crucial change has swept across the New Zealand Pinot Noir scene this year

banging on

block are no longer so new. Their vines are starting to mature nicely, and they've clearly been listening to people like us who keep banging on about wine quality, balance and value. As a result there is a rising in the waters of the sea of producers sitting under the top handful of estates. The wines set to hit the shelves in 2008 represent the largest collective improvement in lower-tier New Zealand Pinot Noir that we have ever seen in any single year.

New Zealand Pinot Noir is no longer a case of the 'haves' and the 'have-nots.' There is now a hierarchy establishing itself. And it is moving quickly.

It's time that this hierarchy is unveiled for the first time – for the world to see, for the heroes to be celebrated and for the "almost-made-its" to set about striving to reach the next level. This is it, **The Great New Zealand Pinot Noir Classification.**



the great new zealand pinot noir classification

The Great New Zealand Pinot Noir Classification is based on an average rating across the five most recent vintages of Pinot Noir that we have tasted. We both keep detailed notes and scores from all of our tastings as well as impressions of the total performance of every estate listed. We collaborate on these to develop a list of rolling averages. Any estate can move up or down on each and every release – this is a rolling classification that enables everyone to improve if they so desire.

A classification of **5** is awarded to the top estates and **0** to the lowest, although we do not publish the 0s. Inclusion, even at level 1, is a commendable performance as the majority of estates have not yet achieved this level.

5

Ata Rangi
Felton Road
Mt Difficulty
Escarpment

4

Dry River
Peregrine
 Bell Hill
 Pyramid Valley
 Two Paddocks
 Valli

3

Chard Farm
Cloudy Bay
Martinborough Estate
Pegasus Bay
Rippon
Wither Hills
 Dog Point
 Hinton Estate
 Mountford
 Mt Edward

Each estate is graded on its **estate wine**. No single vineyard or special cuvée wines are taken into consideration.

With five vintages in the tank the **bold** rating is awarded. The producers not in bold are tentative inclusions for whom we have not yet seen five consecutive vintages – these will be 'bolded' and firmly positioned on the fifth vintage.

There is no ranking *within* each tier (estates are ordered alphabetically).

We have travelled the length and breadth of New Zealand this year, sent out exhaustive requests for samples, fronted up for every tasting and tasted every New Zealand Pinot Noir that has come anywhere near us. If an estate is not included, it is either because the wines don't stack up in our minds or that we have not yet come across them. We apologise if we have missed anyone. We do, of course, welcome the opportunity to taste your wines.

2

Gibbston Valley
Olssens
Palliser Estate
Villa Maria
 Bald Hills
 Kumeu River
 Voss

1

Carrick
Nautilus
Quartz Reef
 Amisfield
 Craggy Range
 Foxes Island
 Gravitas Wines
 Huia
 Murdoch James
 Neudorf Vineyards
 Pisa Range
 Te Kairanga
 TerraVin

2008