

# THE INDEPENDENT WINE MONTHLY

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This month's IWM is largely devoted to coverage of the 2018 Central Otago Pinot Noir Celebration. We were invited as guests of COPNL who paid for our flights, accommodation and tickets to the event. An offer was extended to travel down in advance and visit producers which we were both able to do; Emma spending two days travelling the region and Jane just one.

Because of the intensive schedule, we thought it best to split the articles; this month covering our producer visits whilst the March issue will contain the Grand Tasting at Amisfield and the two tutored tastings; Central Otago Discovery and the Exploration of Oregon.

Whilst we strive to retain independence at all times it should be recognised that the wines tasted at the Celebration were not tasted blind.

## The Central Otago Pinot Noir Celebration, Part One

### Quartz Reef

Jane Skilton

My day started well. Lianne Collins, Quartz Reef's Sales Manager, generously offered to collect me from the airport and we had a hoot travelling to Cromwell discussing the state of the wine industry, the joy of ironing and Lianne's upcoming trip to PyeongChang to cheer on her snowboard slopestyling son who was scheduled to compete in the 2018 Winter Olympics.

Arriving at Bendigo Station, a 12,000 hectare sheep station which contains the 450 hectare Bendigo Vineyard, from which over 10 wineries draw fruit, I joined fellow wine writers Julia Harding MW and Joe Czerwinski. Rudi Bauer arrived shortly thereafter, accompanied by a hoard of small yappy dogs. Rudi said that we wouldn't be tasting too much (there would be plenty in the days ahead) so instead he'd decided to open a couple of wines from the cellar. The first, 2001 Quartz Reef Zero Dosage had been disgorged just that morning (hence why no dosage) and was an absolute joy. The extended time on lees had resulted in a wine with layer upon layer of lemon meringue pie, toasted brioche and red apple aromas, leading to a crisp, precise palate. Fresh and detailed, I would never have guessed the wine was 17 years old such was its vitality. Alongside we tasted magnum number 004 of the 2001 Quartz Reef Bendigo Pinot Noir, the first wine Rudi made off this vineyard. Beautifully mature, the colour was a delight, the nose full of mushroom, truffle, leather, baked plum, with a savoury, meaty edge. There was still a very light touch of tannin giving some structure. A peep back in time and an absolute honour that Rudi chose to share it with us.

At this point John Perriam, owner of Bendigo Station, came to join in. He seemed bemused that we were tasting such old wines, maybe not realising what a treat for us writers. Perriam regaled us with stories of his ancestors arriving from the Isle of Coll in 1856, the subsequent gold strikes, establishment of a rabbit trapping business and how he rescued Shrek the Sheep. He was enjoying himself until he tasted the older wine and couldn't help but query why Rudi had chosen to show it.

Maybe it was the presence Joe Czerwinski from the Wine Advocate or Julia Harding of Purple Pages (maybe not so much Jane from the Independent Wine Monthly) but the Quartz Reef team looked horrified and flew into action, hurriedly procuring a bottle of the 2015 Quartz Reef Bendigo Pinot Noir, a wine much more to Perriam's taste. Lovely youthful pinot, very opulent and exotic with aromas of damson and dark plum, melting chocolate, with silky tannins to support the ripe fruit and just a touch 10%(ish) of whole bunch contributing a smattering of cinnamon and nutmeg spice. Very approachable but judging by the evolution of the 2001, will definitely benefit from time in bottle.

Perriam seemed appeased by the younger vintage but was still slightly perplexed that we continued to discuss the older wines. We left to visit Rudi's biodynamic shed where we were treated to a close look at worms in soil. A wonderful start to the Celebration.

Footnote : I can't help but think the Quartz Reef team are missing a trick by not adopting a slightly amended quote from John Perriam "Quartz Reef : We are making much better wines these days"

### Chard Farm

Emma Jenkins

I was very excited to visit Chard Farm, having long been an admirer of both their pale, interesting wines, and of winemaker John Wallace and his dry sense of humour. I was not disappointed by either. Chard Farm is one of Central Otago's pioneering producers, and one of its most photographed courtesy of its precarious positioning beside the Kawarau River in the heart of Gibbston Valley. Reached by a vertigo-inducing cliffside road snaking along the edge of the gorge, the sloping home vineyards planted by Rob Hay and wife Gerdi Schumann in 1987 are tucked under the hillsides, though Chard Farm has also since expanded its holdings into the Cromwell basin's Lowburn sub-region. John has been at Chard Farm since 1997, and over time he and Rob have developed an extensive portfolio across six varieties, teasing out the subtle differences of extra special spots in the vineyards and slowly refining the winemaking, mainly by doing less and less each year.

It was interesting to hear John's observations about the impact of vine age for them, which he sees as the tannins now moving beyond just texture into providing inherent structure to the wines (with oak dialled back accordingly: my notes barely mention it), and with the acidity now finding a more naturally harmonious place in the wines. Certainly, the wines are impressive. They're not showy, in fact exactly the opposite, and all the more delicious and drinkable for it. Flying under the radar for many, they capture the essence of Central Otago in a clever, understated manner – thoughtful, with plenty of character and a wonderful faithfulness to their sites.

Chard Farm make a smart, snappy pair of rieslings, with the Viper the slightly sweeter of the two, a crisply compact sauvignon, fragrant, dry gewürztraminer, textural pinot gris and a two delicately structured, persuasive chardonnays (a variety so well suited to the region). With this visit being part of the Pinot Celebration, I've chosen to focus on notes for the pinots, but you can consider yourself in good hands no matter which Chard Farm wine you should choose.

2016 River Run Pinot Noir

\$33.00

Spice and florals in a juicy cherry and raspberry background, expressive and voluminous, vibrant with a brightness that continues across the silky palate to a tight, sappy finish. Youthful, ready.

2016 Mata-Au Pinot Noir (Lowburn)

\$45.00

A mix of fruit from the (silky, dense) Tiger and (aromatic, pure) Viper vineyards, Mata-Au starts with a whoosh of florals and peppery spices with lovely bright red fruits behind. Lots of layers, silky and rounded, more dark fruit evident on the palate with a spicy freshness and deceptive concentration for such a lithe wine.

2014 Mason Vineyard (Parkburn)

\$69.00

As with the other two single vineyard wines, there's a clear step up in concentration at this level. Again, a lovely perfumed expressiveness, with florals (borage and rose), raspberries and wild strawberries. There's a sort of lacy spiciness, with wild herbs and earth too. More tannin, and a bit more structure and mid-palate richness than the preceding wines but all wrapped up with savoury fruity goodness. Drive and freshness, with a spicy, sappy clean finish. Very moreish.

2014 The Viper (Parkburn)

\$69.00

Splendid aromatics, quite a blithe and dancing sort of wine, a medley of florals, fruit, spice and herbs, it's all very charming. Blue and red fruits on the palate with fine tannins and sleek acid, it's quite a contained wine for all of its aromatic exuberance, a real shapeshifter, delicate and very long with lots of energy. A baby but an exciting one to watch unfold.

2014 The Tiger (Lowburn)

\$69.00

Bolder, spicier, more exotic with lots of dried herbs and wild strawberry, locked down at first with a sense of holding back, it has an impressively dense core yet keeps the familial sense of delicacy, lightness and layered shimmering texture. Very supple and silky, tannins seem more gravelly here but with no rough edges at all, just a graceful flow across the palate.

## **Peregrine**

## **Emma Jenkins**

Nadine Cross joined Peregrine from Marlborough eight years ago (a Dunedin girl returning south) and has quietly set about making steady yet incremental change with clear improvements to the wines. Over this time there has been a move to organic viticulture, away from contract vineyards, and a gradual holding back of release times so there is both an insurance cushion for supply as well as ensuring the wine is released in a more settled state (2014 is the current release pinot noir, with trade soon to move on to the 2015, cellar door will be later this year). There is a thriving wine club who see small batch releases, a valuable testing ground for Nadine's trials and new wines such as the Methode Traditionelle.

Nadine is a bright winemaker, confident but always questioning too. From 2017, all whites from both the Peregrine and Saddleback ranges plus the Peregrine Pinot Noir are certified organic.

2017 Pinot Gris \$29.00

A blend of Bendigo and Pisa fruit. Ripe pear and apple and peach with gingerbread and soft lees influence. Just off-dry, it's fresh, clean and delicate. Evidently, they can't sell enough of it.

2017 Rastaburn Riesling \$27.00

A very pretty delicate style (9.5% abv) with fresh kaffir lime and honeyed citrus notes, attractive juicy palate, finishes clean and surprisingly dry - you certainly don't see the 30g/L residual sugar.

2015 Pinot Noir \$45.00

Slightly reductive to begin with but soon opens up to bright cherry and raspberry fruit perfumed with a dash of herbs and lavender. Silky tannins and a juicy core of fruit and acid, plenty of finesse (something Nadine attributes to both increasing vine age and the impact of organics on the grapes) and good length, this is looking very smart indeed.

## **Lowburn Ferry**

## **Emma Jenkins**

Lowburn Ferry, previously owned by Roger and Jean Gibson, is a tiny estate growing solely pinot noir in the Lowburn subregion. Under their care over the past 20 years, it has won numerous awards from prestigious shows, but has recently been sold to the latest ambitious project of Steve Smith MW and his partner and financial backer, American Brian Sheth. The newly minted Aotearoa New Zealand Fine Wine Estates aims to showcase some of New Zealand's finest "terroir-driven" sites and as part of a wider series of purchases (including Waipara's Pyramid Valley and a Hawke's Bay vineyard in the Gimblett Gravels), Lowburn's new owners have an ambitious plan for the site, including vineyard expansion (already underway, with chardonnay now in the mix) conversion to organics and eventually, plans for a tasting room and winery. You are forgiven if this seems familiar...

Of course, it's easy to snirk, and a project this awash in both cash and hubris makes it a sitting duck for scepticism (Smith's recent interview on the Stuff site does not help, sounding for all the world like a man enthusing about his second wife: this time it will be different!). But Smith is a smart operator and presumably Sheth is no fool either. The combination of brains, experience, and of course money, is never a bad start for getting things done - the Lowburn Ferry vineyard is certainly a hive of activity at present - and they've picked up some interesting sites. For this visit, I was kept company by the very nice Nick Paulin, formerly viticulturist at Peregrine (where it was clear he was highly regarded and much missed), who will be the 'site manager' of Lowburn Ferry. At this early stage (the Lowburn Ferry purchase had only recently been approved by the OIO) despite being extremely genial and helpful company, Nick was unable to tell me much of the overall shape (not to mention he had his hands pretty full with the significant vineyard works underway) but it seems Smith's initially mooted negotiant-style idea has given way to a series of standalone estates under the one ANZFWWE umbrella. As luck would have it, Jane and I are shortly due to catch up with Michael Henley, formerly of Craggy Range in the Smith era, and who recently left his role as CEO of Trinity Hill to take up a similar position with ANZFWWE, where we shall grill him mercilessly.

## Valli

## Jane Skilton

The current mood at Valli seems to be one of upbeat optimism, maybe related in no small part to the division of labour between founder Grant Taylor and talented winemaker Jen Parr. As an owner operator, it just isn't enough to make great wine, you have to be able to market it too. And whilst Taylor is a warm and engaging personality you get the sense that the vineyard and winery is really where his heart lies, not on the road schmoozing customers and critics. With the arrival of Parr, Taylor seems like a man who has had a load lifted off his shoulders; Parr's twinkly disposition belies the serious thoughtful person that, if her surface is scratched, is revealed. She is a fantastic asset to the region and Taylor played a masterstroke asking her to work alongside him.

Taylor was born in Waitaki and you get the feeling this is truly where his heart lies. He has stepped back from the main production wines, allowing Jen to take full rein of the Central fruit, whilst he continues to explore the mercurial North Otago region. Putting his money where his mouth is, Taylor has purchased a vineyard thereby securing his supply of grapes.

We tasted a lot of wines which was hard work because Grant is a quietly engaging speaker and he, Julia and I laughed and chatted throughout. Only by keeping a very firm handle on the time did we manage to get through it all.

### 2016 Gibbston Pinot Gris

Made in two tanks, one destemmed (the fruit, not the tanks) and one whole bunched pressed (ditto). Very pale. Taut and direct with aromas of fresh lemon sorbet and squeezed lime. Touch of talcum powder florals too. Fresh soft green herbs, basil and fennel. Dry and textural, ripe and relatively densely fruited with concentration and intensity. The finish is lovely and pithy with a succulence that adds bite.

### 2016 The Real McCoy Pinot Gris

I'm not the greatest fan of skin contact wines. A style that was once a rarity has been enthusiastically embraced by winemakers across the country and New Zealand pinot gris, for so long the butt of jokes and snippy comments, appears to have drawn the short straw and had to take one for the team. No doubt inspired by the wines of Friuli, the Real McCoy is soaked on its skins for an extended period to imbue it with some degree of interest. Anyway, I was pleasantly surprised by this pale orange hued skinsy pinot gris. An arresting aroma that was very perfumed with fresh apricot, some nectarine stone fruit and a hint of florals. The flavours are deftly handled; there is a touch of tannin but it is well done. Clean and precise, mercifully free of faults that seem to plague wines in this category, I never thought I'd say this but it was one of the more compelling examples of the style.

No rest for the wicked so we barrelled straight into the pinots. And what a wonderful opportunity to see a line up of single sub-regional expressions of Central's signature grape. Plenty of CO pinot is a multi-regional blend and none the worse for being so, but when the opportunity arises, what a treat.

### 2016 Gibbston Pinot Noir

Very red fruited, with cherry, raspberry and plenty of dried herbs and spice (35% whole bunch). Floral and perfumed. Nervy spine of acidity, finely judged tannin. A delight.

### 2016 Bannockburn Pinot Noir

More exotically fruited and definitely moving into a riper spectrum with damson plum, dark berry. Still retains high toned florality. Backbone of cocoa powder tannin balances the fleshy exotic component and gives a wonderful silky texture.

### 2016 Bendigo Pinot Noir

Damsons, licorice, perfume. Has a savoury edge, more prickly than the Bannockburn (which is all fruit). Bolder and more tannic but still with flesh and poise.

2016 Waitaki Pinot Noir.

Quite different in style, lacking the exuberance of the Bendigo and Bannockburn wines with instead focussing on structure and texture. High toned, savoury. Extraordinary perfume of rose petal. A crisp edge, beautifully structured.

2015 Waitaki Chardonnay

Lovely aromas of fresh pie crust plus citrus giving a lemon meringue pie quality on the nose. A hint of gunsmoke sulphides but subdued and adding a little complexity not but not overwhelming. Quite an edgy style with plenty of ripe fruit, (it is by no means lean), and pretty mouthwatering acidity. But a long persistent finish, focussed and precise, suggests this would benefit from a little time in the cellar.

Having had a scarring experience with another producer's Waitaki riesling once before (I was reminded of the quote from an old textbook; 'the levels of acidity can come as a surprise to the unwary") I must admit to approaching this wine tentatively.

2017 Waitaki Riesling 9.5%

Wet stone with bitter lemon and tonic water soda characters and a touch of bran biscuit. Quite a confrontational style, (I wrote 'humungous acidity' in my notes) and although there is intensity and a degree of concentration, a lower alcohol style often works better with a touch more sweetness. Apparently there is 24g of residual sugar lurking in there but even so . . . Definitely one for those who describe themselves as 'acid-freaks'.

Just time to hotfoot to the Bannockburn Hotel for a quick lunch then the handover to Phil Handford and off to Grasshopper Rock.

Emma visited Valli too and was keen to include her comments:

As we both visited Valli and Jane has provided a more comprehensive overview, I have just noted a few thoughts (written before reading Jane's, so nice to see we agree). The delight in each other's company and respect between Grant and Jen is a such a lovely thing to see. Grant's pragmatic nature yet still clear sense of wonder at the region he continues to discover and explore is palpable. To see someone with such history and experience still get so much joy and excitement from its vineyards and wines is really heartening. The wines are very smart, and it's a treat to look across the sub-regions through the lens of one producer. The Waitaki is the obvious outlier but a proper wine in its own right albeit with shades of the perfumed expressiveness found in both Gibbston and Alexandra. The exploration being carried out by Grant and Jen into Pinot Gris should give pause for thought to those who are dismissive of the grape. The thicker skins give plenty of scope for winemaking trickery and the Valli skin contact/orange wine 'The Real McCoy' is an intriguing, savoury and surprisingly approachable example. The Vendemmia Tardiva is another dimension again and while a little less successful a style for me, was fascinating to taste. I was quite happy to be persuaded by Jen that all I really needed was some blue cheese and local dried apricots to have been a true believer.

**Aurum**

**Emma Jenkins**

Whilst New Zealand's pinot noir producers are (thankfully) less inclined these days to compare their wines to Burgundy, Aurum is one of the few producers that actually represents a cross-pollination of the two: a bona fide Burgundian transplanted to NZ's pinot mecca, Central Otago. In this instance, third generation winemaker Lucie Lawrence followed her husband Brooke back from Burgundy (where they met working at Domaine de l'Arlot) and together they helped develop his parent's existing Lowburn vineyard from a contract supplier to the thriving organic family estate it is today. Brooke now takes care of the vineyards while Lucie oversees the winery but it's very much a hands-on affair across across the board – so much so that visiting wine writers are even made (very delicious!) lunches by the couple's young daughters.

The daughters themselves are the namesakes for Aurum's two flagship pinots – Mathilde and Madeleine - which alongside their Estate pinot, allow Lucie to express their 4ha site in three different ways (four if you count the unsulphured 'Libera' pinot that is sold direct to trade, in kegs no less!

Not perhaps a typical Burgundian habit...). It would be simplistic to try to ascribe some sort of 'Burgundian' influence to Aurum's wines though. Like any winemaker, Lucie is both an individual as well as the sum of all her experiences and influences, which in this case may involve a Burgundian heritage but the wines remain very much a personal reflection of her and Brooke's Lowburn site.

Lucie has always approached their wines with sensitivity and a desire to be as hands off as possible but charmingly, is also the first to comment when tasting back across all vintages of Mathilde (from 2006 onwards) how much she sees her winemaking hand in the early years versus the more recent vintages. A not unexpected evolution to be fair, particularly as she was adjusting not only to a new site but also an entirely new region, with a climate and terrain quite unlike her former home. The dialling back of opulence, so easy to achieve with Central Otago's saturated fruit character, and lighter touch in the winery have certainly paid dividends, bringing a freshness and elegance to the wines, and there is a more savoury, structured character emerging too as the vintages roll on. The latter is likely the result of not only Lucie's experience but also vine age and Brooke's work with the organic conversion (they became fully certified in 2014). Lucie says they are ultimately looking to make wines that are “easy, but not simple” which seems a very sensible guiding light.

2016 Organic Pinot Noir (Estate blend) \$38.00

Spicy, redolent with dark cherries and dried herbs, quite soft and expressive with a gentle, sandy tannins and nice tension coming from the acidity. Purity of fruit backed with texture, it's a very easy wine to enjoy, but as Lucie hoped, plenty to keep your interest piqued too.

We tasted seven vintages of Mathilde, with my favourites below:

2009 Mathilde Pinot Noir

There seemed to be a more vibrant shift in this wine (compared to the darker, spicier more intense fruitiness of the 2006 and 2007 – the latter is echoed in style by the 2013, albeit in a more evolved, sophisticated fashion) with red and black cherries, baking spices and sappy tannins. It was more front-loaded than later vintages but there was an appealing silkiness and long, tapering finish that looked smart.

2012 Mathilde Pinot Noir

Pretty, perfumed with a vitality and spicy lift to the core of expressive red and black fruits, juicy with a line of fine tannin right down the middle, quite light on its feet with good layers of flavour and texture.

2014 Mathilde Pinot Noir \$55.00

This is the current release, and it is a lovely wine. Restrained and elegant with savoury, herby depths to the bright red and black fruits, supple tannins, silky acid and long. It's a very poised wine, shifting and flowing in the glass, ripe for exploration over a bottle.

2012 Madeleine Pinot Noir

This is 100% whole bunch (foot trampled, no less), though so cleverly interwoven this technique does not immediately spring to mind when tasting it; you just see the wine itself, not the hand of the winemaker. Vibrant aromatics, florals, fruitcake, waxy with red plum and cherry, intricately structured, it's also very silky rather than the sappiness one often sees with whole bunch.

2015 Madeleine Pinot Noir \$88.00

The current release. Strawberries and spice, florals, quite tight and youthful at present with a fluid ripe fruited nature, fresh acidity and lovely integration across the palate. A total baby now but should develop into an absolute cracker.

## **Grasshopper Rock**

## **Jane Skilton**

There's something very appealing about Grasshopper Rock. In a region that is home to a veritable smorgasbord of different nationalities producing wine, there is something distinctly Kiwi about the GR team. The focus on the single wine, the very reasonable pricing, the sheer ordinariness of it all. And I mean that as a true compliment; no glamorous winery (the wine is made at VinPro), nothing flash at all but instead a producer quietly getting on with making wine.

The face of the operation, Managing Director Phil Handford, normally to be found in his native habitat of Hamilton, always seems slightly bemused to find himself steering a trophy winning pinot producing winery based in Central Otago. But under his steady hand Grasshopper Rock has not only won a host of awards but continues to remain true to its original aim ie. producing one wine, from a single vineyard.

For our visit the entire team of three had turned out: Phil, winemaker Pete Bartle and vineyard manager Mike Moffitt. The amazingly hot season, (apparently Central had already received more heat by the end of January than by the end of April in 2017) the like of which the local wine industry hadn't seen before, was causing Mike a little concern, mainly it seemed because he was due to leave for his annual boys' trip to Stewart Island and the early onset of veraison was throwing a spanner in the works. Bartle displayed typical NZ male laid back attitude and wasn't going to let the challenging season faze him. "We'll cope when the time comes" was his answer to how he was going to organise things.

We tasted twelve vintages, back to 2006. I was impressed that each wine showed the characteristics of the vintage clearly; the vineyard seeming to be a true reflection of the season. My favourites were:

2006 : holding up remarkably well with a lovely truffle and wild mushroom note leading to a silky, earthy palate. Maybe the alcohol was just starting to peep through as the fruit faded but a wonderful effort from what must have been very young vines.

2010 : a delicious, darker fruited wine with some exotic plum and floral notes, a core of sweet fruit.

Apparently frost in the middle of flowering decimated the crop and lead to a very challenging vintage so all the more reason to .

2013 : still youthful and vibrant, crisply fruited with a lifted, vivid red fruit character. Concentration without weight.

2016 : Magnificent aroma of red plum and cherry with a touch of dried wild thyme. The tannins are still fairly firm but ripe and chalky and sit well amongst the fruit.

## **Carrick**

## **Emma Jenkins**

I like visiting Carrick, not only as there's always fascinating art on the walls (and of dogs this time, too!) but winemaker, and now GM, Francis Hutt is reliably excellent company. He can also be relied upon to suggest a trot around the vineyards to look at why something is doing what it is, which is a nice place to chat and get a feel for the wines. He's also a very free range thinker and talker. So much so that occasional comments made even my buttocks clench (and thus would doubtless have permanently welded Jane's shut) but there's no doubting the sincerity of his views, and the increasingly interesting ways in which his ideas are manifest in Carrick's wines. Francis is also smart enough to deftly handle the need to produce wines that won't scare too many horses (Carrick being a medium-sized Central producer) while continuing to push the boundaries of what the vineyard and wines can deliver. He's passionate about bringing microbial life into their soils (no mean feat in a place as arid and devoid of organic matter as Central) and clearly spends a lot of time thinking about the shape and structure of his wines. Carrick's wines are the sort that are always decent enough upon cursory glance, if sometimes a little austere and unyielding, but given some time to open up and settle into the glass, turn into something quite different and altogether more compelling. It's pleasing the owners of Carrick (old and new) have presumably seen the benefit of giving Francis a relative free rein to pursue his ideas as the wines have undoubtedly become more absorbing and more self-possessed than earlier years.

2017 Bannockburn Pinot Gris

\$27.00

Beautifully, faithfully fragrant with delicate pear drop and gingerbread notes, juicy mid-palate and dry, quite linear, saline finish. A very moreish, quite sophisticated expression of the grape.

2015 Bannockburn Riesling

\$27.00

Drinking wonderfully, though clearly still a baby. Vibrant key lime and Granny Smith with a wonderful burst of crunchy intense acidity. A wine you can't help but keep coming back to.

We also tried the 2016, which was leaner and tighter wine, with slightly more phenolic grip. It seemed to need a little longer though the concentration and juicy acid suggested blossoming would duly occur. The 2017 Dry Riesling was another tightly coiled spring, limey, mineral and linear, with a saline crunch of a finish.

2015 Bannockburn Pinot Noir

\$45.00

Expressive, perfumed nose with bright red fruits and spice, blueberries and borage behind, with a sappy, raspberry leaf edge. Fine tannins, taut, quite light bodied but in a very lithe rather than under-fruited fashion. Very deftly handled wine, tonic-like in its mineral freshness.

2014 Excelsior Pinot Noir

\$95.00

Less exuberant on the nose bit still with a lovely lifted red/blue fruit expression and spicy, savoury depths. Quite a tight, dry palate, demands you pay some attention to it. Elegant and a step up in concentration and depth from the Bannockburn; a touch of oak shows too. Quite a distinctive style, more taut and lean than the typical rich Bannockburn expression, but all the more satisfying for it to drink (not just taste).

2016 The Death of Von Tempsky (Not currently available for purchase)

A perfumed, almost muscat-like nose with lots of exotic jasmine, musk and quince notes, quite beguiling. The palate is dry, elegant and altogether silky with just a little nip of orange-peel bitterness on the finish. There's a quinine/tonic-like character to the wine, it's very refreshing to drink. It's not super-complex or deep in the 'serious' sense, but interesting all the same. I was amazed to find it was riesling, as its kaleidoscopic nature makes it hard to pin down – you just have to take it as a wine in its own right. (After ferment, the wine was sealed to mature on its skins/stems for 95 days. The name references the Marion McGuire lithograph that graces the label.)

2016 Billet-Doux

\$36.00

A 'preservative-free' pinot noir made from Abel clone (relatively uncommon in Central). Floral, quite spicy and lifted, it has a wilder, more brambly aromatic profile than its siblings. Tight, dry and vibrant palate, very supple, almost creamy with dark berry fruits and an intensely juicy core. There's a slightly prickly phenolic lick on the finish but I almost found myself wanting a just little more grip (am I becoming masochistic?). This is a charming and settled wine, alarmingly easy to drink.

## Two Paddocks

## Emma Jenkins

I'd quite like to dislike the crew at Two Paddocks, consumed with envy as I am by the bucolic Red Bank Farm, a former research farm, home to all manner of interesting plants and trees and these days a quite impressive array of livestock. Despite loving my Good Life-esque splendid isolation set-up in Taupo, I've long harboured a desire to shift back down south and now I think I found my dream property. But it's actually annoyingly difficult to dislike Red Bank Farm's incumbents. GM Jacqui Murphy could not be more charming and ebullient, and proprietor Sam Neill is obviously of good character as he likes pigs, a lot. Two Paddocks was established by Neill way back in 1993 with the planting of the original Gibbston Valley vineyard (the First Paddock) and seemingly much to everyone's surprise, it's turned out to make some bloody good wine ever since.

Two Paddocks has now expanded beyond Gibbston to sites in Alexandra (The Last Chance and Red Bank vineyards) and the recently purchased Bannockburn vineyard, which supplies The Fusilier as well as bolstering the estate blend. This has rather fulfilled Neil's desire to connect with his local history (Neill & Co Wine and Spirit Merchants) and make some good wine to drink slightly more than he anticipated but he seems to be taking it in his stride. Neill had the good sense to employ the talented (and slightly mad) Dean Shaw to make the wines, an enduring partnership that has duly matured into a fine collection of wines. The lovely Jacqui took me on a tiki tour of the four Two Paddocks sites (insert joke about numerical challenges here), all tiny, well situated and for the most part sloping, which was a very useful way to gather an understanding of what makes them tick. The Last Chance was my favourite to stand in, being a slice of land with true presence, which was interesting as it's usually my favourite wine too. It's a mystery to me why Alexandra doesn't get more attention as a sub-region, I suppose the tininess and relative remoteness doesn't help, but it's such a pity given the purity and prettiness of the wines. Anyway, Two Paddocks makes a brace of vibrant, crunchy rieslings (under the Two Paddocks and Picnic labels) and then a collection of pinots showcasing the sub-regions plus the estate blend. Jacqui kindly opened the 2016 of each of pinot (the single vineyards due for release in May) as well as an older wine of each, a helpful way to get a handle on how things shape up.

2016 Two Paddocks Pinot Noir

\$55.00

A blend of fruit from all sites. Subtle red fruits layered with spice and touch of wild herbs. A gentle lift of aromatics but in keeping with the Two Paddocks 'house style' of relatively restrained wines. A savoury creamy textured palate with ripe fruit, earth and fine grained, slightly chewy tannins. Nicely balanced, harmonious, has a pleasing sense of calm about it. The 2012 estate (which had no Gibbston fruit courtesy of a frost) has a more earthy richness, baking spice and ripe fruit with a fine line of acid and tannins running through the middle. Drinking very well now, it was just sliding into an autumnal secondary complexity, and built well on the finish.

2016 First Paddock Pinot Noir, Gibbston Valley

\$85.00

Voluminous red/black fruit and aromatic spiciness on the nose, a lift of violet florals and wild raspberries too. Lighter-bodied with a compact and savoury character, fine-grained tannins and typical Gibbston energy and drive along the palate. The accompanying 2010 was drinking beautifully, with a gorgeous lift of red fruit, mushroom and autumn leaves, very linear and precise. Shows that Gibbston characteristic of looking quite light until you see instead it simply sitting calmly and just building and building.

2016 The Last Chance Pinot Noir, Alexandra

\$85.00

Lacy, ethereal with lots of red fruits, earth, herbs and wild rose/briar notes. Very silky, delicate structure and lovely vibrancy, the core of juicy fruit is wrapped up in supple tannin, lots of finesse here, the layers keep unfolding. The 2012 showed a remarkable likeness in personality, just a touch more development but equally clear in its elegance and drive.

2016 The Fusilier Pinot Noir, Bannockburn

\$85.00

The most recently purchased vineyard, named for Sam's father, Major Dermot Neill. Distinctly Bannockburn in its cherry/milk chocolate plushness, it's definitely a richer, more generous wine but by no means a fruit bomb. A thread of red licorice and hint of herbs, tannins are sturdier, but with a silken covering, and you just see a touch of oak. A firmer, denser wine, perhaps without the vitality of the Gibbston and Alex wines, but quite comforting and classic in its velvet embrace. The 2014 has the same bolder, more exotic and rounded personality (within the relatively restrained and savoury context of all Two Paddocks wines), a touch of soy and spice to the cherry, and a four square structure. Good concentration and length.

## 2018 Te Mata New Releases

Jane Skilton

I grumbled that the 2017 Te Mata new release tasting was a bit of a nightmare. By operating a revolving door policy it was hard to get any time to talk to winemaker Peter Cowley and instead, a constant procession of tasters came and left the table. Whilst I was trying to taste I had to listen to other tasters vocalise their thoughts on the wines and when one person said they could taste the influence of two different coopers in the one wine I realised I'd entered the BS zone so made my excuses and left. Thankfully the Te Mata marketing team, lead by the ever professional Sally Duncan overlooked my tantrum and, when I said I couldn't make the Coleraine 16 launch because I was teaching, suggested I could arrive late and taste on my own after everyone else had gone home. Thank you Sally.

### 2016 Cape Crest

With more than a nod to the barrel influenced sauvignons from the Graves, this has pungent sauvignon aromas of elderflower, gooseberry and guava with some lemon peel and lime interwoven with a touch of smoky gunflint and struck match. Whilst this could be overwhelming, thankfully the palate has more than enough richness to make for a satisfying glass, the flavours long and pithy.

### 2016 Elston Chardonnay

Cowley has deftly side stepped the current fashion for positive (sometimes I'd venture engulfing) sulphides which seems to have enveloped many of Hawke's Bay's chardonnay producers in recent years. If I describe this style as 'old school' it may give the sense of a wine that is buttery and fat. Nothing could be further from the truth as the overall impression is of restraint and balance. There is an abundance of white stone fruit oak, a smattering of well judged, biscuity oak and a long, sustained finish.

### 2016 Bullnose Syrah

Very perfumed, lots of cracked pepper, red plum, cranberry and spice. Cowley said the months leading up to Christmas were some of the coolest on record and despite the weather turning in January, this cooler start does seem to have imbued the 2016 reds with a degree of elegance and freshness. Crunchy and vividly fruited, fresh acidity and silky juicy red fruit flavours. Firmly structured with papery fine tannins. Delicious.

### 2016 Awatea

Cowley described this Awatea as having a certain 'rustic' charm, but I think he meant rustic in a Hunter Wellington boot, not a Waikato farmer sort of a way. It still seemed pretty polished to me. Dried rosemary, shaved lead pencil, hint of black olive. Red cherry and bay leaf. Powdery tannins, structured but already has a good degree of accessibility.

### 2016 Coleraine

Super ripe, polished and velvety with a luxurious dense aroma with blackcurrant and blueberry. Like all good cabernet dominant wines the acidity seems to lead, tannins bringing up the rear. High toned, crisply fruited with restraint and presence. Really needs time to show its best side.

Te Mata manages that rare feat of making wines that are subtle and understated in youth but, if properly cellared, blossom into magnificent mature bottles. A pity then that the focus in recent years has been on ever more boisterous marketing, using 'perfect' scores to sell these premium wines, especially the Coleraine. Wines such as these can speak for themselves.

## Trinity Hill Homage 2015

Jane Skilton

When Warren Gibson said he thought the 2015 was a Goldilocks wine I thought it meant the best food match was porridge. In my defence, I'm blaming my stupidity on the stress of running a WSET Level 3 exam that morning on a blistering hot day in Hawkes Bay.

En route back to the airport it made sense to taste the latest Homage at the cellar door rather than ask for an expensive bottle of wine to be sent to Auckland. So I emailed ahead and was greeted by Warren and Cara who had set out glasses etc on the Trinity Hill verandah so that I could taste whilst looking over the vines.

With wines like this it almost seems pointless to write a review. Ultra premium wines like Homage are made with such care and attention that only a disaster of catastrophic proportions would surely prevent it being anything other than delightful. But ever conscious of our IWM readers I dutifully tasted and took notes.

2015 Trinity Hill Homage

\$130.00

25% whole cluster, 13.0% alcohol. 15 months in barrel post ferment, some in large 5000 litre ovals.

Intensely floral with violet and lavender. A touch of smoke, some sizzling bacon, black pepper. There is an intensity and concentration of fruit, a note of luxurious creme de cassis with melting bitter chocolate and just a whiff of wintergreen but still a sense of elegance and remains.

The palate is silky, generously fruited but with succulence and poise. As ever the wine is not really showy but sits quietly in its own skin. There is a strong sense of place, this is a true expression of Gimblett Gravels not the Northern Rhone, and the transparency of the vintage shines through. Despite time in barrel at no point did I write anything about oak in my notes which must surely be a testament to the skill of the Trinity Hill team. Long and persistent flavours suggest this will cellar well.

I do accept that for wines of this stature a ginormous bottle is almost *de rigueur* but such heavyweight packaging gives off an expectation of style ie. that the wine inside will be honkingly over the top. That is so at odds with the character of this wine which is in fact not too hot, not too cold, but just right.

## Takapoto Estate Bannockburn Single Vineyard Pinot Noir

Emma Jenkins

It probably piques most wine writers' interests to be sent a wine of which one has no previous acquaintance. So it was with the Takapoto Estate Bannockburn Single Vineyard Pinot Noir. This is the baby of Invivo winemaker Andy Anderson, sourced from the Legend's Terrace in Bannockburn owned by Mitch and Kate Plaw. At the close of 2017, Andy picked up IWSC trophies for World's Best Pinot Noir and New Zealand Producer of the Year, as well as an Outstanding Gold for the 2012 Takapoto Estate Pinot Noir. Pretty impressive stuff. We were intrigued by the fact the wine was five years old upon submission, something not especially common in New Zealand's wine-infanticide driven mindset. Andy kindly replied to our queries thus: "Part of the style I make is a Pinot that is age worthy, and they do take 5 years to start to show their best. Fortunately the owners Mitch and Kate Plaw agreed that we would release the wine when it is starting to show its best, and they can afford to do so". Andy also decided to bypass NZ shows for the Takapoto's first outing, reasoning that "If I was going to enter the wine into a show it would have to do two things: it would have to internationally regarded, and secondly would be difficult to win, [as] this would give the wine greater credibility internationally and locally." Presumably Andy and the Plaws must consider those boxes duly ticked. Takapoto Estate itself only came into existence at the end of 2011, with production across the pinots at 200 cases tops.

2012 Takapoto Estate Bannockburn Single Vineyard Pinot Noir \$75.00

Spicy, dark with ripe cherry, raspberry and sweet floral perfumed notes, palate is silky, open with fine tannins and a dash of bright Central acidity. Pretty archetypal and made well. You can see the bolder yet well handled and balanced style doing well in a show - it represents much of what is appealing about the

CO style with its dark yet fresh fruit with the hints of exotic spice, florals and soy-like umami, the silky fruit rich palate, fine fairly soft tannins and fresh acid tying it all up at the finish. I would certainly have found myself among those judging it in a show awarding a high score as it's a classic style for that situation. Yet for all its glossy well made credentials, the wine's polish comes to a degree at the expense of its character. It falls into the camp of a wine that has no fault - well dressed & well behaved, undoubtedly gold medal worthy - but also a wine of which you get the measure of very quickly, making it hard to sustain any sort of meaningful conversation. However, on the scale of such, it's a pretty decent effort and so should be worth keeping an eye on what its maker does next.

### **2017 Pinot Naturel by Fromm**

**Jane Skilton**

According to the release notes, this wine was inspired by Marcel Lapierre's Morgon. Having drunk my fair share of this particular wine, I can attest that while it can be extremely delicious, it is also subject to a fair touch of bottle variation. But as you'd expect from a winery as fastidious as Fromm, its wine was made as naturally as possible save for a touch of sulphur added just prior to bottling, to ensure stability.

Personally I'd like to see more New Zealand pinot noir made in this style. There has always been a focus on making concentrated expressions of pinot noir, with winemakers aiming for wines with extended cellaring potential. But the landscape is changing. Many newer wine drinkers lack either the desire or the ability to cellar wines and the decrease in the number of fine dining restaurants and the accompanying explosion of more relaxed ways of eating out must surely suit wines that are immediate enjoyable and ready to drink on release. This style of wine when done well, as Fromm's Pinot Naturel demonstrates admirably, can have just as much interest, sense of place and intrinsic quality as those with more lofty ambition.

2017 Pinot Naturel by Fromm

\$32.00

Fruit came from three vineyards (Fromm Vineyard, Churton Vineyard and Quarters Vineyard), was handpicked and wild yeast fermented with 20 to 25% whole bunches and the remaining 75-80% gently destemmed with a high portion of whole berries. Vivid and crunchy, with blackcurrant and Morello cherry fruit flavours. Acidity is vibrant and edgy, very little tannin but instead an arresting, electric flavour. Not for the long haul but served at cellar temperature it was absolutely perfect on a warm Auckland evening.