

# Central Otago whites

Best known for its Pinot Noirs, this region's warm days and cool nights also provide the perfect climatic conditions for aromatic whites, says Daniel Honan



FLYING INTO NEW Zealand is always jaw-droppingly memorable. The South Island in particular is more spectacular than a highlight reel from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

In Central Otago, home to some of the New World's most stunningly powerful Pinot Noirs, the snowcapped mountain

ranges reach well over 1,000m before cascading deep down into canyons that flow with fresh glacial snowmelt into lakes that shimmer azure blue. Against this backdrop, vineyards can be seen sloping down Burgundian lines in Bendigo, sprawling across flat fields in Cromwell, and precariously lining the ridges and gorges that reach right to the lake edges in Gibbston and Wanaka. This may just be the most visually spectacular wine region in the world.

At 45° south, this is also the world's most southerly winegrowing region, with the grapes benefiting from a large diurnal temperature range. This means warm days and cool nights – excellent conditions for fruit ripening. This ideal climate plays a large part in ensuring quality in the white wines of Central Otago, especially where aromatic grapes, such as Rieslings, are concerned. Indeed, in many cases you might be forgiven for thinking that you were drinking a spätlese trocken straight out of Germany.

In addition to the two non-vintage sparklings, the wines below are from the 2011, 2012 and 2013 vintages. According to many Central Otago winegrowers, 2011 was somewhat of a lacklustre vintage overall, but as the Pinot Gris from Prophet's Rock and Kalex prove, dismiss all of this vintage at your peril. Conditions improved in 2012 then culminated in an outstanding vintage in 2013, where Rieslings were the standout white by far thanks to their high natural acidity.

*'So many of these whites perfectly balance tension and flesh, acidity and fruit'*

*These wines are the best of those tasted non-blind from samples submitted during June and July 2014*

*For full details of UK stockists, see p102*

So many Central Otago whites perfectly balance tension and flesh, acidity and fruit. Riesling is the star, and especially noteworthy are the biodynamic examples – such as those made by the likes of Rippon and Felton Road. The Sauvignon Blancs reflect the cooler nights the vines experience here compared with further north in Marlborough, with The Starlet from Misha's Vineyard being of particular note. Their character is expressed in more limey, green apple and kiwi fruit aromatics than in Marlborough, and leaner, lengthier acid lines.

Meanwhile, the much-maligned Pinot Gris is a textural triumph in Central Otago. The wines here show a fascinating interplay between savoury and sweet characters, which are underscored by their textural pear-skin mouthfeel. The Blondie is an anomaly as, technically, it's made from a red grape (Pinot Noir), but only the juice has been used, so it remains white but with a pinkish tinge.

What's encouraging is that Central Otago is still a relatively young region, as are many of its winemakers and vineyards. As these younger vines mature and their fruit gains in complexity, and provided they are taken care of (a positive nod to New Zealand's sustainable winegrowing programme here), there can be no doubt that the best from this region is yet to come.

For now, though, Central Otago is producing white wines with good ageability, desirable complexity and superior refreshment. They might have slightly higher price tags than others from New Zealand, but certainly in the 18 recommendations here they are worth it. From the fine beads of the Quartz Reef sparkling, to the steely Sauvignon Blancs, restrained Rieslings, cool Chardonnays, crunchy Pinot Gris and the curious rebel Blondie, each of these wines offers an insightful glimpse into the largely underrated great whites of Central Otago.

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## 18 whites to discover



**Quartz Reef, Methode Traditionelle Brut, Bendigo NV** 17/20 (90/100)

£16.95-£18.95 Bibendum, Exel Wines  
Fine-beaded mousse. Fresh, breezy and crystalline aromas lead on to a crisp, tight palate, whose balancing act tingles between clean acidity and fruity sweetness. Rich mineral refreshment with raspberry panettone flavours. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alcohol** 12.5%



**Akarua, Methode Traditionelle, Brut NV** 15.5 (85)

£21.95-£23 oW Loeb, Salusbury, Wine Utopia,  
Predominately Pinot Noir wrapped tightly around a crisp Chardonnay core, showing white nectarine and other stone fruits. Crunchy, cool and crisp. Gentle jasmine and springtime floral perfumes are captured within the delicate fizz. Easy refreshment. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 13%



**Rippon, Mature Vine Riesling, Wanaka 2012** 18 (93)

£19.95 Lea & Sandeman, Selfridges  
Iced lemon and a cool honey fragrance, with wafts of freshly baked spiced apple strudel. Rounded honeyed textures lie underneath a long, lingering lime crème brûlée glaze. A wine that proves this region's greatness in aromatic whites. **Drink** 2014-2020 **Alc** 13%



**Wooring Tree, Blondie, Cromwell 2013** 18 (93)

£22.50-£25 Great Grog, Harvey Nichols, The New Zealand Wine Cellar, Wine Utopia  
A unique still white made from Pinot Noir. Delicate finesse, like rosewater Turkish delight. Echoes of pomegranate and strawberry. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 13.5%



**Felton Road, Riesling, Bannockburn 2013** 17 (90)

£16.50-£18.50 Cornish Point Wines, Harvey Nichols, Hawkshead Wines, Selfridges, The New Zealand Cellar, WoodWinters  
Caramelised sugar and lemon meringue pie nose. Sweet, juicy lychees, crunchy pear, savoury snow peas and tense acidity. **Drink** 2014-2017 **Alc** 12%



**Valli, Old Vine Riesling, Gibbston 2012** 17 (90)

£22-£25 Armit Wines, Exel Wines, Pont de la Tour  
From 32-year-old vines. White nectarine aromas lead on to a palate of lemon juice sprinkled over jasmine flowers. A pineapple fruit core shores up a distinct mineral frame of pleasurable length and breadth. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 12%



**Carrick, Cairnmuir Terraces EBM Chardonnay, Bannockburn 2012** 16 (86)

£19.50 Great Western Wine  
Hay bales, cinnamon-dusted ripe stone fruits, caramel and vanilla, all held together by soft peppery tension and acid zing. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 14%



**Two Paddocks, Picnic Riesling, Alexandra 2013** 16 (86)

£17.99-£19.99 Negociants UK, Noel Young, Planet of the Grapes, The New Zealand Cellar  
Perfumed lemon sherbet along with Pink Lady apples. Sizzling minerality and striking sweetness delights the palate instantly, but there's vibrancy and depth too. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 11.5%



**Misha's Vineyard, The Starlet, Sauvignon Blanc, Bendigo 2012** 17.5 (91)

£17.50 Lay & Wheeler  
Flinty lychee and lemon scents. Passion fruit and kiwis meld with crisp cucumber in a classy tug-of-war between tension and verve. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 13.5%



**Kalex, Pinot Gris, Gibbston 2011** 17 (90)

£18-£20 The New Zealand Cellar, The Wine Society  
Curious aromas of autumn leaves, smoky bacon and aged cheese. Caramelised brown sugar, lychee and aniseed flavours confound then conspire to create ultimate deliciousness. An intriguing wine. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 13.8%



**Felton Road, Block 2 Chardonnay, Bannockburn 2012** 16.5 (88)

£19.50-£22 Cornish Point Wines, Harvey Nichols, Selfridges, WoodWinters  
Jasmine, peach and nuanced oak aromas. Vibrant oak continues on to carry crunchy stone fruit flavours across a palate of lingering length, finesse and class. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 14%



**Mount Edward, Morrison Vineyard Riesling, Gibbston 2013** 16 (86)

£17.50-£19 Alliance, Halifax Wine Co, Z&B Vintners  
Apple and pear perfume. Tight slatey minerality deftly balances sweetly crisp red apple and pineapple on the palate – such textural refreshment! **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 11.5%



**Carrick, Pinot Gris, Bannockburn 2013** 15.5 (85)

£13.50 Great Western Wine  
Hints of mint, clove and spice. Sweet poached pear and orange zest flavours attack swiftly before retreating over fine acid ramparts, courtesy of soft and subtle menthol highlights. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 13%



**Rippon, Sauvignon Blanc, Wanaka 2012** 17.5 (91)

£17.95 Lea & Sandeman, The New Zealand Cellar  
Grass, white flowers and glacial snowmelt aromas drift over soft-textured ridges of limes, passion fruit and crunchy pear. Natural spark and symmetry, beautifully balanced. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 13%



**Misha's Vineyard, The Gallery, Gewürztraminer, Bendigo 2012** 17 (90)

£17.50-£19.50 Latitude Wines, Lay & Wheeler, PLB, The New Zealand Cellar  
Turkish delight with subtle grassiness, sugar cane and fennel. Watermelon and sliced pear balance orange-peel acidity. **Drink** 2014-2017 **Alc** 14%



**Pisa Range Estate, Riesling, Cromwell Basin 2012** 16.5 (88)

£33 Charles Mitchell Wines  
Crisp minerality flushed with aromas of sweet pear skin, cold-pressed apple juice and citrus undertones. Lime cordial acidity dispenses gentle refreshment on the palate. An intense wine that is not at all overbearing. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 12%



**Prophet's Rock, Pinot Gris, Cromwell Basin 2011** 16 (86)

£18.95-£20.95 Bibendum, Exel Wines, The Wine Society, Winedirect  
Immensely textural thanks to its pear-skin grip. Cinnamon and saffron perfumes race through weighty honeysuckle, restrained by citrus acidity and minerality. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 13.4%



**Mt Difficulty, Sauvignon Blanc, Bannockburn 2013** 15.5 (85)

£17.90 New Zealand House of Wine  
Green apple and tart lemon sherbet aromas shimmer onto the palate, joining a surge of limey freshness and pleasant melon sweetness. Delicious and unassuming. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 14%