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Harvey Steiman At Large

New Zealand Pinot Noir

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There are times when I take a few sips of a Pinot Noir from New Zealand and think the Kiwis have discovered the road to nirvana for this notoriously finicky grape. And then I hit a few speed bumps.

A few weeks ago a group from Central Otago, currently the darling of Kiwi Pinot regions, put on a tutored tasting in San Francisco to demonstrate their sub-regions. Events conspired to make me miss the organized tasting, but David Strada, who represents New Zealand wine in the U.S., set aside a set of 10 bottles from the proceedings for me to taste over a recent lunch at [South Food + Wine](#).

I found consistently nice wines among them, but only one real standout, and that from a familiar name: [Felton Road](#). No discoveries here, and not a high batting average for such a celebrated region.

That jibes with some of my recent blind tastings of NZ Pinot Noirs up for review. It's a sea of pretty good wines punctuated by the occasional wow. It's those "wow" wines that give me hope that the rest will catch up and fulfill the promise most of us expect New Zealand to deliver someday.

What the Kiwis can do is deliver a distinctive style that's relatively rare in the Pinot world these days: crisp texture, with vivid fruit flavors, usually more tangy than broad. If you just grab an NZ PN off the shelf, you should expect mouthwatering acidity and a lighter style than what you are likely to find from Oregon or California, purer fruit than the general run of red Burgundy.

Central Otago is the poster child for these positive characteristics, which may be why so many pundits are ga-ga over the wines. My problem is that so many of these wines come off as simple or incomplete, and, despite their lightness, lacking in finesse. I think of finesse as the ability to pack a lot of interesting character on a lighter frame than those flavors would suggest. Too many New Zealand Pinots are just light and simple.

Not that this is bad. With Pinot Noir, I'll take light and simple over heavy and complex most days. But the ideal combines light texture with complex character. Of the 10 wines from Otago that I tasted, only [Felton Road 2007](#) (\$50) accomplished that. Lithe, with an open texture, it played its pure berry and wet earth flavors against an elegant frame, with polished tannins, finishing with refinement. Non-blind, 91 points. And this was Felton's regular bottling, not one of the winery's revered single vineyards.

Felton is in the Bannockburn sub-region, the warmest part of Otago, lending credence to the maxim that warm places in cool regions often make the best wines. Carrick 2007 (\$35), also from Bannockburn, was my second favorite in the tasting for its vivid raspberry and red plum flavors, silky texture and vibrancy. I'd put it in the very good range.

The coolest area, Gibbston Valley, produced a charming, silky Hawkshead 2007 (\$38) with strawberry and raspberry flavors and some length, comparable in many ways with Burgundy's Pernand-Vergelesses. I also liked [Rippon 2006](#) (\$57), with its cherry and raspberry fruit and clean, tangy acidity and firm tannins. I was in the very good range on both, which makes those prices seem high in this market.

In between, wines like Three Miners 2007 (\$35) and Shaky Bridge 2007 (\$35), both from the Alexandra area, were crisp, with prominent tannins that lacked the flesh to balance, thus seeming harsh. Chalky tannins also kept wines such as [Rockburn 2007](#) (\$35) from Lowburn and Quartz Reef 2007 (\$35) from Bendigo well short of the outstanding range.

Going through these wines got me thinking about the overall state of Pinot Noir in New Zealand. Most of the conversation seems to focus on Marlborough, on the northern tip of the country's South Island, and Martinborough, on the south tip of the North Island.

I find more consistency in Marlborough across a wider spectrum of wineries and styles than anywhere else in New Zealand right now. That's not surprising when you consider that it's the largest winegrowing region and it has lots of well-funded wineries and growers, thanks to the world's fascination with their bright, vibrant Sauvignon Blancs. Martinborough has the longer history as a Pinot Noir specialist, and it seems to be able to get more sorely needed flesh into the wines, which Marlborough and Otago miss too often for me.

For my money, the region to watch is Waipara. It lies about halfway between Marlborough and Otago, just north of Christchurch, in rolling hills that have a unique mix of soils. [Waipara Springs](#) and [Pegasus Bay](#) are the largest wineries in the neighborhood. I have also tasted some lovely stuff from Muddy Water, Torlesse, Daniel Schuster and Mountford. Their wines have more of the generosity, complexity, texture and finesse I look for in Pinot.