

TEXT SIMONE MADDEN-GREY

PINOT CENTRAL

Home to one of the most celebrated varieties, Central Otago welcomed a high quality 2019 vintage.



OPPOSITE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY VAUGHAN BROOKFIELD AND COURTESY OF TE KANO ESTATE. THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY CENTRAL LAKES PHOTOGRAPHY AND COURTESY OF FELTON ROAD.

AUTUMN COLOURS
The Elms Vineyard at Felton Road. Opposite: Te Kano Estate workers.

**STUNNING SCENERY**

The awe-inspiring view from Felton Road's vineyards.

the sense of community and the beer. Although the formal structure of the exchange has drawn to a close, the friendships that have grown from the experience are set to last for decades, not only influencing immediate connections but expanding the global pinot noir community.

Any visitor to Central Otago, whether here to make or to sample the region's wine, is immediately struck by the stunning scenery that greets you at every turn. Rugged, often snow-capped mountains carve dramatic texture into the landscape, providing cellar doors with an enviable backdrop for showcasing wines and there are a couple of new projects well worth adding to your itinerary.

Mount Edward in the Gibbston Valley has always welcomed visitors, but this year marks a new look for the space in which to taste through their range of wines, including the delicious gamay. In-house murals have been created by Kairau 'Haser' Bradley, of the international TMD graffiti crew. The murals are an extension of the illustrative style of the Mount Edward labels, and also provide a natural counterpart to the winery art collection and to the winery's involvement with the multi-genre arts festival LUMA.

Continue east though the Kawarau Gorge to Bannockburn and you will find recent arrival, Te Kano Estate. Headed up by winemaker Dave Sutton and three-time Central Otago Young Viticulturist of the Year Mike Winter, Te Kano Estate is firmly focused on contributing to the regional story with vineyards in Northburn and Bannockburn.

The name Te Kano means 'seed' in Māori, referencing the solitary 400-year-old Kowhai tree on the Northburn property. From this tree, seeds are being harvested as part of a native species replanting program at the Northburn vineyard. In Bannockburn, the Eliza vineyard is the site for the new tasting room. Taking full advantage of breathtaking views over the Kawarau River and on to the mountains, the design includes floor-to-ceiling windows in a building cantilevered over the vines. Construction is underway and a September 2019 launch is planned.

Another new arrival was launched in October 2018. Well-known winemaker Pete Bartle, who for many years has been running the contract winemaking facility VinPro in Cromwell, has created his own wine label, Providore Wines. Fruit is sourced from several subregions, including Bannockburn, Gibbston, Alexandra and Queensberry and tastings are by appointment at the facility in Cromwell, although future plans include building a cellar door for visitors.

The wines are not currently available in Australia, but are well worth hunting down next time you cross the Tasman. Be sure to check out their Augmented Reality label by downloading the Providore app, holding it over the label on the bottle and stepping inside the Providore world. Landscapes and the people who make the wine will come to life on your mobile device.



At the annual Pinot Celebration in Queenstown this year it was time to take stock. Discussions centred around a retrospective theme and to begin, the first seminar covered a review of Central Otago's relatively brief modern history and remarkably rapid ascent to international recognition.

Many years have passed since those first vines were planted and a reassessment within the local industry has taken place, covering topics such as site and variety selection, replanting, replacement of clonal material and where possible, vineyard design. This is perhaps a logical response to the growing body of knowledge accumulated over time and to increased confidence in responding to the challenges each vintage brings.

Matt Dicey, winemaker at Mt Difficulty in Bannockburn, confirms this, saying, "One constant about climate is it is never constant, it is always challenging here (in Central Otago) so we have to be able to adapt and react, utilising past experience to manage that".

A retrospective motif also closed the event with a discussion about the Central Otago Burgundy Exchange. Born of an idea formulated in 2006 by Nick Mills of Rippon and Sophie Confuron of Domaine Jean-Jacques Confuron, this formal exchange program is unique in that Central Otago is the only region in the world to have such a relationship with Burgundy. More than 100 interns, or *stagiaires*, have benefited from the program, and the exchange of ideas has been to the advancement of both regions.

Feedback from participants identifies the rich history, culture and the cheese of Burgundy being just some of the highlights for New Zealand interns, while the Burgundian *stagiaires* welcome the laid-back but hard-working approach to winemaking in Central Otago,

VALLEY VIEWS
Mt Difficulty cellar door. Opposite: Head winemaker of Mt Difficulty, Matt Dicey.



"One constant about climate is it is never constant."



RIPE FOR HARVEST
Hawkshead harvest. Opposite: Winemaker Dave Sutton in the Te Kano barrel room.





25 STEPS OF PINOT
Akarua's 25 Steps Vineyard is dedicated completely to pinot noir.

As the region came together for vintage, the mood was one of positivity and excitement. James Dicey, a contract viticulturist in the region for producers like Mt Difficulty and who also manages his own vineyards at Ceres Wines, describes 2019 as a vintage sitting right in the middle. "After two years at the opposite ends of the scale in relation to Growing Degree Day – 2017 being cold and 2018 being a record hot year – 2019 is going to sit pretty squarely in the mid-range." This is good news given the variety of weather events producers have had to contend with.

Rain was a recurrent theme through the spring and into the summer of 2018, in addition to frost in October and even a blanket of snow in November. The spring and summer rain meant increased vigilance and weed management in the vineyard. "This meant plenty of healthy growth," says Pete Bartle, "and a lot more grass mowing and vine trimming than normal!" The extra rain also pushed the need for irrigation later than usual on many properties in the Gibbston, Bannockburn, Bendigo and Lowburn subregions, with some properties, such as Hawkshead Wine in Gibbston Valley, not requiring irrigation at all.

Warm days and cool evenings, experienced in the latter part of the season, have played a critical role in fruit development for aromatic white and red wines. "We have been receiving some pleasing cool overnight temperatures," says Blair Walter of Felton Road in Bannockburn, "which is beneficial to slow ripening and preserve acidity."

Jo Mills of Rippon Vineyard in Wanaka describes the growing season as fantastic. "We have been set up perfectly for harvest with a very healthy crop," she says. Periods of hot sun and wind following the high number of rain events during the summer have been key to producing healthy fruit. This was similar for Felton Road. "It's almost always positive for us to have increased rainfall," says Walter, "as our normal very dry and low humidity conditions are usually stressful for the vines and some extra natural moisture is seen as a positive for soil and vine conditions."




Producers have taken the October frost and the late-November snow in their stride. Denis Marshall of Hawkshead Wine confirmed their vineyard was spared any damage from the frost due to the typical later start to budburst in Gibbston Valley. By and large the frost events appear not to have negatively impacted yields across Central Otago, rather the effect was to reduce the requirement for green harvest (bunch thinning).

At Mt Difficulty, James Dicey noted, "We had some cooler weather during flowering and fruit set so had a mild level of 'hen and chicken' or millerandage (very small and normal sized berries in the same bunch), which has suppressed tonnage very close to optimal levels. This meant the bunch thinning focused on dropping variable bunches in most cases rather than dramatic yield reduction."

At Quartz Reef vineyard in Bendigo, winemaker Rudi Bauer described the lower bunch weight and slightly lower yield as being "a good thing", helping to produce fruit for sparkling wine with "very good acidity at the right sugar levels". Bartle of Providore Wines also noted "slightly smaller bunches than average" in vineyards across Gibbston, Queensberry, Bannockburn and Alexandra, and as the season progressed the fruit remained clean and ripened well, providing a crop that was slightly down on volume but showing excellent potential.

In contrast to last year's early start date, vintage for 2019 settled into the more familiar schedule of sparkling wine picking in late-March and harvest continuing through until mid-April. On the western shores of Lake Dunstan in Pisa, Domaine Thomson Viticulturist Simon Gourley was excited about this year's crop and said it was "shaping up to be the best vintage ever".

At the time of writing in mid-April, and despite a few exceptionally cold starts to the day, the general feeling in the region about the quality of the fruit was positive and expectations were high for a vintage capable of producing wines that will continue to show well for years to come. 

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF AKARUA AND TE KANO ESTATE.



BOUNTIFUL
The Eliza Vineyard bears larger berries and bunches.

Central Otago Wines to Try

2018 Akarua Pinot Rouge, A\$30/NZ\$23

Drink now and enjoy! This is the first release of Pinot Rouge, which was hand harvested, fermented with indigenous yeasts and bottled without maturation or fining. Bursting with succulent red berries, black cherry and liquorice and finishing on a bitter cherry pit and almond note.

2018 Mount Edward Muirkirk Vineyard Gamay, A\$45/NZ\$35

Dark and complex, the character of this wine is uncovered with each sip. Juicy pops of bright red fruit and succulent black plum sit alongside savoury splashes of Worcestershire sauce and bitter Campari notes, all wrapped in fine, dusty tannins winding around a core of pencil shavings.

2017 Providore Wines Pinot Noir, NZ\$39

From the Queensberry vineyard just north of Pisa, the fruit for this wine was hand harvested and destemmed before fermentation in open-top fermenters. Showing a brilliant colour and flavours of ripe black fruit – blackberry, plum, cherry – a velvet texture and a finish of moreish spice notes.

2017 Te Kano Estate Pinot Noir, NZ\$65

The Bannockburn fruit from the Jerome and Eliza vineyards was destemmed and fermented according to clone and vineyard, before maturation in French oak for 11 months. A very fine tannin structure supports a lithe, silky texture with delicate florals and black fruits, leading on to savoury black tea notes.

2016 Rippon Mature Vine Pinot Noir, NZ\$65

The north-facing Rippon parcel of vines sits on a base of schist soil. The wine is intensely perfumed with pink florals, bright red berries, a dash of spice and a delicious savoury undercurrent. A powerful yet elegant wine of supple tannins and silky texture.

2015 Aurum Wines Mathilde Organic Pinot Noir, NZ\$48

The vineyards at this family-run estate hold organic certification and from the gravels, sands and silts of the Te Wairere vineyard in Lowburn, comes fruit of very delicate aroma and flavour. Red and black fruit, rose, violets and green tea wind around refreshing acidity and fine tannins to create an attractive lightness on the palate. Classic, elegant and restrained.



2015 Hawkshead First Vines Pinot Noir, NZ\$65

A delicately coloured wine that exudes sophistication. Bright red berries, rosehip and hibiscus tea and herbal green leaf show on the palate. An aromatic lift is provided by a small portion of whole bunches and the very finely textured tannins add an attractive grace to the wine's structure.

2015 Mt Difficulty Bannockburn Mansons Farm Pinot Noir, A\$110/NZ\$110

Produced in very small quantity and only on its second release, the Mansons Farm possesses layers of red fruit, rosehip tea, delicate pink roses and violets floating above a bed of savoury forest floor notes and framed by fine, dusty, tannins. A classic wine built to last and produced only in the finest vintages.

2015 Prophet's Rock Home Vineyard Pinot Noir, NZ\$65

From fruit perched high on the north-facing slopes of the Bendigo site, this is a sleek and graceful wine with an impressive balance of power and restraint. The pretty floral notes of rose and violets lead on to red and blue fruits, dried Italian herbs, liquorice and wood spice.

2015 Quartz Reef Single Vineyard Franz Ferdinand Pinot Noir, NZ\$120

Fruit from the eastern side of the Bendigo vineyard creates a bold and powerful pinot noir with a silky texture and fine tannin structure. Concentrated and generous with pretty pink florals, ripe black fruit, rosehip tea and red berries, lifted by an earthy green leaf character.

2014 Felton Road Block 3 Pinot Noir, A\$110/NZ\$95

Enticing structure, delicious complexity and impressive concentration of flavour are just some of the qualities coaxed from the older vines on Block 3. Red berries, black fruit, spice and forest floor notes weave together around finely etched tannins and silky texture.

2013 Quartz Reef Methode Traditionnelle Vintage Blanc de Blancs, A\$76/NZ\$75

A sophisticated and elegant wine with exquisite bubbles endlessly bursting with citrus, green fruit, brioche and poached pear. Brimming with nervy tension and promising years of delight, the chardonnay (91%) brings delicious creamy notes to the blend, while the 56 months on lees contribute a scrumptious toasty brioche character.