

Felton Road strokes its beard

21 Oct 2013 by Jancis Robinson

Early last month Nigel Greening, the owner of [Felton Road](#), one of Central Otago's most admired producers, presented a run of their latest wines in London. So popular were his sessions that he had to speak three times to a crowded Mary Lou room in the Groucho Club, Soho, and even by the end of the second one looked exhausted. He is someone who doesn't just present a PR spiel but, in my experience, genuinely shares the current preoccupations of the 32-hectare estate based in Bannockburn and is clearly in reflective mode now that the oldest vines are into their twenties.

Stewart Elms planted the first vines here in 1992 in what is now known as the Elms vineyard at Bannockburn. They subsequently added the Cornish Point vineyard (pictured) by the lake in Cromwell and have just bought, as opposed to leasing, the Calvert vineyard close to Elms, one of the first biodynamic vineyards in the region, I seem to remember. Calvert's fruit until recently was shared between Felton Road, Craggy Range and Pyramid Valley. Cloudy Bay will also be using some Calvert fruit for their top Pinot Noir bottling. The famous Block 3 of the Elms vineyard and Cornish Point both have marked calcareous strata, apparently, which results in some quite marked characteristics in the fruit (read more on Saturday).

As with most Central Otago producers, Pinot Noir is Felton Road's prime product, accounting for about 70% of their vineyards, but 10% is rather fine Riesling and 20% ditto Chardonnay. 'So we're now the biggest Chardonnay producer in Central', Greening pointed out ruefully, adding, 'it's a great shame that people pulled out so much Chardonnay because they were told there was no market for it and so have planted Pinot Gris. May I clamber aboard a favourite hobby horse and second this emotion? I think it is desperately sad that Chardonnay has been so dramatically demoted that it is now planted on only about 3,000 ha of New Zealand (as opposed to almost as much Pinot Gris and nearly 20,000 ha of Sauvignon Blanc). New Zealand Chardonnay can be seriously fine, as witness their Block 2 Chardonnay 2011, or many an offering from the likes of [Bell Hill](#), [Dog Point](#), [Kumeu River](#), [Millton](#) and Neudorf. Did Bridget Jones really wreak so much damage to this grape's reputation?

According to Greening, 'All the top New Zealand Chardonnays are Mendoza clone - a great clone for us. The crops are very low because the vines are usually naturally millerandé and the wines therefore have an intense spike of minerality.' He claimed that by 2007 they were already happy with their Chardonnays and 'we haven't really changed vinification except we're getting braver about not stirring. And the wild ferments are getting better.' They use about 10% new oak, slightly less in Block 2. Indeed their policy is to use as little new oak as possible for Chardonnay - just for replacement purposes.

Anyway, enough of the Chardonnay ranting. Felton Road was a biodynamic pioneer and was Demeter certified four or five years ago but Greening is not a rabid BD proseletiser. 'I'm not a massive fan of the special preparations - I'm not terribly into all that. I'm more concerned with running a completely closed gate farming ecosystem that runs pretty much independently,' he told us. In the winter we do the composting and in the spring the animals arrive - goats, sheep, cattle. We also grow our own fruit and veg, and make all our own preparations now.' He pointed out that New Zealand, having huffed and puffed a little early about their clean, green credentials, now has a solid system of a full audit trail now (see Monty Waldin's on this in his [organic/BD stocktake - outside Europe](#)).

I like the fact that at Felton Road they are always curious. As Greening pointed out, despite

some summer heat spikes, Central Otago is overall about 15% cooler than the Côte d'Or, being somewhere between Chablis and Champagne in terms of climate. They were always puzzled therefore by how rich and dark Central Otago Pinot is compared with Burgundy's. I assume that this is not due to the clones planted because they took the trouble to set up a climate research group in Central Otago and came to the conclusion that differences in the phenological cycle had a huge effect on ripeness.

In Burgundy the vines' physical ripeness (things like lignification of the stems and seeds) is very high but sugar ripeness lags behind whereas in Central Otago the sugar bolts ahead, then the phenolics develop but the physical ripeness lags behind. Greening cited [John Gladstones' recent book](#) in which he points out that if night temperatures fall below 15decC the vines go dormant. This happens reliably for a few hours every night in Central Otago (though rarely in the height of summer in Burgundy) when the vines stop respiring and so stop consuming sugar.

As for colour, according to Greening, 'We get the colour from our UV levels that are 2.5 times what they are on the west coast of the US or Burgundy. You'd have to go up to an altitude of 9,500 feet (!) in Burgundy to match ours. We took UV filters and measured tannin and phenolics in grapes to compare with those without a UV screen to prove that. We already knew that our issues with green tannins were related to seed tannins not skin tannins. Lignification of the seeds prevents green tannins escaping from them - so, we worked out we need to base our picking decision on when seed lignification takes place.

'We're looking at the ideal flavour reference point, and then trying to learn from that how it compares with physical ripeness. If you pick two days ahead of ideal, is it still ok re the tannins. We're trying to relate this to seed lignification - which is probably impossible to spot with the eye. The point is, how early can you nudge picking (to retain the freshness we've decided we want now) without tripping over green tannins? In Burgundy it's only the weather that makes them pick. It's not like that for us. We seem to reach over-high phenolics and sugars all too easily, which is our impetus to pick.'

Their regular Bannockburn Pinot Noir bottling is usually a third each of each vineyard plus some young vine material from their individual Blocks that are bottled separately and designed to show off those Blocks' singularity. Single vineyards get 15 months in oak, as opposed to 11 months for the Bannockburn bottling, although the most concentrated wine of all, Block 5, gets 18 months.

I'll be writing more on Saturday about the changes they have made to their Pinot Noirs from the 2012 vintage. The wines now are very much drier, more savoury and, I would guess, likely to age even better. But this has long been a particularly reliable producer. Greening described 2013 as 'a very interesting year. Some people are already calling it the vintage of the century. I can't wait to nibble away at seeing how much tighter we can get our Pinot Noirs.'

The wines below are listed in the order tasted.

FLIGHT ONE

Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2007 Central Otago 16 Drink 2010-2015

Cool wet spring and small crop. Warm summer and quite early harvest. Originally considered a benchmark vintage but nowadays they don't like the lack of phenolic ripeness in these warm years. The long harvest means there are some green tannins and overripe fruit giving a sweet and sour character.

Bright ruby medium intensity. Fairly light but very convincing nose that says burgundy pretty strongly compared with most New Zealand Pinots. Light compost and autumnal leaves with a undertow of tertiary fruit. Good acidity and quite jewelery fruit but if anything a little suppressed - big contrast with the Cornish Point norm. Maybe losing a bit of vitality?

Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2008 Central Otago 16.5 Drink 2012-2018

Warm, even year. They harvested a big crop. If they cut back, they end up with huge bunches which they don't want, so they have learnt to live with it. The 2008 was closed for a while but great for drinking now. A surprise vintage.

Bright ruby. Quite nutty nose – mild and fragrant. Definitely in the pure fruit register. Linear with fruit and acidity, well integrated. Refined fruit and slightly but not excessively sweet. Just a little dry on the finish.

Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2009 Central Otago 16.5 Drink 2013-2020

Closed at the moment. When the vines were young the wines didn't seem to go through a sulky period but that's where 2009 is now. There was lots of mildew though Felton Road managed to escape. Harvest was a little too spread. For Nigel Greening this was the most successful vintage so far. First year that the Pinot had an average vine age more than 10 years.

Bright cherry red. Back to compost on the nose of this (like 2007). Some purple fruit character too. Solid, straightforward fruit. Very definitely similar in style to other bottlings. Pure and well balanced. I'm just looking for a little ingredient X. Perhaps that's reserved for the Block 3 and 5. Dry finish.

Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2010 Central Otago 17 Drink 2014-2020

Warm, even year when it was easy to make great wine.

Hint of liquorice and tar – briary Pinot. But good fruit underneath. Punchy fruit. Suave texture and should age well.

Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2011 Central Otago 17 Drink 2015-2022

Very stressed vintage and global warming effects seen for the first time. Very early spring and then went cool and didn't seem to recover. Grapes approached harvest without being really ripe despite the fact that it was already 114 days from flowering and they were running out of their phenological cycle. Realised nothing else exciting would happen. Got us thinking about how phenological cycle affects wine.

Rather serious and majestic – very concentrated and dry. Exciting with real undertow. Some black cherry notes.

FLIGHT TWO

Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2012 Central Otago 17 Drink 2016-2024

Bright ruby (not much blue despite the wines' youth). Intensely ripe on the nose but no sweetness on the palate. Quite a change of style! Quite grown up. Lots of excitement and reverberation on the palate. Dry finish and real savour. Very long and punchy.

Felton Road, Calvert Pinot Noir 2012 Central Otago 16.5 Drink 2017-2025

Heady and opulent on the nose. Very flattering. Sweeter than the other Felton Road 2012s at the start. Then a little spindly on the finish.

Felton Road, Cornish Point Pinot Noir 2012 Central Otago 17 Drink 2015-2022

Dark crimson. Heady and intense, with some smooth fruit, polished leather character and considerable juiciness. A charmer.

Felton Road, Block 3 Pinot Noir 2012 Central Otago 18 Drink 2016-2027

Dark crimson. Distinctively intense and mineral. Very sinewy and with sparkling fruit that's intense rather than sweet. Dense. Lovely lift and length.

Felton Road, Block 5 Pinot Noir 2011 Central Otago 17.5 Drink 2015-2024

Clay. Mid crimson. Big, sweet and transparent. Charming but more stereotypically Central Otago than Block 3.

FLIGHT THREE

Felton Road, Bannockburn Chardonnay 2012 Central Otago 16.5 Drink 2014-2018

Pale, almost water white. Savoury, vegetal nose. Very New Zealand! Lots of fine acidity and fruity freshness but much more mineral than fruit. Racy and no oak influence at all. Chewy finish, with chalkiness. But not too austere.

Felton Road, Block 2 Chardonnay 2011 Central Otago 17 Drink 2015-2020

Pale straw. Smells like Chablis! Lots of weight and extract though not sweet. Intense and very rewarding. Great tension. Masses of both fruit and acidity has me searching for tropical fruit analogies but that would be wrong as this is definitely not of the cool, hi-tech school. Very long and refined.

Felton Road, Dry Riesling 2012 Central Otago 16.5 Drink 2015-2020

RS 4 g/l. Herbal notes. Just a hint of body odour. Elderflower cordial! Not uncomfortably dry. Though it is very youthful and the finish should become a little more comfortable and less astringent. Very bright fruited. 12%

Felton Road, Bannockburn Riesling 2012 Central Otago 16 Drink 2013-2017

RS 64 g/l. Same wine as Dry Riesling but fermentation stopped by chilling. Nose a little richer than the Dry version. Pungent and at least Spätlese level of sweetness. Good balance. I'm not quite sure how I'd drink this – with which foods? Not at all funky despite the wild yeast. 8.5%

Felton Road, Block 1 Riesling 2012 Central Otago 17 Drink 2015-2025

RS 64 g/l. More refined and crystalline with great extract than the Bannockburn. Really very refined. Chewy finish for the moment. 8.5%