

Felton Road: producer profile and 12 wines to try

Many people dream of owning a vineyard, but for Felton Road owner Nigel Greening this is no vanity project. Anne Krebiehl MW meets the man behind one of Central Otago's most prized producers and discovers that his work in New Zealand has only just begun.



Anne Krebiehl MW January 5, 2023



Felton Road's Calvert Vineyard and the surrounding hills in Central Otago, on New Zealand's South Island. Credit: <https://feltonroad.com/>

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It is what many dream of: you are an experienced executive at the top of your game, you have seen it all. Then you leave it all behind to buy a vineyard. And no, not in a famous region, but an emerging region on the other side of the world.

That is the story of Nigel Greening, British-born owner of Felton Road in **Central Otago**, New Zealand, who just celebrated his 25th vintage. But as anyone who has met Greening will know, marking this milestone is not a self-congratulatory rest on well-earned laurels but an opportunity to reflect on this ever-evolving project, as pioneering now as it was on its first day.

Artisan and authentic

‘I did not want to die of a heart attack on a 747 when I was 65. I wasn’t going to do the job I did,’ Greening says about his life in the mid-1990s. He was in his mid-40s then.

‘I was a creative director mainly doing very large corporate events, big expo pavilions; very stressful, high adrenaline, high-energy stuff. That was not a long-term thing.’ Yet Greening’s story differs significantly from the usual trope of a tech or banking tycoon buying a vanity vineyard.

Scroll down to see tasting notes and scores for 12 Felton Road wines to try

Greening also happened to be part of a working committee set up by the British government with the remit of looking at what the new millennium would hold. This led to a connection with Oliver Sparrow, then director of the Chatham House think-tank.

‘I was privileged to have Oliver’s insight,’ Greening says and summarises Sparrow’s societal theory. Sparrow had identified four categories of people who would prosper in the age of post-industrial feudalism. ‘First, the surfers who’d keep up with the change of technology, see a wave coming, ride it without falling off, these would be the feudal overlords. Everybody else would become a serf. But artists or artisans, carers and authentics or originals would also do well.’

Greening took Sparrow’s theory – which has now come to pass – to heart.



Nigel Greening

Ticking magical boxes

In the end, it was a project for German car manufacturer BMW in the Far East that took Greening to the other side of the world. ‘I had been to New Zealand on holiday, and I liked it,’ he remembers. ‘So I said if I could live in Wanaka, maybe I’d say yes. They said New Zealand was fine, so I went to Wanaka for a year to work for BMW.’

The first night I was there, I went into a wine shop to get a bottle of wine for tea. They had a thing where winemakers presented top New Zealand **Chardonnay** and I got a ticket. From that next morning – and this is interesting – I wasn’t thinking ‘oh yes that is what I want to do,’ but I realised if I started researching, if I could get it right. I could be both an artisan and an authentic, and tick two of Oliver’s four magic boxes.’

Apricots and elms

At the time, Central Otago was just emerging as a wine region. Stuart Elms, a hotelier and blackcurrant farmer from Dunedin, had prospected and bought land along the Felton Road in Bannockburn. He planted Blocks 1, 2 and 3 in 1992.

The first wine was made in 1995 by Grant Taylor, now of Valli Wines, then winemaker at Gibbston Valley. It was just one hogshead barrel, not even 250 litres. The first proper vintage was not until 1997 – hence the 25th anniversary in 2022.

At the time, Elms' plantings doubled Central Otago's vine hectareage, which grew from 19ha in 1990 to 244ha in 1999 and 2,055ha today. By then, Greening had done his research and divined Cornish Point, an apricot orchard, as his ideal vineyard. He bought the site in 1999 and planted it in 2000. Later the same year, he bought the Felton Road estate from Stuart Elms – hence the elm tree on every screwcap.



The adventure begins

Was Greening a wine lover before? 'I was a Burgundy drinker of great enthusiasm in an age where we could still do that; and I was familiar with the things at Calera,' he says, referring to the legendary **California Pinot Noir** estate.

When did biodynamics start? 'Pretty much right away,' Greening says. Winemaker Blair Walter and viticulturist Gareth King both wanted to convert to organics. Due to a number of **Burgundy** estates working this way, Greening was aware of biodynamic methods. 'I wasn't convinced by the science, because there wasn't any, but I wasn't averse to it,' he says.

Trials started straight away. 'It took us a couple of years of gradual transition, so it wasn't too scary.' But people took note of the wine, especially in the UK where the wines were first imported by the late John Avery.

'One thing is weird about Felton Road,' Greening says. 'At the point I bought it in 1999, it still was not on the radar. But [US critic Robert] Parker had seen

it and had given it an amazing write-up – that caused a lot of people to pay attention.’

Does he have any regrets? ‘Oh no,’ he says with complete conviction. He remembers a line in *Decanter* by one of the first wine writers ever to visit Felton Road, describing Greening ‘walking through Block 3 with a mix of paternal pride and a lottery winner’s disbelief’. He smiles: ‘This was three months after I bought it, right at the end of 1999.’

Two halves

Walter has made every Felton vintage since 1997 and King was on board almost from the beginning too. It speaks volumes that both are still there, not only having stayed the course but expanded, evolved and shaped it. Greening, Walter and King learned and evolved together.

‘We regard 2012 as our renaissance, the year when we woke up,’ says Greening. ‘2011 sealed it for us. Just as we got to harvest, the grapes just started losing it, so we hauled the vintage earlier than we usually do. Hang on,’ he says emphatically. ‘This is not as ripe but we like it better’.

This meant that they switched to picking earlier from 2012 onwards. He says ‘Felton Road lives in these two halves, before and after.’ The wines clearly have more tension and ageability now.

Felton Road at a glance

Founded 1992

Owner Nigel Greening

Vineyard area 32ha

Varieties Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Riesling

Key vineyards Elms, Cornish Point, Calvert, MacMuir

Single site wines Block 1 Riesling, Block 2 Chardonnay, Block 6 Chardonnay, Block 3 Pinot Noir

Forever evolving

‘We’ve got a very detailed replanting book that runs for about 30 years,’ Greening says. It is about future-proofing the estate, gradually moving over drought-tolerant rootstocks and ‘looking at new clonal possibilities as well as massal selections’. Everything is being fine-tuned.

‘Apart from the guys who do the viticulture, we have a technical viticultural team. They do nothing but measure. They are counting bunches, counting berries, how many buds versus the spacing between buds... They are looking to establish patterns of data. Every time they see a weak vine, it will be tagged, numbered and entered into a recovery programme,’ he says.

‘Everything is at individual vine level, leading to much more accurate control of things like irrigation. We are moving irrigation underground, ending drip irrigation. This is to help us with regenerative farming. We crimp rather than cut weeds... we have all these plans. There is a lot of technical stuff that we have to research.’

Insatiably curious

Greening clearly sweats the small stuff: ‘We are now formally auditing carbons to IWCA [International Wineries for Climate Action] standards which in itself is very instructive. I love the rigour of IWCA.’ Their carbon audit extends to recording the means of transport of every visitor to the tasting room – did they come in a 4×4 or cycle?

‘We have to audit for every bottle of Felton Road in the world to its final consumption. The only way you can do it is with algorithms, you have to start by building models and have to make assumptions. This is very rigorous stuff. We are learning a lot from it,’ he says.

So once again Felton Road is at the forefront of viticulture. Greening is clear what all this carbon auditing means: ‘Ultimately, we will have to plant a forest – it will be in New Zealand, 30,000 to 40,000 trees, as the maths work

themselves out,' he says with a satisfied smile which then expands to a broad, happy grin.

'It is so much easier to plan for the future when you do not have to darling growth!'
