

Felton Road Turns 25



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Felton Road is in fine fettle, as this extensive 25th anniversary tasting shows. Blair Walter, on the left above, has made every one of those vintages.

Felton Road, an organic and biodynamic pioneer in Central Otago, is one of a handful of New Zealand wineries with an international reputation and has been celebrating its 25th anniversary with a series of events in the UK, not least because owner Nigel Greening has vowed to fly less from his base in Devon, south-west England. I attended a truly historic tasting followed by lunch at Medlar restaurant in London's deepest Chelsea in late October.

On show was a wine made even before Felton Road existed, as well as other vintages hand-picked to show the winery's journey. There were all of the 2021s and verticals of Bannockburn Pinot Noir from 2017, Bannockburn Chardonnay from 2018, an array of 2002 whites plus the odd 2011 and quite a few wines from 2012, their turning-point vintage.

What happened was that vintages up to 2011 tended to show well on release but would suddenly topple over. So, in 2012 they decided to pick earlier. They loved the results and decided that maybe the much-vaunted 'extended hang time' was not such a good idea after all. From then on, they continued to pick earlier than previously and ferment spontaneously, and they employed less new oak and fewer punchdowns.

The 2011 Chardonnays also sparked a renaissance. The Bannockburn Chardonnay 2011 had minimal oak influence and was much fresher and more beguiling than the barrel-fermented Elms Chardonnay 2011, which had been fermented in oak (one-third new). Greening observed, 'it was through tasting the oaked Chardonnays against the unoaked versions at around ten years of age that we appreciated the superior ageing potential of avoiding new oak and ceased using new oak in Chardonnays (other than the need to replace the odd dead barrel)'.

These are routes that many winemakers have subsequently followed but 2012 was quite early to change direction, and it was unusual to go public on such a dramatic change of strategy, as Greening did at presentations in London in 2013. (See Felton Road strokes its beard, which includes much of the background to this landmark producer, and New Zealand's future, also written in 2013, in which the changes in strategy are detailed.) Most wine producers have eventually done this but kept fairly quiet about it. An obvious exception to this would be Eben Sadie of Swartland in South Africa, although he did not make the point that 'our wines were too ripe' until the following year.

For Pinot Noir, the winery's principal focus, the proportion of whole bunches in the fermenter (currently seen by Pinot Noir fans as a crucial metric) hasn't changed much since 2012. And Felton Road's Pinot Noir still spends 18 to 20 days on the skins. But what has changed is average alcohol levels which are now about 0.5% lower than prior to 2012 and often no more than 13.5% – although they tended to be a bit higher than this in the sunny 2021 vintage. Apparently, the New Zealand authorities are extremely tough on alcohol levels in wine for export and will deny export licences to producers who declare an alcohol content more than 0.5% adrift from reality.

One thing that has changed since they built a new barrel cellar about five years ago is that wines now spend closer to 13 months in barrel than the old norm of 11 months (presumably to make way for the new vintage).

The 25th anniversary we were celebrating was Felton Road's first official vintage, 1997. A wine had been made in 1995 – by Grant Taylor of Gibbston Valley (now of Valli) – from fruit grown by the previous owner of the original vines, Stewart Elms. (One barrel of it was bottled and shipped to the UK to be split between two of the country's most fastidious wine merchants, John Avery MW of Averys of Bristol and Bill Baker of Reid Wines, and one precious bottle of this unicorn wine was served at this celebratory lunch.)



When Elms planted what are now known as Blocks 1, 2 and 3 (shown above) in 1992, just before Olssen's and Mount Difficulty also planted vines, Central Otago's total area of vines doubled, from 11 to 22 ha (54 acres). The first Cornish Point vines went into the ground in November 1999, just in time for Greening to come into view, slightly battle-scarred from involvement with the UK's millennium celebrations (he used to design large events), and buy out Elms in 2000. See more detail about Felton Road's vineyards on their website.

In 1996 the grapes were sold to Gibbston Valley while the man who has made every single vintage of Felton Road from 1997 to the present, Blair Walter, was making wine at Domaine de l'Arlot in Burgundy and Rippon in Central Otago.

When planning the future of Felton Road, Greening asked Walter, by now appointed winemaker, what sort of total area of estate would be ideal and was told 30 ha (74 acres). By 2006, by dint of steady land acquisition, Felton Road had got there. Today they own between 32 and 33 ha with Greening claiming that they need the few spare hectares as wiggle room since phylloxera has been discovered in two of their vineyards.

After the watershed 2012 vintage, the Felton Road team came in retrospect to value the earlier, weaker vintages, which is what informed the choice of which wines to serve with the lunch. The three 2002 Rieslings – all under screwcap, a move Felton Road made across the portfolio in 2001 – were chosen, incidentally, because this was the first vintage that they made these three wines in their current form.

On the basis of this tasting, warts and all, Felton Road is now in the finest of fettle and they must be thrilled to have taken the turn they did.

See my 35 tasting notes below, wines presented in the order they were served within the following six flights: the 2021s, two Bannockburn verticals, much older white vintages, lunch wines, Pinot in the early years, and the Pinot renaissance.

The 2021s

[Felton Road, Dry Riesling 2021 Central Otago](#) 16.5

Really quite firm and without the sweet cachou quality found in some antipodean Rieslings. Are the clones German? Just a little bit of RS but beautifully judged to counterbalance the (notable) grapefruit acidity. A really fine, dry, bracing aperitif.

12.5%

Drink 2022 – 2027

[Felton Road, Bannockburn Riesling 2021 Central Otago](#) 16.5

Their off-dry version.

Really quite sweet-tasting. A Spätlese style but with well-sculpted acidity. Very crystalline. Should age well. Clean and fresh on the finish. 9.5%

Drink 2023 – 2030

[Felton Road, Block 1 Riesling 2021 Central Otago](#) 16.5 +

Dense, firm nose. Then very rich, on the cusp of Spätlese and Auslese style. I wonder how they price these three Rieslings and how easy it is to sell them. Lots of grip on the palate. A serious, ambitious medium-sweet Riesling with quite enough acidity to keep it going for many years. 9.5%

Drink 2024 – 2032

[Felton Road, Bannockburn Chardonnay 2021 Central Otago](#) 16.5

Blend of Cornish Point and Elms vineyards. Some of their oldest vines.

Light and delicate on the nose. Good texture and a little more obviously natural acidity than most fine Australian Chardonnays. Dry finish with good fruit impact on the palate. Crisp and crystalline. Lime juice is the dominant flavour. 14%

Drink 2022 – 2027

[Felton Road, Block 2 Chardonnay 2021 Central Otago](#) 17 +

From a gentle, east-facing slope in front of the winery that's part of the Elms vineyard.

Reticent nose. Then notably creamy texture on the front palate and masses of acidity and life. No obvious oak flavour although it has obviously been in oak for this firm texture.

Quite long and complete. Really very impressive indeed. Lots of undertow and potential.

14%

Drink 2023 – 2031

[Felton Road, Block 6 Chardonnay 2021 Central Otago](#) 17

From a high, north-facing block of schist and gravel within the Elms vineyard.

Bigger, broader and more robust than Block 2 on the nose. Emphatic and seems a bit more alcoholic (or less acid?) than Block 2. Less ethereal. Almost earthy! Lots of texture. Very distinct from Block 2. My personal preference is probably for Block 2 but Block 6 is certainly very well made. 14%

Drink 2023 – 2032

[Felton Road, Block 3 Pinot Noir 2021 Central Otago](#) 16 +

North-facing slope of deep silt that's the heart of the Elms vineyard in front of the winery.

Transparent cherry red. A certain sweet lolly character on the nose. Some sweet spiciness and a certain graininess on the end. Still quite youthful. 14%

Drink 2024 – 2030

Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2021 Central Otago

16.5

Blend of their four Bannockburn vineyards.

Earthy and interesting on the nose. Already open and sweet but with good structure. Great for current drinking, with real interest and freshness. At the moment I prefer this to Block 3.

14%

Drink 2022 – 2028

Felton Road, Calvert Pinot Noir 2021 Central Otago

17 +

From the deep-silt Calvert vineyard, 1 km east of the winery.

Bright pale crimson. Deep flavours suggest purple velvet somehow. Really interesting and savoury with fine tannins and excellent structure – and apparent future. A real caress on the palate. Already fun but should last really well. 13.5%

Drink 2022 – 2033

Felton Road, Block 5 Pinot Noir 2021 Central Otago

17.5

North-facing silt in the Elms vineyard.

Simpler, more direct nose than the Calvert. Then very sweet and round and jewel-like. Masses of sweet pleasure. Already broachable but underlying acidity and fine tannin suggests ageability. 14%

Drink 2022 – 2034

Felton Road, MacMuir Pinot Noir 2021 Central Otago

17.5

From another deep-silt vineyard 1 km east of the Elms vineyard on Felton Road.

Dark crimson. Very reticent nose but suggests there's lots under there. A finesse of texture plus acidity compensates well for the high alcohol. Savoury note on the end makes this very appetising. Probably worth keeping for a year or two. 14.5%

Drink 2024 – 2034

Felton Road, Cornish Point Pinot Noir 2021 Central Otago

16.5 ++

Eastern end of Bannockburn, 6 km from the winery.

Bright crimson. Not yet especially expressive on the nose. Sweet palate entry and a little less 'serious' than some of its stablemates. Lots of fine tannins. At the moment there's a bit of a hole between the fruit and the tannin. Needs time. 14%

Drink 2025 – 2034

Bannockburn verticals

[Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2017 Central Otago](#)

16

Pale garnet. A little hint of sweet oak and masses of sweet fruit. Transparent. Sinewy and interesting but very particular with quite emphatic tannins. Oak-derived? Not that long. 13.5%

Drink 2019 – 2024

[Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2018 Central Otago](#)

17

Pale garnet. Quite heady nose. And some freshness on the palate as well as a heck of a lot of sweetness. Actually, this reminds me of nothing more than a Gredos Garnacha! The granite texture... I like it though possibly not ideal as a direct alternative to red burgundy. 13.5%

Drink 2020 – 2028

[Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2019 Central Otago](#)

17

Mid garnet. Savoury and nuanced on the nose. Delightful freshness. Fine tannins. Redcurrant fruit and persistence. Great balance. But still a little tannin in evidence. Bright fruit. 13.5%

Drink 2023 – 2030

[Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2020 Central Otago](#)

16.5 +

Bright crimson/garnet. Smoky/mineral nose. Then very sweet, round palate. Light graininess gives it structure. 14%

Drink 2022 – 2028

[Felton Road, Bannockburn Chardonnay 2018 Central Otago](#)

16.5

Green streak runs through this. Nice balance and, although this is being shown to demonstrate their relationship with oak, I don't see any obvious oak in here. Racy and just a little simple but very well balanced. A fine NZ Chardonnay! 13.5%

Drink 2021 – 2027

[Felton Road, Bannockburn Chardonnay 2019 Central Otago](#)

16.5

Very fresh with notable acidity. Bright fruit and sleek. Not like white burgundy but a very well-balanced Chardonnay with a certain sweetness. Impressive persistence though. 13.5%

Drink 2021 – 2028

[Felton Road, Bannockburn Chardonnay 2020 Central Otago](#)

16.5

Minerally nose. Masses of acidity – almost as though this had been picked early! But perhaps it was the vintage conditions? Green fruit – not especially subtle. But certainly refreshing. Still chewy. 14%

Drink 2022 – 2030

Much older white vintages

[Felton Road Chardonnay 2002 Central Otago](#)

16.5

Butterscotch nose with lots of acidity. A little simple with a certain pungency but the acidity and something a bit lactic has certainly preserved it. Some sweetness and milkiness.

Drink 2004 – 2020

[Felton Road, Barrel Fermented Chardonnay 2002 Central Otago](#)

16

Rather heavy and alcoholic with strong (and not very appetising) butterscotch notes.

Drink 2005 – 2026

[Felton Road, Bannockburn Chardonnay 2011 Central Otago](#)

17

Very fresh and lively, smoky and creamy. A really nice wine! Chablis-esque. Much better than the barrel-fermented 2011, which taught the team a lot...

Drink 2014 – 2024

[Felton Road, Elms Chardonnay 2011 Central Otago](#)

16

A bit metallic on the nose and then very sweet on the palate. Then chewy, not nearly as graceful as Bannockburn 2011 Chardonnay! Hard end.

Drink 2014 – 2019

[Felton Road, Block 1 Riesling 2002 Central Otago](#)

15.5

RS 60 g/l.

A bit cachou and sweet and not very sophisticated. 10%

Drink 2005 – 2012

[Felton Road Riesling 2002 Central Otago](#)

16

RS 50 g/l.

Again, lots of RS and a bit astringent. Sweet lime juice. 10%

Drink 2007 – 2017

[Felton Road, Dry Riesling 2002 Central Otago](#)

15

RS 5 g/l.

The only wine under cork and the only too-old wine in this collection! A bit old on the nose and drying out on the palate. The first wine to show too much age! 10%

Drink 2005 – 2012

Lunch whites

Felton Road, Vin Gris 2021 Central Otago

16

Served as an aperitif. Blanc de Pinot Noir. RS 3–4 g/l. Full malo.

Off dry with good acidity and real structure. But not as serious as the other Felton Road wines.

Drink 2022 – 2023

Felton Road Chardonnay 2012 Central Otago

16.5

First vintage of the renaissance.

Lots of acidity and a green-fruit streak. Very New Zealand! Clean and crisp with a hint of pineapple.

Drink 2014 – 2024

Felton Road, Block 2 Chardonnay 2012 Central Otago

17.5

First vintage of the renaissance.

Some real subtlety here. Long and creamy-textured with an impressive undertow. Not simple. Definitely several cuts above the regular Chardonnay 2012.

Drink 2017 – 2027

Pinot in the early years

[Felton Road Pinot Noir 1995 Central Otago](#)

16.5

The first vintage from what would become Felton Road's vines. Label showed a black tree on gold whereas the tree is black on white now. Very early days. Wine made when Stuart Elms owned the vines, in response to an order from UK importer Christopher Fielden. He sold it to John Avery MW, of Averys of Bristol, and Bill Baker, of Reid Wines.

Cloudy deep garnet (it had been hand-carried to the lunch by John's daughter Mimi Avery). Very sweet with rather candified fruit. There was obviously potential here and the wine certainly wasn't dead. But nor was it very sophisticated.

Drink 2000 – 2020

[Felton Road, Block 5 Pinot Noir 2008 Central Otago](#)

16.5

Big crop so not too ripe.

Lustrous ruby-garnet colour. Attractive smoky/mineral nose. Clean with no obvious oak but a light hint of coffee. Fresh finish though a rather sudden end.

Drink 2014 – 2024

[Felton Road, Block 3 Pinot Noir 2009 Central Otago](#)

16

Crimson-garnet colour with a pale rim. Big and beefy. Definitely not subtle! And doesn't seem to have anywhere to go.

Drink 2012 – 2020

Pinot renaissance

[Felton Road, Cornish Point Pinot Noir 2014 Central Otago](#)

18

Favourite of owner Nigel Greening.

Perfumed, fresh and somehow especially fluid! Great purity of fruit. Excellent spine.

Drink 2017 – 2027

[Felton Road, Calvert Pinot Noir 2015 Central Otago](#)

17

Sweet and transparent.

Drink 2018 – 2026

[Felton Road, Block 3 Pinot Noir 2012 Central Otago](#)

16.5

Bottle brought by Stephen Browett of Farr Vintners. First vintage of the renaissance.

Something a bit vegetal about the nose of this wine. Sinewy and firmer than some later vintages.

Drink 2019 – 2027