

# MAKE IT A DOUBLE

*In 2022 iconic Central Otago winery Felton Road enjoyed a dual celebration: the 25th vintage of its pinot noir and 30 years since its first vines were planted. Winemaker Blair Walter discusses the history and wisdom behind its wines.*

WORDS BY CAMERON DOUGLAS

Few readers would know the name Stewart Elms, but he had the dream of growing pinot noir. After researching soil profiles and climate conditions around New Zealand he discovered the right combination at an old hay-growing site on Felton Road in Bannockburn, Central Otago.

When the opportunity to purchase that site came along in 1992, he made the first part of that dream real by planting vines. One of Elms' classmates at Lincoln University was Blair Walter, who went on to become a talented winemaker and crafted the first official Felton Road 1997 Pinot Noir. Walter has remained at the helm of Felton Roads' winemaking ever since, the 2021 release marking the 25th vintage. The current owner of Felton Road, Nigel Greening purchased the property in 2000 and along with Walter, has developed a fantastic wine program underpinned by specific viticulture practices and a globally renowned wine brand.

I chatted with Walter about the milestones for the company and the 25th release celebrations, as well as some of the winemaking philosophies that underpin Felton Roads' riesling, chardonnay and pinot noir wines he crafts.

"In the past we've celebrated the 10th and 15th vintages, but a quarter century has a nice ring to it, particularly so because it's also 30 years since the Elms vineyard was



planted," he said. "We started the conversion to organics and biodynamics in 2002, so that's 20 years of focused soil health management as well. Thirty years in Central Otago wine is quite significant: there are less than 10 hectares of vines with that age or older and the inherent quality that's now available to those winemakers in the region is exciting and celebrating these milestones is very important for us."

The wider guest list for the 25th celebrations included Felton Road's mail order database, "extremely loyal customers, some of whom have been with us since the first vintage," said Walter. The biggest events took place in November 2022, an opportunity for

**Clockwise from above:** The scenic view over Felton Road; Biodiversity in the vineyards has contributed to many excellent recent harvests; Phacelia is beneficial to vineyard soils; Blair Walter (left) and Nigel Greening.

the customers of Felton Road wines to attend masterclasses on the wines, as well as food and wine get-togethers. It was also an opportunity for guests to meet the winery team and key staff, some coming from the US, Singapore, and Australia.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

Site and soil health are two important keys to successful grape and wine growing. Walter says that the harvests over the last six



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BLAIR WALTER

vintages (2017-2022) have been excellent. “We have been incredibly blessed with vintage size consistency, and with our wines all allocated, it has been great to be able offer the same volume of wine to our customers from year to year,” he said.

Walter had something exciting to say about all the wines and vintages he has worked with, making particular mention of the 2021s and saying how elegant and transparent they were. As a fan of riesling and the Felton Road expression I wanted to know a little more about how Walter managed the juice: “Our riesling pH is almost always low around 2.87 or 2.85, we settle the juice for 5-7 days, it’s all wild yeast ferment, there’s no skin contact, and all whole bunch pressed,” he said.

The Felton Road riesling is a racy and fine-boned wine with finesse and detail. Walter says that because the schist gravel soils and the climate don’t push the body and

## FOUR OF THE BEST



**Felton Road Bannockburn Chardonnay 2021, Central Otago**

Elegant and complex, immediately enticing with a bouquet of subtlety and finesse, layers of fresh white-fleshed stonefruits and citrus, layers of fragrant spices and mineral then gently toasty barrel qualities. Complexity on the palate builds as the wine opens up, there’s purity and finesse seamlessly woven into the satin saline texture. Lengthy yet youthful finish, a wine that will develop and continue to impress from 2023 through 2030+. RRP from \$55.50.



**Felton Road Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2021, Central Otago**

Purity and finesse, core varietal scents of dark cherry, violet and gunflint, there’s a quiet smokiness from the barrel along with a five spice quality then a mineral and earth quality adding complexity and sense of place. A light dried herb and savoury quality reflect the rugged background these vineyards sites are exposed to. A heart of pinosity and charm. Excellent drinking early if you must, but will also age and be equally delicious from 2025 through 2035. RRP \$74.50.



**Felton Road MacMuir Pinot Noir 2021, Central Otago**

After the primary scents of pinosity and seductive charms, a sense of power, ripeness and youth prevails. Aromas of darker red berry fruits are mixed with soil and barrel spice scents, the synergy and complexities from fruit and site speaks volumes with a light smoky clay soil and raspberry plum aromas. Youthful, taut, new textures and ripe flavours, medium+ acidity and core pinosity fruits that mirror the bouquet. Best drinking from 2026 through 2036+. RRP from \$103.50.



**Felton Road Block 3 Pinot Noir 2021, Central Otago**

Complex, specific, mineral then fruit centric, the sense of place suggests a stony mineral quality, ripe red berry fruits with a soft savoury quality, then nut and baking spice layers from barrel. Taut, ripe, youthful and equally complex on the palate, firm tannins and acidity frame the wine and set the foundation for fruit. There’s power and intensity with electricity in the mouthfeel. A wine for your cellar that would like you to let it mature slowly. Best drinking likely from 2026 through 2036+. RRP from \$122.


the texture too much, he wants to be careful and honest regarding what the terroir is telling him. The chardonnay wines are managed differently: “We haven’t used more than 15% new oak for the chardonnay since 2001 ... over the last several vintages the Block 2 and Block 6 wines don’t see any new oak and at all and it’s only the Bannockburn chardonnay that has some new oak, driven mainly by the need for replacement barrels, some are over 20 years old.

“For the pinot noir with its lovely Otago fruit profile and acid line, new barrel use is a little different with some new oak adding wood tannins into the wine in a judicious, moderate way.”

He added: “Block 5 hasn’t had any more than 33 per cent new oak for 10 years at least and the other pinots noir sit around 30 per cent new oak use. With the 2020 and 2021 wines, we have reduced that again to 25% new oak.” Similarly, Walter uses whole bunch in a very judicious way, ensuring the lens of pinot noir is not lost to this technique, a moderate use only ensuring the voice of pinot noir and its origins are maintained. “We keep vineyard

parcels separate as much as possible when fruit is first harvested and pressed, especially for specific blocks or vineyard sections.”

And finally, who would Walter say were his biggest influencers when he first became a winemaker? “I certainly have to take my hat off to Marcel Giesen. I started working at Giesen Wines in 1991 ... Marcel introduced me to fine wine and tasting good bottles in the pursuit of quality. My vintage in Burgundy working with Jean-Pierre de Smet at Domaine de L’Arlot was hugely influential, and [working with] John Kongsgaard at Newton wines in the US as well.”

At the end of a hard-working day, which is most days for Walter, he loves a good cocktail, but “that’s two less glasses of wine I could enjoy”, so he often plumps for a craft beer with a hoppy punching style – “Extremely refreshing”. 

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