

TASTING REPORT: FELTON ROAD, THE HANDSOME PRINCE OF NEW ZEALAND PINOT

September 21th, 2015

If Central Otago was the Côte de Nuits, then Bannockburn would likely be Vosne-Romanée and I'm going to hang it right out and say that Felton Road would be the top gun, the DRC.

The Felton Road Elms Vineyard, winery, office and cellar door all sit right in the pocket of the most consistent stretch of vineyard land in the Central Otago region, consistent in terms of both style and quality. And whilst they may be a lazy 1500-odd years younger than their Burgundian soul mates, they have as many runs on the board as is humanly possible in the time they've been working the land for wine.

And Blair Walter, the winemaker at Felton Road (though I want to find a better title that sums up his all-encompassing oeuvre), operates with the humility and respect that is a reflection of both the man himself and the reverence he has for the land he works with. Don't get me wrong, he can cut loose in the right circumstances, but where wine is on the table he is most often entranced by it.

The success of Felton Road is certainly not all down to Walter though. The fact that someone like Nigel Greening owns the joint cannot be underestimated. Greening is a man whose mind circumnavigates the world of thought at a satellite-like height whilst his oft-bare feet stand firmly on earth. His mind is as inspiringly sharp as it is perfectly offbeat and I've often thought that Felton Road is therapeutic for him, it keeps him grounded.

And then there's Gareth King the resident vineyard whisperer at Felton Road who, alongside Walter, has a keen eye for vine health. If you ever meet King you'll know. He's the dude with the "I'm the luckiest man on the planet" smile. You'll find him in the vineyard. Enough said.

Walter visited Australia recently on an extended tour and I caught up with him in Melbourne to taste some current and new wines, as well as a few back vintages. He's a great presenter. Softly spoken, he talks a brand logic, honesty and humility that is not often seen in the world of winemaking.

He likes the new wines of 2014, a slightly cooler vintage, where greater definition is the reward in the warmer Bannockburn district of Central Otago. Walter likes these cooler years better than the warmer years (like 2013), he sees the cool edge as giving the wines a kind of x-factor in terms of balance, it sharpens them up.

He regards the recent 2012 vintage as the finest to date for Felton Road, delivering wines with more of a mineral edge, keenly detailed and very precise. The 2014 wines aren't quite as pared back as the 2012s, they're slightly more sweet-fruited and opulent, yet they have clearly defined, precise and complex character.

And whilst I (and no doubt you) have always associated Felton Road foremost with pinot noir and secondly with riesling, I have to confess that since tasting the 2012 Block 2 Chardonnay I've been madly curious about where they're heading with this grape.

The answer is they're moving away from new oak, sticking with full malo-lactic fermentation and they are hitting Chablis-esque notes. Walter brought a vertical of the Bannockburn Chardonnay to the tasting, along with new releases and a vertical of the now maturing Cornish Point Vineyard Pinot Noir.

Contributing Editor Nick Stock is a renowned Australian wine writer, author, presenter and filmmaker who reports on his worldwide wine tasting experiences for JamesSuckling.com.



FELTON ROAD PINOT NOIR CENTRAL OTAGO BLOCK 5

COUNTRY	New Zealand	TASTING NOTES
REGIOIN	South Island	Block 5 is in a class of its own and shows an immensely powerful style with elegance and poise; really impressive. A swirling array of spice and fragrance here, there's a chalky, stony layer underlying the whole thing, dense and dark pinot noir fruit on offer with super bright cherry aromas and gently earthy nuances, a hint of cola too. The palate texture is impeccably dense and there's an athletic, lithe and juicy personality that makes for exciting tasting. There's a wealth of compact tannin that layers up impressively and delivers a surge of energy through the finish. Plenty of pure cherry and boysenberry, rarely do you find wine with this much tension, power and poise. Almost settled and ready, another year or two more perhaps.
VINTAGE	2012	
SCORE	97	

FELTON ROAD PINOT NOIR CENTRAL OTAGO BLOCK 3

COUNTRY	New Zealand	TASTING NOTES
REGIOIN	South Island	A bolder wine that has a little more new oak, some swirling herbs and spices, very complex and concentrated wine here. Bright red cherries, slightly tarry almost, more savory and cryptic with less emphasis on the red fruits. There's a darker cherry thread of fruit, the spices are more evident, the tannins are more legible and they deliver a more succulent, more firmly defined finish. Great depth, balance and smoothly polished texture. Innate balance, effortless and detailed. Very composed. Drink now.
VINTAGE	2014	
SCORE	96	

FELTON ROAD PINOT NOIR CENTRAL OTAGO BLOCK 3

COUNTRY	New Zealand	TASTING NOTES
REGIOIN	South Island	Shows all the deeper, denser and more brash side of pinot, a hallmark of this Elms Vineyard bottling. It delivers a complex mix of dark cherry, mulberry, plum and softer red cherry aromas, plenty of sappy complex bracken and a sheen of fine-ground spice, some toasty oak too. The palate's really glistening with ripe, glossy dark cherry and plum, some cherry pie, crunchy acid and juicy, long appeal. Drinking well now.
VINTAGE	2010	
SCORE	96	

FELTON ROAD CHARDONNAY CENTRAL OTAGO BLOCK 2

COUNTRY	New Zealand	TASTING NOTES
REGIOIN	South Island	Nice chalky lees-derived complexity, bold and attractive stone fruits as well as some tropical elements, hints of citrus and well placed oak. The acidity really rounds up the complex texture and draws succulent through the finish; nectarine and peach flavors sit deep and long in this composed and plush chardonnay. Drink now.
VINTAGE	2013	
SCORE	95	

FELTON ROAD PINOT NOIR CENTRAL OTAGO CORNISH POINT

COUNTRY	New Zealand	TASTING NOTES
REGIOIN	South Island	Dark cherries and stony earthy notes too, some chalky aromas intertwined with toasty oak spice, plenty of darker cherries and cassis, iodine, some dried herbs too. On the palate there's a plushness and depth that really makes for compelling drinking even now; the fruit builds weight and presence in effortless, balanced style, plenty of cola and cherry flavor pervades every part of the mouth, leaving an open and expansive impression at the finish. Mineral-flecked and deep through the finish. Drink now.
VINTAGE	2012	
SCORE	95	

FELTON ROAD CHARDONNAY BANNOCKBURN

COUNTRY	New Zealand	TASTING NOTES
REGIOIN	South Island	A very rich nose with plenty of nectarine, grapefruit, yellow peach and an assertive pure fruit edge. There is a strong comparison to Chablis in style here, think Droin or Raveneau, smooth lees, flinty and stony. The palate has a smooth, creamy texture, flavors of peach, nectarine and preserved lemon; a smooth, polished and stony texture, all nicely integrated, edges into more tropical fruits to close. Great wine, long and composed. Drink now.
VINTAGE	2014	
SCORE	94	