

- [The Independent Wine Monthly](#)
- [Emma Jenkins](#)

## Felton Road New Release tasting

Let me begin with a disclaimer. This is indeed a flattering review typed after an enjoyable lunch. Oh dear.

But having tasted such a stellar line-up of Felton Road's latest releases (plus some gems from the cellar), I would have to have had no sense of taste at all or be curmudgeonly in the extreme not to recognise that these were wines of varying degrees of excellence.

Blair Walter is a most charming and clearly very talented winemaker and by all accounts Nigel Greening is a passionate man. Of course, these attributes alone do not make success. The desecrated orchards of Otago bear witness to the number of charming and passionate people who have arrived into the region in the hope of making great wine but managed to make a mess of things.

However a recent tasting in Auckland, hosted by Blair, afforded an opportunity to get an in-depth look at Felton Road's wines across the vintages and varieties. I could only conclude that the Greening/Walter combination of charm, passion and innate winemaking skill has created one of the finest, (if not the finest) wineries in New Zealand.

First off was a flight of new release 2008 pinot noirs. Felton Road regarded 2008 as a fairly straightforward vintage with relatively heavy crops (albeit in its case off a pretty low base) which required more intensive green harvesting than usual. Even so the winery ended up with a 15% greater yield than average (one doubts there will be many complaints from the mailing list).

We began with the **2008 Felton Road Pinot Noir** (\$46), the wine one supposes is most representative of the house style. The expected lush and richly fragrant Otago fruit is there, as is poised acidity and fine grained tannins. Although in its infancy, developing complexity is already apparent and there is good length to the vibrant fruit. Delicious, and surely an excellent price for the quality. The **2008 Felton Road Calvert Vineyard Pinot Noir** (\$55) comes from a leased vineyard, Calvert, managed by Felton Road since 2001. Blair emphasised that Felton Road did not want to take all of the fruit from this new vineyard, not as a reflection of the quality but more an attempt to make sure he did not over stretch the capacity of winery. However he didn't want to see the fruits of viticulturist Gareth King's labour sold on the spot market, hence an agreement with Craggy Range and Pyramid Valley to share the fruit. This certainly offers wine lovers (and critics) and intriguing glimpse of the differences between house and vineyard influence should they wish to try all three wines side by side. The wine is the most distinctive in colour of the 2008 pinots with the most marked purple hue. The fruit also shows more juicy red berries than the other wines with a lovely savoury finish. It does show a little heat on the finish but as it opens up this disappears and more mineral elements emerge in the wine.

Quite firm with a hint of toasty oak (also the only wine in which the oak is apparent). The **2008 Felton Road Cornish Point Pinot Noir** (\$55) is from a vineyard that was first released in 2003 under the stand alone Cornish Point label. In 2007, it was decided that the quality of fruit and character of the vineyard was sufficient to merit release as a single vineyard FR label. It is a very aromatic wine with a spicy floral perfume. The palate is fairly light in body with delicate red fruits and lovely almost powdery fine-grained tannin. This is a very pretty wine with an elegant texture and excellent length.

The next two wines are the highly sought-after Block wines, and they show a noticeable step up in concentration and intensity, though thankfully lose none of their elegance or lightness of being with it. The **2008 Felton Road Block 3 Pinot Noir** (\$69) has a rather complex nose showing lifts of violet and smoke along with a hint of meatiness plus plenty of perfumed cherry and berry fruit. It is quite a poised and nervy wine with very impressive balance and length, with time it opens up with a lovely savoury mushroom character. The **2008 Felton Road Block 5 Pinot Noir** (\$69) follows on with plenty of intensity and perfume, hints of raspberry and chocolate though it is slightly more closed than the Block 3. It has the lovely fine-grained powdery tannins of the Cornish Point but is a more dark and intense wine over all. Again there is impressive length and balance. Young and clearly will reward time in the bottle but utterly drinkable and beautiful now.

An impressive set of wines, but there was plenty more to come. The next flight was four vintages of the Felton Road Pinot Noir: the **2007 Pinot Noir**, from a vintage Blair regards as his finest so far and generally accepted as excellent for the region as a whole. This wine was reviewed in the March 09 Independent Wine Monthly and it was fascinating to see how much tighter and closed it had become over the last 6 months. Certainly it was aromatic and dense with a rather thrilling exoticism to its profile but definitely much more closed. The **2006 Pinot Noir** was a lighter and more delicate example with some lovely forest floor emerging, not as lengthy or concentrated as the 2007 but elegant and perfumed. The **2005 Pinot Noir** is very rich, sweet and dense with great length but it was also the wine Jane and I both felt looked slightly clumsy in the flight though a number of other tasters had this as their preferred wine. From a slightly cooler vintage, the **2004 Pinot Noir** was a stunner showing a wonderful array of complex forest floor and mushroom, tomato leaf and spice. This was a lengthy and elegant wine that continued to evolve beautifully in the glass suggesting plenty of life yet.

So it was with some anticipation that we moved on to the next flight of Felton Road Pinot Noir Block 3: the **2005 Pinot Noir Block 3** showed a lot more elegance than the straight 2005 Pinot Noir, and though it was a touch spicity on the nose, there was also plenty of florals, a touch of bacon fat and a charming, poised and lengthy palate. The **2004 Pinot Noir Block 3** showed a similar array of mushroom, forest floor and bacon fat to its little brother and also lots of exotic spice. Plus a big jump in intensity. This is a seamless and wonderfully complex wine that is still very youthful; it was exciting to see it open up in the glass. The **2003 Pinot Noir Block 3** showed toasty notes with floral and herbal fruit, very pretty and smart this wine has loads of concentration and length with beautiful structure. The final wine in the flight was the **2002 Pinot Noir Block 3**, which was the first wine seen so far that was really beginning to show quite developed secondary characteristics. Plenty of berry fruit as well, this was also the

only wine to show some slightly green stalky notes in its sweetly generous palate. Lovely drinking now.

The first three flights gave a comprehensive and one must say very impressive picture of the results of the skill and fastidious approach to quality at Felton Road. The wines were united by elegance, very fine balance and complexity. They are beguiling wines that show great personality and poise. One can sometimes have a sense of the emperor's new clothes when tasting Central Otago pinot but there was none of that slightly creepy feeling when tasting these wines. The consistent deliciousness across the vintages showed that they are standalone quality wines in their own right as well as most excellent ambassadors for their region.

The final flight of wines of the tasting was the latest release of Felton Road's white varieties – chardonnay and riesling. Felton Road is the largest producer of chardonnay in Central Otago and has been refining its style over successive vintages. Two labels are now produced on a regular basis; the unoaked Elms and the main Felton Road label, a combination of stainless and oak aged wines. In suitable vintages, a Block 2 Chardonnay (of which the 2008 release is the fourth vintage) is also made. Interestingly Blair commented that while they had enough exceptional and distinctive fruit to make further chardonnay individual Block bottlings, they could not see a market for such wines, as there is so much competition from other decent chardonnays made all over NZ. Coming from such an assured and sought-after pinot noir producer, this does rather beg the question of why consumers are happy to accept one half of the NZ 'Burgundy' equation but are not interested in exploring the other?

The **2009 Felton Road Chardonnay Elms** (\$26) has pure and upfront melon and white peach fruit in a crisp and mineral style with a moreish wet stone and grapefruit finish. Very finely balanced, this is an attractive wine that somehow manages to be both succulent and austere. The next step on the ladder is the **2008 Felton Road Chardonnay** (\$32) is a taut and elegant with a small amount of new oak, around 10-15% adding creamy spicy depth; this is a very graceful, youthful wine, light-to medium bodied.

By contrast the **2008 Felton Road Chardonnay Block 2** (\$42) is a big step up in intensity and concentration, though still a very taut and linear wine. Plenty of mineral and wet stone notes alongside restrained white stone fruit, apple and citrus. This is a beautifully balanced wine that at this stage is relatively closed but I would love to see how it unfolds over the next five years or so. Overall, the trio of chardonnays were very accomplished and one must admit very, very good value for the quality and character on offer.

Felton Road is indeed a much admired winery and the final three wines of the tasting were an emphatic illustration of how small but perfectly formed is so much more attractive than large and sprawling. The **2009 Felton Road Dry Riesling** (\$26) is from gravely soils, deliciously dry (RS 4.5g/L) with lime, honeysuckle and wet stone characters. It is very lengthy and sure to just get better and better with more time in the bottle.

The **2009 Felton Road Riesling** (\$26) is quite a lot sweeter at 47g/L but matched with such knife edge acidity that it has a gloriously light and lively character. Honey, floral, marmalade and lime predominating. Surprisingly complex for such a youthful example, it finished with a pretty citrus flourish. The

**2009 Felton Road Riesling Block 1** (\$34) comes from a tiny parcel of vines on similarly heavy soils to the Blocks 3 and 5 of pinot fame. This is a complex and restrained wine, again taut and minerally with lovely elegance and with time in the glass blossomed beautifully to give a richly aromatic glimpse of what will presumably unfold with time in the bottle. Very lengthy.

As if we were not already over-faced with deliciousness, the good people of Felton Road had another five wines to lavish upon us at lunch. The **1997 Felton Road Dry Riesling** gave assurance to predictions of greatness for younger wines by retaining a clean, crisp character alongside honeyed beeswax and complex citrus fruit; the **2001 Felton Road Chardonnay** had that wonderful struck match character on the nose which unfolded into a rich yet fresh wine displaying brioche, a complex medley of apple/stone fruit and bright acidity. To accompany duck, the **2003 Felton Road Pinot Noir** and **2001 Felton Road Pinot Noir Block 3** retained structure and depth and a beautifully aromatic and complex expression of fruit and complex secondary notes. To finish, we were treated to the **2003 Felton Road Riesling Block 1**, still with plenty of fresh floral and citrus notes but now also wonderfully aromatic with honeysuckle, lime, kerosene and beeswax. Fantastic minerality and length, this was a wine to savour.

As much as anything, this tasting was a relief to us both in many ways. We often wonder if it is us alone that thinks many of the wines we taste are not as good as one would expect from the glowing release notes that accompany the bottles. And that character and individuality are being ironed out by commercial realities. Sometimes it is difficult to decide whether the glowing endorsements and huge scores handed out by other critics are for the benefit of the consumer or to find favour with the tiny and insular New Zealand wine industry.

But when you are presented by a line-up of wines such as these, it acts as a perfect exercise in palate calibration. It confirms that there really are only a small number of wines that should be rewarded by outstanding scores. This tasting confirmed that Felton Road is indeed one of New Zealand's superstar wineries, quietly going about its business, making fantastic wines that speak of sense of place much more than of winemaking technique or artifice. On reflection, consider me bought.

(prices quoted are rrp, ex Felton Road's cellar door. Some wines are available on allocation only)