



JAMES HALLIDAY

Road to glory

FELTON ROAD COULD fairly claim to be Central Otago's answer to Marlborough's Cloudy Bay. Both wineries achieved overnight fame, and have done everything right since.

Felton Road owes its existence to the vision of one-time Dunedin hotelier Stuart Elms, who pored over climate data and soil maps before selecting a site at the end of Felton Road (hence the prosaic name), Bannockburn. In 1992 he began planting the 14ha estate vineyard on sheltered, north-facing slopes, taking the process one step further by dividing it into 13 blocks differentiated by the proportion of stones and clay in the soil of each block.

The predominant variety was pinot noir, with lesser amounts of chardonnay and riesling. The first crop came in '95, while '97 was the first official vintage. Flying winemaker Blair Walter was hired, and a gravity-flow winery built into the hillside. Enter Englishman Nigel Greening, who had tasted the small amounts of Felton Road exported to the UK; so impressed was he that he purchased a property at the other end of

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Bannockburn that he named Cornish Point, planting 23 combinations of pinot noir clones and rootstocks on the 8ha vineyard.

In 2000 Elms sold Felton Road to Greening. In 2002 the winery was expanded, and along the way Felton Road leased two nearby vineyards, The Sluicings and Calvert Road. While Block 3 and Block 5 Pinot Noir are the strictly allocated flagships, Cornish Point, Calvert and the basic (if that's the right word) Felton Road Pinot Noir anchor its position as the greatest pinot producer in New Zealand. But I share Walter's view that the rieslings are entitled to equal billing, with the chardonnays only an eyelash behind.

You might think Greening and Walter would be content to bask in the reflected glory. Their marketing diary for 2009 tells you otherwise: Greening visited Dubai, Sweden, Denmark and the UK in June, Brisbane in July, and was in Hong Kong for a week in November. Walter spent June visiting all of Felton Road's smaller Asian markets, a week in July in Sydney's and Melbourne's best restaurants, and all of September in the US and Canada. I wonder how many 12,000-case top end Australian producers work as hard on their export markets.



2009 FELTON ROAD RIESLING

This wine sits between the slightly sweeter Block 1 Riesling (\$48, 96 points) and the Dry Riesling (\$37, 94 points). Bright straw green, it has a highly floral bouquet, then a juicy-sweet cloudburst of lime on the palate; the 53g per litre of residual sugar balanced to perfection by the high natural acidity; the length of the wine is exceptional. 10% alc/vol, screwcap

Rating: 95 points

Drink: to 2024

Price: \$37



2008 FELTON ROAD BLOCK 3 PINOT NOIR

I know it's aggravating that you may not be able to still find this wine in retail shops, but mark it down for next year's release or grab it if you see it on a restaurant wine list: it is far better value than many Burgundies. Alternatively, buy the standard pinot (\$70, 94 points). Deep and clear, Block 3 has wonderful drive to the bright cherry fruit of the palate; long and almost juicy, with very fine tannins, it is a wine of ultimate finesse. 14% alc/vol, screwcap

Rating: 96 points

Drink: to 2018+

Price: \$110



2008 FELTON ROAD BLOCK 2 CHARDONNAY

Here, too, there is the fall-back of the standard chardonnay (\$53, 93 points). Bright, pale green, the bouquet has white peach and grapefruit aromas that drive the long palate, providing the concession to those who choose to drink it now, but still has the fine-boned structure and intensity that is the mark of all the Felton Road chardonnays of '07 and '08, and guarantees its future. 14% alc/vol; screwcap

Rating: 95 points

Drink: to 2020

Price: \$65