



Vineyard: Calvert Vineyard, Felton Road, Central Otago

The Vertical

10 YEARS OF FELTON ROAD CALVERT VINEYARD PINOT NOIR

Several hundred metres after you turn into Felton Road, the Calvert Vineyard looms to starboard, tilting ever so gently down towards the Kawarau River. It was planted in 2001. Felton Road Wines began leasing the entire 10.2-hectare property that same year. In 2013 the winery purchased three blocks of the whole, totalling 4.6ha of pinot noir. As with all Felton Road vineyards, the vines are farmed biodynamically.

I sat down with winemaker Blair Walter to look at the last 10 years of Calvert pinots.

The warmth of the **2013** summer shone through that year's Calvert. A vivid wine, with a freshness still evident in the fruit, and savoury, tarry notes prominent towards the back. BW: "We saw the '13s as a little rustic, quite Burgundian. A departure from that fruitiness." The **2014** offered exotic scents (sumac, coriander seed), structural finesse and a little more development than the '13. BW: "There was a lovely velvety texture to the tannins." Then adding, almost to himself: "Perhaps old-fashioned? I don't think so." We both agreed the **2015** was special. Fresh florals, red fruit poise, so subtle yet so well defined. BW: "One of my favourites across all the wines that year, with the elegance and detail we're looking for." Yet another graceful number in **2016**, finely structured with a minerally seam. "Amazing consistency through these wines," I remarked. BW: "That's one of the biggest compliments I can get. You get that (consistency) with an in-depth understanding of the vineyard and knowing what you can achieve from it when a winemaker has settled on an approach." I thought the **2017** had an old-fashioned bent – darker fruit, fleshy in texture. BW: "A low cropping year and a cooler year. Quite brooding and sulky." The **2018** I found a little awkward – aromatically reticent, a red wave in the mouth, a dramatic finish. Walter described a vintage of wild extremes: "In January I started thinking it might be like '03 in Europe, but then we had the coldest February on record." Warm and embraceable was the **2019**: red cherry, blood orange and that Calvert character of umami savouriness which gives all the wines a serious side. BW: "An average growing season, but which finished warm. We had to get the fruit off quickly." The **2020** Covid vintage was cooler in Central compared with points north. This contributed to a more robust structure, with relatively feisty tannins. BW: "Un vin de garde." He described the **2021** as "precise and detailed, the product of a typical growing season. We were all big fans." That Calvert typicité – light stepping fruit and savoury element – came through. It was backed up by the ravishing **2022** – dark fruit, a touch of soy, fine bones, all class. BW: "Beautiful florality – when that jumps out of the glass, it's a great vintage."

TE WHENUA CENTRAL OTAGO TASTING PINOT NOIR & CHARDONNAY

Te Whenua's 2024 Central Otago tastings took place at the Felton Road winery on 21-22 March. Thanks to Felton Road for providing a great venue and assistance at a busy time (fruit was coming off the vine the whole time I was there).

The current-release pinot noir blind tasting consisted of 61 wines. Most of these (35 to be precise) represented the 2022 vintage. Not a year of extremes or curveballs, it certainly spawned some outstanding wine.

The stylistic diversity on display was remarkable, though not surprising. It is the continuation of a trend we've seen for some time now, a natural evolution for a region of disparate pockets and enquiring, open-minded winegrowers.

At the *Te Whenua* tasting, 20 wines gained selection to The List. That is a success rate of roughly 33 per cent, the most of any pinot region so far. Of the 20, 12 were from the 2022 vintage. Also worth noting: the majority of the wines on The List were made with fruit farmed on certified organic vineyards. Central Otago leads the country in having close to 30 per cent of its vineyard area certified organic.

FELTON ROAD'S "LIST" WINES:

Felton Road Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2022

Of the four Felton Road pinots to make The List, I thought this the most Burgundian in flavour profile. High, trilling red fruit notes – cherry, pomegranate – flood the palate. A hint of reduction is an enhancement. The acidity and tannin structure are like a fine wrapping. A precise, charming wine.

Felton Road Calvert Pinot Noir 2022

Gorgeous floral scents, a little soy on the side. In the mouth, red and dark fruit notes play alongside a blood orange negroni-like character. A line of fine tannin. There's a settled, almost precocious harmony to this wine – a house with everything in order for what will be a long life.

Felton Road Cornish Point Pinot Noir 2022

Lovely perfume – deep florals. Fruit of many shades, bright red cherry and darker sour cherry prominent. Again, a sensational structure. It comes at you with a generous, natural, warm-hearted embrace. So easy to love. A long, juicy, lengthy finish.

Felton Road MacMuir Pinot Noir 2022

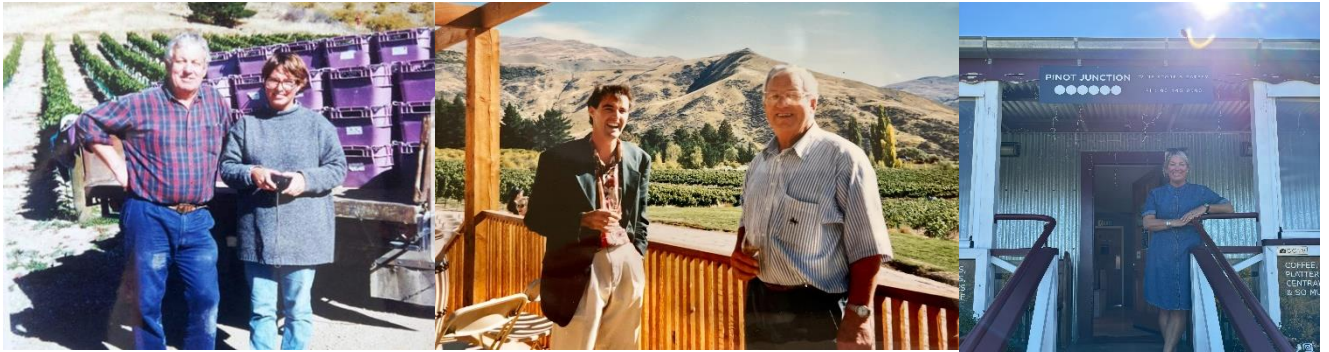
This is glorious – an absolute banger. Different shades of red and dark, with a low cherry seam. A saturating quality is enhanced by a bottomless quality to the fruit, such is the depth. Acidity and tannins are in sync and in tight together, dictating shape in fine brush strokes. A long savoury tail.

Felton Road Bannockburn Chardonnay 2022

This is beautiful. The fruit is the hero – citrus and stonefruit notes, underpinned by a *sotto voce* line of flintiness. It plays out delicately and deliciously, helped by fresh, lively acidity. Great length of flavour.

Felton Road Block 2 Chardonnay 2022

Chamomile and Mirabelle compote scents. The palate is an essay in harmony and unity. A fine acid backbone gives lift and direction. The fruit has subtle allure (and yet speaks plainly); there is an attractive textural fleshiness. The finish is long and lovely.



Stewart Elms and daughter Kate at Felton Road; Blair Walter and Stewart Elms; Kate Barnett at Pinot Junction

THE ELMS OF CENTRAL

It was a beautiful gesture. One which said a lot about the mutual respect and affection that joined two men from different generations, brought together by a great wine adventure. Following the death of Stewart Elms in Wanaka in August last year, Felton Road's Blair Walter learned he was included in the will. Elms, the visionary founder of Felton Road, had bequeathed to Walter 12 bottles from his cellar. Walter was free to choose his dozen and shared with *Te Whenua* some of what he thought he might select: "An Ausone '37 – how could you turn that down? – Haut-Brion '21 and '53, Pétrus '53, Latour '57, Mouton '71, Yquem '66..." Amazing, was my response. But no Burgundy? Walter explained that Elms began collecting wines when he worked in the liquor trade, owning and running the City Hotel in Dunedin in the '60s and '70s. Back then, good Burgundy didn't come into New Zealand.

Stewart Elms led a remarkable New Zealand life. He understood good wine, he understood business and most importantly, he was a man who got things done. He deserves to be remembered as one of the heroes of the New Zealand wine story.

The Felton Road chapter came quite late in the arc of that life. Elms went back to school to learn about oenology in 1990 when he was 55 years old. At Lincoln he met a young Blair Walter. Some years later, after having planted the first vines in Bannockburn in 1992, Elms asked Walter to become Felton Road's first winemaker. At the same time, he offered him a stake in the business.

What's important here is that, despite all the newness and unknowns of that pioneering time, Elms did not put a foot wrong. Everything at Felton Road, from site selection, to the planting of the vines, to the elm tree logo and typefaces (which have remained as they were), to the engaging of key staff, was carried out astutely.

Stewart Elms sold Felton Road to Nigel Greening for \$8 million in 2000. Speaking at his funeral, Walter said Elms initially regretted the sale, then came to accept it and became proud of his achievement. Many regard the sale as the trigger for what became the Central Otago pinot planting stampede.

A family wine connection continues in the region. Kate Barnett, the youngest of Stewart and Kay Elms' four daughters, last year opened Pinot Junction, a wine shop and eatery in Cromwell's Heritage Precinct. A great selection of bottles (yes, of course Felton Road is there); lunches, brunches and platters; a beautiful spot above the Kawarau River. During *Te Whenua's* recent visit, she remembered her father: "He was a complete perfectionist who so backed himself. He didn't lack confidence. He often came across as arrogant or aloof but he was neither - his strength was building beautiful things. We all adored him and are very proud of his legacy"