



Exploring the terroir and stylistic evolution of Central Otago Pinot Noir

Previously defined by its power, Pinot Noir from Central Otago has become more elegant and nuanced. Anne Krebiehl MW explores the stylistic differences between its subregions and recommends 20 top bottles to try.



There was a time when you could easily pick a Central Otago Pinot Noir out of a blind line up. The bold, muscular and ripe wine would always be the ticket, its intensity and power reflecting the stark beauty of the landscape.

How things change. With less extraction, less oak and earlier harvests, the wines have seen a reset that allows fruit and provenance to shine – while revealing the sometimes subtle, sometimes marked differences between [Central Otago](#)'s distinct subregions.

With just 2,054ha of vines, Central Otago on New Zealand's South Island represents just 4.9% of the country's vineyards, according to the *New Zealand Wine Vineyard Report 2023*. But it is home to 29.2% of the country's [Pinot Noir](#) plantings.

This means that Pinot Noir takes up just over 80% of Central Otago's vineyards, set against snow-capped peaks and glacial lakes.

The region's pristine air translates into some of the world's most intense sunshine, which explains the once much punchier wine style that initially put Central Otago on the map. Grapes were harvested at plump maximum ripeness and high potential alcohol, which was then underlined in the winery by vigorous extraction of tannins and ageing in small, often new oak barrels.

An evolution of style

But sensibilities have changed. Earlier harvests now prize aromatics over alcohol, while both extraction and new oak are dialled back. Jen Parr, winemaker at Valli Wine in Gibbston, says: ‘The concept of ripeness has changed, not only for Valli but for most of us.’ Less is now more and red-fruited, floral aromas are more common than black cherry or dark-fleshed plum.

‘Twenty years ago when you did not do a punch down every four hours, there was something wrong with you,’ quips Rudi Bauer, co-owner and winemaker at Quartz Reef in Bendigo.

His much younger colleague Brian Shaw, co-owner and winemaker at Wild Irishman in Alexandra, explains how gently he now extracts.

‘2019 was the first year we really pulled back. We now just keep the cap wet with a watering can, and – if we can handle it – we will give the ferment just one punch down over the entire time.’

Duncan Forsyth of Mount Edward sums it up when he says: ‘The way we have evolved stylistically is that these elements like tannin and acid are coming at you anyway. We now have less extraction and aim to have an elegant, supple, soft representation of these vineyards.’

This new, more restrained approach allows us drinkers to taste real differences between Central Otago’s subregions.

From the cool Gibbston Valley, via warm Bannockburn, to arid Alexandra in the south, along either side of the Clutha river in Lowburn, Pisa and Bendigo, up to more temperate Wanaka in the north.

Not forgetting the tiny offshoot of Waitaki Valley, which links Central Otago and the South Island’s eastern coast.

Let’s take a look at these subregions from north to south...



Wanaka

On vineyards sloping towards and surrounding picturesque Lake Wānaka, a glacial freshwater lake and New Zealand's fourth-largest, this cooler subregion gets 600mm of annual rainfall.

Vines grow on a mixture of schist-based soils, moraines and clays, at altitudes up to 400m. The lake acts as a moderating influence.

'Wanaka is not as hot, not as cold, not as dry,' as the other subregions of Central Otago, says Nick Mills of Rippon Vineyard. 'Wanaka is the most temperate climate of Central Otago. Precision and articulation of tannin are the calling cards of this valley,' he adds.

Bendigo

These west and north-west facing slopes on the eastern shore of Lake Dunstan are some of the warmest vineyard sites in Central Otago. 'Sun-drenched' is how Misha Wilkinson (*below*) of Misha's Vineyard puts it, with the vines basking in every last ray of sunshine until sunset.

Since vineyards slope down to the lakeshore, both water and cold air drain freely on very rocky, schistous soils. Vines at around 200m at the lake shore are harvested three to four weeks before those higher up at around 400m.

Both quartz and calcium carbonate seams crop up on these hillsides. The soils create structured Pinot Noirs with firm tannins that enable these wines to age and evolve – in fact, they are better with bottle age.

Gibbston

This region along the Kawarau Gorge extending east of Queenstown is 'the highest, wettest and coldest subregion of Central Otago', says Shaw of Wild Irishman.

Vines root in loess, loams and gravels on top of schist at altitudes between 300m and 480m. They get 550-600mm of rain per year. Gibbston is probably the most distinct Central Otago subregion in character, with vividly red-fruited, tender, translucent yet expressive wines.

Fine, tea-like tannins and floral, peppery overtones mean Gibbston-grown Pinots are some of the most perfumed and aromatic. 'Gibbston is all about fragrance,' concludes Parr of Valli Wines.

Cromwell, Lowburn & Pisa

Extending north from Cromwell on the western shore of Lake Dunstan, Lowburn and Pisa sites are varied. Some are in the valley on deeper soils that have been farmed for a long time; others are on slopes of up to 350m.

The vines root in a mix of silts, loams, with quartz, calcium carbonate, schist and sandstone. 'The climate is severe,' explains Yoshiaki Sato of Sato Wines. 'Cold air always runs down from the mountain.'

'But we are facing east, so we warm up quickly in the morning, between 45 minutes and an hour earlier than Bendigo [across Lake Dunstan]. In the afternoon it is the opposite. We get less of the intense sunlight,' he adds.

Fine tannins, clarity and exquisite brightness run through these nervy, translucent wines.

Bannockburn

Deeper soils – of loam, clay, silt, gravel, loess and even clay on top of schist bedrock – are a distinguishing feature of Bannockburn. Meanwhile its climate is the warmest in Central Otago.

It extends south of Cromwell along the Kawarau Gorge. It is the quality of the tannins that distinguishes Bannockburn, uniting ripeness with density and finesse.

Yes, there is power in these wines, but it is controlled and elegant rather than punchy.

Alexandra

This is Central Otago's most southerly subregion along the Clutha River. Shaw of Wild Irishman notes: 'Alexandra is the hottest and coldest place in New Zealand – it is very continental.'

The dramatic temperature shifts here see the highest day and coldest night temperatures. With just 300-350mm of rain per year, it is also the driest.

The vineyards, much lower-lying at around 150-200m, grow mostly on alluvial silts and sandy gravels, again on schist bedrock. The wines show a different, more elastic tannin structure, with vivid juiciness and energetic fruit.

Waitaki Valley

This tiny subregion is really nothing more than an outpost, some 2.5 hours' drive north-east from Cromwell in North Otago.

Here there are just 59ha of vines rooting in limestone. The climate is cool, even marginal, and frost is always a risk. The coolness means that bunch weights are lower and that harvests can last into May.

Everything here is fraught with risk, but the wines are delicate yet intense expressions of Pinot Noir with red-fruited depth, vivid tension and beguiling aromatics.

Valli's Parr says: 'Making Waitaki wines is the wildest ride of my career.'

Central Otago: recent vintages

2022: Sufficient rain and warm, dry conditions in the growing season spelled some higher yields. But fruit was healthy and beautifully balanced.

2021: A splendid growing season with a coolish start but fine, dry harvest and exquisite and healthy fruit. These wines will hit the UK later this year.

2020: A cool season in Central Otago with some poor flowering, so Bendigo and Bannockburn saw lower yields. But the wines from the Covid vintage are beautiful.

2019: Poor flowering, caused by dampness in spring, spelled concentrated fruit that ripened well with sufficient temperature and water.

2018: After the hottest growing season ever, harvest in Central Otago was very early and the wines seem more developed than others at the same age, already showing clear evolution.

2022 FELTON ROAD PINOT NOIR BLOCK 5

Tasted by: [Anne Krebiehl MW](#) (at Spotlight on Central Otago Pinot Noir Tasting, 20 Feb 2024)

Part of **Exploring the terroir and stylistic evolution of Central Otago Pinot Noir**

Drinking Window: 2026 - 2036

Rose-scented intensity plays on a creamy and fragrant nose. More air brings highlights of redcurrant juiciness. The palate is bright, beautifully dense, with fine, tart red fruit enfolded in a silky web of ever-so-slightly astringent tannins, dusty but so fine. A serene display of pure, tart, red fruit, profound, tender, superbly aromatic and elegant. The finesse of Bannockburn is at its height here, from a clay-rich seam running through this block.