



Jancis Robinson

21 March 2023

## Central Otago – Pinotland



*New Zealand's southernmost wine region has so much more to offer than its increasingly compelling Pinot Noir.*

Sunny 'Central', as New Zealanders call it, has been utterly free of the effects of Cyclone Gabrielle on its 2023 harvest. When I spent a couple of days there last month one of the region's 140 wine growers confessed to 'survivor guilt'. Many of these growers have such small landholdings that their wines are made at one of the contract wineries such as the Central Otago Wine Company run by Dean Shaw and co-founded by actor Sam Neill of Two Paddocks.

Looking at a map you might think the region too far south to ripen grapes, but the vineyards are so well protected by spectacular mountain ranges that you'd be wrong. This is the country's only wine region with a semi-continental as opposed to maritime climate so the growing season is relatively short – not a great problem for the dominant grape variety Pinot Noir, although snow arrived as early as 10 April last year and even last month, as harvest approached, there were little white patches on top of the mountains. Nights can be cool even when days are hot.

The early pioneers planted vines in the 1980s and then there was a boom between the mid 1990s and the mid 2000s. Outsiders such as LVMH (Northburn, for the Cloudy Bay label), Edmond de Rothschild of Ch Clarke (Akarua, for a luxury lodge) and the American Foley wine group (Mount Difficulty) have all moved in, but the really big companies have stayed out, presumably deterred by the much more modest yields than Marlborough Sauvignon can deliver.

Another distinguishing feature of the region is that it has not been buffeted by the recent changes in wine producer ownership that seem so prevalent elsewhere in New Zealand. But well-heeled incomers such as the prominent American investor Peter Thiel who has acquired a big chunk of lakeshore land on the beautiful Lake Wanaka have pushed up local land prices. Tourism is very, very important here, New Zealand's ski country and birthplace of commercial bungee jumping.

The region was so focused on Pinot Noir during the boom planting years, when Chardonnay was unfashionable, that there is now a shortage of Chardonnay. The white burgundy variety currently constitutes just 3% of all plantings in Central Otago but such wines as are made can be very impressive. Central Otago sparkling wine and aromatic whites can be excellent too. (Several prominent winemakers such as Paul Pujol of Prophet's Rock and Olly Masters of Misha's Vineyard were trained in Alsace and are especially interested in Pinot Gris, Riesling and Gewürztraminer.)

While 2017 and 2020 were relatively cool years, the summers of 2018, 2022 and 2023 have been so hot that I imagine growers are looking ahead for useful alternatives to the relatively delicate Pinot Noir. While some Central Pinot Noirs can be rather sweet fruit bombs (that need acidification in warm years), what I appreciate about the most successful examples is that they are not copies of Burgundy but have their own style: quite fruity but with lovely tannins, refreshment and some finesse.

Irrigation is widespread. The relatively dry climate ('not like Oregon where it can start raining in autumn and carry on through winter,' according to Pujol) encourages organic and some biodynamic practices and arch BD believer Rudi Bauer of Quartz Reef assured me that Central can boast the country's highest proportion of organic growers: 25% as opposed to a national average of 7%. (New Zealand has a very high proportion, 96%, of its vineyard signed up to its Sustainable Winegrowing certification scheme, but its requirements are not the most demanding.)

Organiser of my trip Steve Smith MW is a trained scientist and has some doubts about organic practices but has become a fervent convert to regenerative viticulture. He argues that New Zealand is uniquely placed to put its eggs in a regenerative basket because its soils are so young, so they have not become denatured as so many European soils have, and the country enjoys consistent rainfall so avoids the trap of emitting carbon when soils dry out. (He made this point just before the arrival of Cyclone Gabrielle in his native Hawke's Bay.)

Another distinguishing mark of Central Otago is the sense of community there. It's quite an isolated region, a two-hour flight south of Auckland, which presumably promotes this.

## Misha's Vineyard



Left to right: Olly Masters, Misha and Andy Wilkinson and Michelle Dacombe at their tasting room in Cromwell

Misha and Andy Wilkinson arrived in Central Otago from Singapore about 20 years ago determined to find a frost-free, west-facing site with free-draining soils on which to plant about 10 ha (25 acres) of vines. They ended up on an incredibly rocky slope right down to the road that runs along the eastern shore of Lake Dunstan (pictured at the top of this article) that had to be painstakingly cleared for planting and is so steep that one section of it is known as the Ski Slope. The grapes at the top of the vineyard ripen a full three weeks after the Pinot Noir vines at the bottom. But this stretch of Bendigo with its significantly



low level of organic matter was approved so strongly for Pinot Noir by Richard Smart that they have ended up clearing and planting 26 ha (64 acres) – so far. They had to pump irrigation water up from the lake and yields average only about 4.5 tonnes/ha.



Like so many wine growers all over the world, the Wilkinsons have found it difficult to recruit pickers. Like some of their peers, they have found retirees can be willing to help out. Thinking laterally, because they are not blessed with ample staff accommodation, they advertised in *Motor Caravanner*. Below is one of their more senior pickers.

Olly Masters, a celebrated winemaker from Martinborough related to Helen Masters of Ata Rangi, has made Misha's wines with great competence since 2006. He admitted he would rather like to make a Central Otago Chardonnay. Misha's viticulturist is American, Michelle Dacombe, ex Felton Road.

In her past life, Misha herself developed strong marketing skills but alas the UK does not benefit from them. The Wilkinsons concentrate on the Asian markets with which they were already so familiar before they arrived in New Zealand.

### **Misha's Vineyard, The High Note Pinot Noir 2020 Central Otago 16+**

*Blend from various parcels.*

**Transparent crimson. Sweet black-cherry note. Very gentle powdery tannins, good acidity. Pretty youthful.**

Drink 2024 – 2030 NZ\$48 producer's website

### **Misha's Vineyard, The High Note Pinot Noir 2017 Central Otago 16.5**

**Transparent garnet. Subtle, sinewy fruit with marked acidity and finesse. A hint of liquorice. Rather atypical for Central Otago? Very long.**

Drink 2021 – 2027

### **Misha's Vineyard, The High Note Pinot Noir 2014 Central Otago 16.5**

**Pale garnet. Quite a fruity nose still but some delicacy on the palate. Great balance for current drinking.**

Drink 2018 – 2028

### **Misha's Vineyard, Verismo Pinot Noir 2016 Central Otago 17**

*Current vintage. From three specific blocks given special care including a high-elevation block planted with clone 5, Abel on the lakeside and 777 halfway up.*

**Subtle, quite delicate, and, yes, there really is liquorice as promised. Really polished, though it has obviously seen more sunshine than a burgundy. Very clean finish. Actually tastes transparent!**

Drink 2022 – 2030 NZ\$85 producer's website

### **Misha's Vineyard, Verismo Pinot Noir 2013 Central Otago 16.5**

**Leafy and lively nose. Real grip! A tad more brutal than the 2016.**

Drink 2021 – 2028

### **Misha's Vineyard, Verismo Pinot Noir 2010 Central Otago 17**

**Subtle, evolved nose. More concentrated than the 2016. Rich with liquorice notes. Firm still with some meatiness. Fresh. Still some fine tannins!**

Drink 2017 – 2027

**Misha's Vineyard, The Starlet Sauvignon Blanc 2021 Central Otago 16.5**

**Water white. Quite typical New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc pungent nose. But it has richness and texture on the palate that's almost like a Pessac-Léognan (which winemaker Olly Masters is aiming at). Long and distinctive.**

Drink 2022 – 2031 NZ\$32 producer's website

**Misha's Vineyard, The Starlet Sauvignon Blanc 2010 Central Otago 16.5**

**Pale greenish straw. Nose has lost its youthful freshness and is now almost like an aged Riesling! Strong lime notes and real follow-through. Some apparent sweetness and real individuality. Certainly not dead.**

Drink 2012 – 2025

**Misha's Vineyard, Lyric Riesling 2012 Central Otago 16**

*Dry style made not every year.*

**Not much nose but clean, fresh, zesty aged Riesling notes without any oiliness. Just a little Eden Valley-like toastiness. Chewy finish. 13%**

Drink 2015 – 2023

**Misha's Vineyard, Limelight Riesling 2021 Central Otago 16 ++**

*Made every year because it's what Central Otago does well and there's demand. Their most popular wine. RS 28–35 g/l.*

**Medium lime aroma. Off dry and embryonic. Really quite simple at present but promises depth and longevity and more interest. Very firm spine. 10.5%**

Drink 2024 – 2032

**Misha's Vineyard, Limelight Riesling 2011 Central Otago 17**

**Pale green-gold. Not that aromatic. Marked sweetness is beautifully integrated. Lightly floral and with no direct counterpart in Germany but a very good wine in its own right. A charmer. 11.5%**

Drink 2015 – 2026

**Misha's Vineyard, Dress Circle Pinot Gris 2021 Central Otago 17**

**RS 4.5 g/l ..... but tastes more! Because of the alcohol? Rich and intense and Alsace-like. Clean as a whistle and lots of flavour there. 14%**

Drink 2023 – 2029 NZ\$32 producer's website

**Misha's Vineyard, Dress Circle Pinot Gris 2015 Central Otago 16.5**

**Round and slightly oily. I could do with a little more acid. But it's certainly fresh with grip. And length. Really intense.**

Drink 2018 – 2026

**Misha's Vineyard, The Gallery Gewürztraminer 2021 Central Otago 16.5**

**Lychees and rose petals but with real grunt underneath. True, pretty varietal wine, with a dry finish. Good stuff!**

Drink 2023 – 2029 NZ\$35 producer's website

**Misha's Vineyard, The Cadenza Late Harvest Gewürztraminer 2022 Central Otago 16.5**

*Cane cut and it's sometimes picked in June. We see a picture of vineyard manager Michelle Dacombe shovelling snow off netted Gewurz prior to harvest. The only wine they foot-tread and basket-press. They make it every year to serve at their wine dinners in Asia. RS 121 g/l.*

Very opulent nose. Soft and rich with rose-petal flavours sprinkled in. There's evidence that this wine lasts well!

Drink 2024 –2030

\* \* \* \* \*