

ANDREW JEFFORD



Pinot gazing

What is it about Pinot? No other grape inspires as much attention. It's both nerd-magnet and fashion doll; it fuels flights of rhetoric and gigabytes of research data; it famously chastens winemaking ambitions and accounts for more wasted consumer cash than any rival variety. And it's a conference darling. I've just got back from a giant shed on Wellington's waterfront after three days of intense Pinot-gazing. Not once did anyone say to me 'Why are we wasting so much time on this over-rated, under-coloured wine weed?'

From a Darwinian perspective, all this is justified: Pinot is the Granddaddy. Pinot Meunier, Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc are all genetically close or identical to Pinot Noir, while its long medieval relationship with a puzzlingly plain Croatian immigrant called Gouais Blanc produced 16 offspring, including Chardonnay, Aligoté, Auxerrois, Gamay and Melon de Bourgogne, the Muscadet grape. A subsequent holiday fling on the Cape with Cinsault has given us Pinotage. That significant fecundity alone would command respect, but I suspect it's also orchestrated more wine epiphanies than any other variety. Lucky New Zealand, then. After years of laborious efforts with more or less herbaceous Cabernet and Merlot, it suddenly discovered what should perhaps have been obvious from the start: the country is natural Pinot territory. The best wines have become southern-hemisphere references in little more than a decade.

The conference began with an excruciating keynote speech by Kevin Roberts of Saatchi & Saatchi. 'Your iPod

is your best friend,' he told us. (I don't own one.) 'You make luurve to her, you lick her.' (Er, no thanks; I prefer humans.) 'Mysstery. Irrresisssttable.' (Late middle-aged man drooling in a mock-French accent: profoundly resistable.) 'If I were you, I'd be tweeting crazy about what's hot, Noir and exclusive.' This drivel – dual-promo for his risible book *Lovemarks* and Saatchi's own irrelevant TV ads – was neatly deflated by Nigel Greening of Felton Road later in the week. 'No Facebook, no tweets: just do the basics. Not mystery but connection.'

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After this painful start, the conference could only get better – and did. The theme was sustainability, and if there was anyone still clinging to the full armoury of chemical warfare in the vineyards, they kept quiet, as the achievements of organics and biodynamics were vaunted, and as panellist after panellist urged the hesitant to push on for certification.

The week's most striking statistic for me, though, belonged to the green end of conventional farming. New Zealand's Sustainable Winegrowing programme has achieved a 72% reduction in toxic insecticide use and a 62% reduction in toxic fungicide over a decade among those producers in the programme – which means 85% of the country's vineyards.

That's a fjord of missing chemicals. Can any other nation boast as much?

Most articulate of all were the wines themselves. The week climaxed, as it must, with a blind 'New Zealand versus The Rest' tasting from which California (the light-framed but refined 2006 Isabelle from Au Bon Climat), Oregon (the pure, perfumed 2006 Elk Cove Vineyard Reserve) and Felton Road's 2007 Block 5, a cherry orchard of a wine, emerged bathed in glory. The three Burgundies (a dry, overly animal 2006 Camille Giroud Chambertin, a noble but charmless '06 Clos de la Maréchale Nuits-St-Georges from Mugnier and a grim, Barolo-like '06 Volnay from Comte Armand) all disappointed. But it's Burgundy, so cue universal shrugging of shoulders and the usual set of excuses. They would have been better with food. Wouldn't they?

The exhibitor tastings outside the conference sessions illustrated just how much progress New Zealand has made with this variety. I have well over 40 notes from which enthusiasm cascades, but two must suffice. The 2006 Bell Hill (grown in a former North Canterbury lime quarry) had an enticingly unshowy aroma which balanced berry fruits and spring-warmed earth; the flavours were soft, fleshy and mouthcoating, pushing on through an increasingly energetic middle palate to a discreetly spicy finish. It's a finely crafted Pinot of great classicism. I love the wines which Hätsch Kalberer teases from the clay soils of Fromm's Clayvin Vineyard in Marlborough. The 2007 is aromatically delicate and subtly layered, moving from cherrystone and kirsch to a warmer, more glowing style of fruit. The palate is shapely, warm, full; again that soft glow. Marlborough Pinot can be stringy and grassy; here, though, the climate has given the wine an inner tension and restraint which, combined with depth of fruit, glycerol and an unapologetic tannin structure, makes a mouthfillingly complex whole. **D**

Andrew Jefford has just completed a year in Australia researching terroir. He will soon be re-locating in southern France

WHAT ANDREW'S BEEN DRINKING THIS MONTH...

SPANISH FLING DOWN UNDER

In Australia, few live by Pinot alone. How about Tempranillo? Two of my favourites are deeply contrasting. **Mt Majura's 2008** has the classic freshness and impact of Canberra: a tenor whose power is preponderantly aromatic

(orange blossom and jasmine).

Gemtree's 2008 Luna Roja from McLaren Vale is plumper and softer, lushly textured with true natural balance and easy articulation, subsiding gently towards a warm, glowing finish,