

MARTINBOROUGH MAGIC

JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

Less than an hour's drive from New Zealand's capital city Wellington lies Martinborough, home to some of the country's most obsessive winemakers.

BY JANE SKILTON, MW | PHOTOS COURTESY OF WINES OF MARTINBOROUGH

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Part of the greater Wairarapa region, the history of Martinborough is well documented. The first vines were planted in 1980 by pioneers who were encouraged by a government soil science report that found the region had many similarities to Burgundy. The first four wineries, Ata Rangi, Chifney, Dry River and Martinborough Vineyard, were established by winemakers who believed they should be able to make outstanding Pinot Noir in the as yet unproven region. At a 25 Year retrospective, photographs were shown of these original founders, young, fresh-faced New Zealanders who, with very little capital to invest, used a combination of Kiwi ingenuity and gritty determination to start producing wine.

As the crow flies, Martinborough is only 80km from Wellington but to get there means navigating the impressive Rimutaka Range whose highest peak, Mt Matthews, stands almost 1,000 metres. The Rimutakas have a two-fold effect; they act as a buffer from Wellington's notoriously strong winds and provide shelter, allowing Martinborough to bask in a rain shadow. Martinborough is the driest wine region in the North Island and though the district is prone to spring frosts (wind machines are not an uncommon sight), once the weather settles the region enjoys one of the longest growing seasons.

Although a number of different grape varieties are grown, the reputation of Martinborough is founded squarely on its ability to produce some of NZ's best Pinot Noir. While it contains less than three per cent of the country's vineyard area, the combination of relatively old vines, challenging climate and complex soils are a winning combination.

Paul Mason is a winemaker at Martinborough Vineyards, one of the original founding four. Did he think Martinborough was right to focus on Pinot?

"In my opinion, Martinborough is perfectly suited to making world class Pinot with the soils and climate we have here. It doesn't mean we can't continue to produce varieties like Riesling and Chardonnay and in terms of red wines continue with Syrah. But Pinot Noir has been and should continue to be the biggest driver."

In contrast to lush, more exotically fruited Pinots produced in other NZ regions, Martinborough's are distinctive because of their firm structure and ripe yet definite tannins. Less showy when young, they really need a few years in bottle to show the complexity of which they are capable. Tastings of older vintages are proof that in the best vintages, wines from good producers can easily take a decade to show at their best >

A Special Place

Many vineyards lie only a stone's throw from Martinborough township but as the demand for viticultural land has increased, some newer entrants have chosen to explore the subregion of Te Muna which lies about 5km to the south.

Te Muna means 'special place' and was the first choice of Larry McKenna when he sought to establish a new winery. Although originally from South Australia, McKenna has been a long-time Martinborough resident and is convinced of the region's potential; there was no other place considered when he founded his Escarpment Winery. Fascinated by Burgundy and the notion of expressing individual terroirs, McKenna focusses on single vineyard wines. Each year he releases four different Pinots, the flagship Kupe bottling being the most sought after.

When Steve Smith MW, Craggy Range's Director of Wine and Viticulture wanted to plant a Pinot Noir vineyard, he too chose Te Muna. A trained viticulturist, Smith saw the region as possessing that special 'something' needed to produce fine Pinot.

On a visit to Craggy's Te Muna vineyard in April 2013, I asked Smith to explain the why he was so excited by this area.

"It is all down to the soil. The region was formed when the Huangarua River shifted position some 100,000 to 300,000 years ago. The soils are composed of volcanic rock and ash and being highly corrosive, this ash breaks down the greywacke soil, slowly corroding it whilst oxidising the minerals. This action releases nutrients, contributing to the complexity of the soils. In some places we have soils 30 to 40 metres deep, so although this is one of the driest areas in North Island, the structure of the soil means less irrigation is needed.

"And don't underestimate the influence of the climate. Springs are dramatic here and we can have cold southerlies one day and lovely warm weather the very next. The climate pushes the development of the vines later so bunch sizes are smaller. I used to think the Awatere Valley was the toughest environment to grow grapes but now I think it is here. But having said that, once settled weather sets in, everything is good."

Established and First Class

Ata Rangi, Dry River, Escarpment, Craggy Range, Martinborough Vineyards



Craggy Range has been producing Te Muna Pinot Noir for 10 years. It was clear to see an evolution in both complexity and depth as the vines became older with the most recent releases particularly impressive, showing a savoury, yet perfumed quality with enough density and weight to make them good cellaring propositions.

Big Sky Wines is one of the newer wineries to settle in Te Muna, and is making exciting Pinot Noir. Owned by Katherine Jacobs and Jeremy Corban, why did they chose Te Muna?

"We lived in Martinborough for five years and could see that Te Muna Road was the new future for Martinborough wine. The higher elevation, which means the harvest is often as much as ten days later than the town vineyards and the amount of wind and the diurnal temperature variation is

reflected in the fact the grapes spend longer on the vines and develop more complex flavours, more tannin ripeness and more structural components. Te Muna Road wines have a complexity and vibrancy that will just improve as the vines gather more age".

Small, Yet Perfectly Formed

Although Martinborough was one of the first regions to plant Pinot Noir and has proved it can make world class wines, in recent times its reputation has been slightly overshadowed by emerging regions such as Central Otago and Waipara. This may be in part down to its remote location and challenging climate, which has made it less attractive to large wine companies looking for extensive plantings. As a result it often flies under the radar, a quiet achiever not a



New Zealand has carved an enviable reputation for producing outstanding Pinot Noir and Martinborough is right at the front of the quality charge. Although quantities are small, and as a result the wines are never inexpensive, they do offer amazing value for the quality. The ability to produce complex wines, capable of cellaring, is surely an indicator of a world-class wine region. Martinborough ticks all the boxes.

great wine. This wide eclectic mix of individuals all bring something different and special to the region and its wines."

Each November, the small town hosts Toast Martinborough, a wine festival that celebrates the region's wines. The compact size of the town means visitors are able to walk from vineyard to vineyard sampling local foods served alongside Martinborough wines.

New and Exciting

Kusuda, Big Sky, Cambridge Road, The Elder Pinot

Most wineries feature some sort of musical entertainment and, providing the weather gods turn on a warm spring day, festivalgoers are in for a treat.

Tickets sell out almost immediately so it's worth keeping an eye on the website at www.toastmartinborough.co.nz.

If your travels take you to NZ, Martinborough makes for a great weekend destination. There are a number of small, boutique hotels and homestays and the town centre has several excellent yet low-key restaurants and cafes. In the heart of the town lies the Martinborough Wine Centre where you can taste and purchase a wide range of wines, maps etc. and get helpful advice on possible itineraries. Visit www.martinboroughwinecentre.co.nz.



gregarious performer.

But perhaps the smaller scale is also Martinborough's greatest strength. It has never been home to the bigger players but instead is made up of

smaller, quality-focussed individuals. Paul Mason summed it up well.

"The village is full of such a diverse range of winegrowers that all are driven by the same goal — to make

FACING PAGE

ALTHOUGH SLIGHTLY OVERSHADOWED BY EMERGING REGIONS, MARTINBOROUGH WAS ONE OF THE FIRST REGIONS TO BE PLANTED WITH PINOT NOIR | THIS PAGE, TOP | GRAPE PICKERS RETURN WITH BASKETS FULL OF FRUIT