



Pinot Pioneers

New Zealand's Central Otago takes winemaking to extremes

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BY ERICA DUECY

➤ NEW ZEALAND'S CENTRAL OTAGO REGION IS A MOUNTAINOUS outpost on the country's south island and the adventure-sports capital of the country — and, some would argue, of the world. It also happens to be gaining a reputation for exceptional pinot noirs, despite its extreme southerly location and challenging climate, where midsummer snows are not uncommon.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the winemakers here are a self-selecting group of hard-core outdoor enthusiasts, driven to take chances on the mountain and in the vineyard. Some of the area's best cliff-hucking winemakers include Rudi Bauer of Quartz Reef Wines, Nick Mills of Rippon, Blair Walter at Felton Road, Nadine Cross at Peregrine Wines, Duncan Forsyth of Mount Edward, and Matt Dicey at Mt. Difficulty. "People here are willing to follow their vision and dreams, at whatever cost," Bauer says of his cohorts.*

Four of New Zealand's best ski areas — Coronet Peak, the Remarkables, Treble Cone, and Cardrona Alpine Resort — are

Winemaker Duncan Forsyth of Mount Edward Wines rips it up in NZ all winter, and in BC during Central Otago's short summer.



within a 90-minute drive from Queenstown. While there are on-mountain cafes, many skiers head down the mountain into the foothills, where more than 30 wineries offer “cellar-door” tasting rooms, and a handful feature upscale restaurants and bars on their property. But don’t knock early if it’s snowing. “No one turns up on a powder day until lunchtime,” says Duncan Forsyth, winemaker and general manager at Mount Edward. When the lifts open at 8 a.m. at Coronet Peak, a few hundred people are already lined up vying to make first tracks. “When you live in a resort town where it’s cold eight or nine months a year, that’s what you do,” he says.

Compared with the rolling hills of France’s Burgundy region, and Oregon’s verdant Willamette Valley, Central Otago might as well be Mars (or Middle Earth — much of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogies was filmed here). Vineyards are bordered by jagged rocks, scraggly bushes, and scrub pines, and some vintners have to shift into four-wheel drive just to reach their grapes. Yet somehow, the region is producing award-winning pinot noirs of exceptional purity and finesse.

At latitude 45 degrees south, Central Otago is the world’s most southerly wine-growing region, and chilly enough that pinot noir is the only red grape that can ripen here. Most of the region’s vineyards are planted around Lake Dunstan, where the lake influence moderates icy winds flowing north across the Tasman Sea. Extreme temperature changes — upwards of 50 degrees between night and day — give the wines an “awesome lushness of flavor,” says Bauer, whose elegant wines would be at home in Burgundy.

In fact, Burgundy and Central Otago are sister winemaking regions, with frequent winemaker exchanges. Nick Mills, of Rippon,

gained his winemaking degree in Burgundy and worked in the region for several years. His family has been farming on the shores of Lake Wanaka, about a 30-minute drive north of Lake Dunstan, for a century, and winegrowing for the past 30 years. “The wines are heavily informed by the mountain environment we live in,” says Mills (who skied competitively on the New Zealand Freestyle Ski Team for several years and is head judge of the World Heli Challenge). He also points to the area’s glacially derived soils — with rich deposits of mica and schist — as contributing elements to Rippon’s precise, multilayered pinot noirs.

Felton Road’s Walter, a dedicated skier and former Vail resident, also attributes the influence of terroir in his award-winning bottles. “Being so close to the slopes reminds us of the cool climate we’re in, one that emphasizes vibrancy, minerality, and tension in the wine,” says Walter. “There’s a brightness from being in this mountain environment.” The sun is intense at higher elevations — many vineyards are at 1,000-plus feet above sea level — contributing ripe flavors without sweetness, and freshness instead of jamminess. Bright berry and cherry flavors dominate Central Otago’s wines along with notes of wild thyme, rosehip tea, and other local herbs.

With more than a dozen Central Otago wineries now exporting their pinot noirs to the United States, these wines are more accessible than ever. Next time you’re entertaining at your mountaintop getaway, surprise the guests with an unexpectedly delicious pinot noir from a shredding New Zealand winemaker. The Burgundy-or-bust crowd will be knocked out of their après-ski boots. ●

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