



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

IT'S COOL TO BE HOT

TASMANIA is hot property at the moment, not climatically speaking, but as an industry and in the market place. As opposed to the mainland, new vineyards are being planted and winemakers are packing their bags and moving south. A decade and a half ago, you could have counted the winemakers on one hand, and while there are still many wines being made by contract winemakers, the number of DIY vigneronis is growing. After saying all that, Tasmania still only accounts for roughly half of 1 per cent of the national crush, but according to Freycinet Vineyard winemaker Claudio Radenti it represents 6.2 per cent of all wines on the nations wine lists.

The varietal mix in Tasmania has not dramatically changed, with chardonnay, riesling and pinot gris being favoured for the whites, and reds dominated by pinot noir (44 per cent of plantings), with the occasional chance being taken on ripening cabernet sauvignon. One change that has occurred is the increased interest in shiraz, probably as a result of Nick Glaetzer winning the Jimmy Watson Trophy in 2010 for his Tasmanian Mon Pere Shiraz.

The island is a complex and challenging place to grow grapes and make wine. You have a multitude of soil types as well as extremes of climate. These can be examined and we can use pinot noir as an example.

Pinot Noir displays the skills of the viticulturist and winemaker, and provides them with the most challenging test of their ability. The ripening process has got to be spot-on, otherwise if picked under-ripe the resulting wine is thin and diluted with herbaceous flavours. Flowering must be uniform and the summer has to be moderate to warm, with preferably, a long late Indian summer. Compare the Tasmanian 2013 and 2014 vintages, for instance. Across all varieties 2013 was a

high cropping year where the weather was cool until harvest when it got hot. 11,000 tonnes of grapes were picked off 1538ha of vines. Compare this to 2014 when there was a poor flowering that resulted in low yields. While the plantings went up on the island to 1611ha the tonnage was a paltry 6624. Bad weather during flowering causes what is known as "hens and chickens" or millerandage, which is a poor fertilization of the grape flower, and some berries do not

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develop correctly leading to lower yields. When you compare 2013 and 2014 wines the effects are easy to see. The 2014 pinots are more concentrated which is great for the consumer but a nightmare for the profitability of producers.

Tasmania has distinctive climatic bands, but surprisingly has only the one Geographical Indication (GI). To compensate for that the industry promotes seven unofficial sub-regions - North West, North East (Pipers River), Tamar Valley, East Coast, Derwent Valley, Coal River Valley and the Huon Valley/ D'Entrecasteaux Channel. In the north around the Tamar Valley and inland at Pipers River the rainfall tends to be higher and is sometimes cooler than the southern vineyards. Here pinot noir is used often for sparkling wines. In the Tamar the wetter and humid conditions can cause problems with botrytis and make growers pick earlier than they really wish to. On the East Coast it is a lot dryer.

But even here it differs by site. The layout of the Freycinet Vineyard, for instance, is a type of amphitheatre facing north and north-east, which acts as a suntrap. A stone's throw away is the Devils Corner vineyard. With a stunning vista it is in more open country and can be up to 3C cooler, according to Radenti. East Coast vineyards ripen at different times over a three-week period. Site selection plays a big part in determining the final wine style.

The soil and geology of Tasmania adds another twist in the tale of pinot noir. This has been explored in depth by Dr Richard Doyle from the University of Tasmania. In simple terms the Tamar Valley has clay with some basalt as well as sedimentary material. Holm Oak, for instance, is on clay/sandy loam soils being located fairly close to the river. Pipers River has deeper red clay soils on top of volcanic basalt. To the south in the Derwent Valley the soils tend to be of sandstone. The most exciting soils for pinot noir are the vineyards that sit on Jurassic dolerite, which formed as the Australian continent broke away from Antarctica. Dolerite is a type of basalt and is found along the ridges of the East Coast as well as Coal River Valley. Domaine A, Freycinet and Pooley Estate all have some dolerite in their vineyards. The soils tend to be stony (allowing good drainage), shallow (so fairly poor) and warm as opposed to the colder, darker soils. On tasting, the dolerite wines constantly display darker red fruits, more depth and intensity.

If only Tasmanian pinot could be understood by soil and climate alone. We now have to consider the clones being used. Pooley Estate in the Coal River Valley has two pinot noir vineyards. Winemaker Anna Pooley explains: "at the Cooina Vale vineyard we mostly have 114 and 115 planted. Structurally they are quite different. 115 is more linear and has tighter

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tannins, whilst 114 is more aromatic. Our Butchers Hill vineyard is mostly MV6 and is more robust and aromatically plush". Careful choice of oak cooperages, as well as maturation on skins post fermentation for up to two weeks "gives more structure and balance to the wines", she adds.

MV6 has been described as the "backbone of Australian plantings" and Penny Jones, winemaker at Bay of Fires, is able to keep various parcels separate so we can look at regional distinctions across the same clone. We tasted 2015 Coal River, Derwent Valley and East Coast barrel samples. The Derwent River wine was lighter and more delicate, while East Coast showed more spice and floral notes. Finally, the Coal River Valley showed more cherry primary fruit and gentle tannins. We also tasted separate barrels of 114, 115 and MV6, and it confirmed Pooley's remarks. The MV6 definitely has more rich and spice notes, while the 115 is lighter in style than 114 and the latter has fruitier notes. At Freycinet, Radenti has a majority of D5V12 clone. This clone grows "upright" and is cheekily referred to as the Viagra clone. This clone has served Freycinet well and I recently tried an incredible 1994 pinot that still displayed some hints of primary fruit. As well as making age-worthy pinot, Radenti is also unique in using a rotary fermenter to ferment his pinot, something the others don't do.

As British author and wine expert Hugh Johnson classically remarked: "pinot noir, like riesling, is a lens that brings the soil into focus. It captures soil, climate and vintage weather, and reveals them without mercy". He might well have been talking about Tasmania pinot. 🍷



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www.barleystackswines.com

E: barleystackswine@internode.on.net

P: +61 8 8834 1258