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Wine: Pinot noir is the toughest grape to grow

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From my first visit to New Zealand in 1991, I can still vividly remember the image of a figure with a biblical beard striding through the Fromm vineyard in Marlborough with his tiny son hoisted on his shoulders. The young winemaker in question, Hetsch Kalberer, was nurturing another fledgling: pinot noir planted at a time when New Zealand was still a one-horse, sauvignon country. Recently, I located a dusty bottle from my decade-old case of 1995 Fromm, assuming it was over the hill. I was wrong. In place of youthful puppy fat, the forest floor undertones and gamey savour of a mature red burgundy were in evidence.

Thanks to the pioneering work of Ata Rangi and Dry River in the early 1990s, Martinborough, east of Wellington, was reckoned to be the best site for pinot noir. But a few adventurous souls were putting down roots in South Island: Fromm in Marlborough, Neudorf in Nelson, Pegasus Bay in Waipara (Canterbury) and Rippon way down south in Middle Earth, aka Central Otago. Today, with some 300 producers and an acreage greater than that of chardonnay, pinot noir has become New Zealand's number one red. It's impossible to overstate the measure of this achievement. Pinot noir's capriciousness makes it the toughest and least economic of the classic red grape varieties to grow. Yet, thanks to a cool, maritime climate and the freedom to take risks with minimal big company pressures, this bold gambit by New Zealand's producers is paying off.

Pinot's new wave of producers have introduced a variety of improving measures in the vineyard and the cellar to take their wines beyond merely enjoyably fruitiness towards reds with greater aromatic intensity, concentration of fruit, complexity and staying power. The problem for them is that pinot is like a cat to cabernet sauvignon's dog. The obedient cabernet responds to its master's voice, but pinot is far too cool to take orders. Add to that the costs of labour-intensive work and a climate in which frosts and vintage variation are as critical as in burgundy, and that still makes for a substantial number of pinot noirs that don't quite yet live up to their price or billing.

Partly through vine age and experience, some of the pioneers of Kiwi pinot remain the best. The 2004 Ata Rangi Martinborough Pinot Noir, for instance, around £30, Majestic, Andrew Chapman (01235 821539), Noel Young Wines (01223 844744), is an intensely flavoured red of burgundian complexity. One of Marlborough's best pinots is Villa Maria's deliciously raspberryish 2005 Seddon Pinot Noir, 21.99,

Wimbledon Wine Cellar (020-8540 9979). Further south, from Waipara, the still youthful 2005 Pegasus Bay Pinot Noir, around £19, Fortnum & Mason, Harvey Nichols, Grape Juice (020-7403 9997), Bona Wines, (Tetbury (01666 505911, The Cellar Door, Overton (01256 770 397) is a seriously intense and classy pinot. Montana offers one of the best value with the easy drinkability of its 2004 Terraces Pinot, £14.99, buy 2 = £9.99, Wine Rack, Thresher, £12.99.

Among the roll-call of rising stars, the 2004 Mountford Estate Pinot Noir, from Waipara, £26.95, Berry Bros & Rudd (0870 9600), Huntsworth Wine (020-7229 1610), is superbly fragrant with toasty oak and cherry fruitiness. Further south in Central Otago, the 2004 Mount Edward Pinot Noir, £21, Jeroboams (020-7730 9284) displays glossy, textured raspberry and cherry richness, while from Central Otago, the stylish 2005 Mount Difficulty Pinot Noir, £19.99 - £22.99, Waitrose, £21.95 The Cellar Door, Overton (01256 770397), Philglas & Swiggot (020-7924 4494), Wimbledon Wine Cellar, displays wonderfully intense mulberry fruit characters. Burgundy may not be looking to its laurels quite yet, but the rise of New Zealand pinot noir will be giving it pause for thought.