

TASTING

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TASSIE PINOTS

The *WINE* panel happily give their palates a regional tour of the cool-climate pinots of our most southern state. Although it's hard to define a purely Tasmanian style, the best examples range from poised and finely structured to quite robust. And prepare to be patient, because many will reward cellaring.

It comes as a surprise to many that Tasmania was producing wine before Victoria and South Australia. Bartholemew Broughton planted his vineyard in New Town in 1823 and cuttings from Tasmania were later taken to these two states to start their affair with wine. Several other ventures followed in Tassie, but none lasted into recent history.

The Tasmanian renaissance began in 1956 when French migrant Jean Miguet planted La Provence (now Providence), east of Launceston, and Claudio Alcorso started Moorilla Estate in 1958 on the outskirts of Hobart. They were followed by Graeme Wiltshire at Heemskerck, Andrew Pirie at Pipers Brook and shortly after by a host of others.

As has usually been the case in emerging regions, the pioneering work was done by small companies, some without the experience to produce consistently good wine from the start, but learning the hard way. That has all changed. The establishment of Tamar Ridge in 1994 brought critical mass to the industry and the more recent vigneron have an experienced pool of vineyard managers and winemakers to rely on. Now, the big companies have moved in, either by buying existing wineries or simply sourcing grapes, and have added further quality and wider distribution. Tasmanian wine has certainly come a long way since 1956.

Given Tasmania's cool climate, it is only the early-ripening varieties that are consistently successful, but these are often brilliant. Some are now at the peak of Australian wine quality within their styles – Arras, Jansz and Clover Hill among the sparklings, Eileen Hardy Chardonnay

and Yattarna in whites, as Tassie grapes sometimes find their way into the latter. Recently 2010 Bream Creek Sauvignon Blanc won the Sauvignon Blanc Trophy at the 2011 Boutique Wine Awards, beating all New Zealand entries.

The position is not so clear with pinot noir. Certainly, many Tasmanian pinots have had success in shows and the wine market, to the extent that many companies are out of stock for more than half the year. There are nevertheless few pinots that consistently stand out in the same way as Jansz or Eileen Hardy. The reasons are pinot noir's capricious nature, the small volumes of the top wines being made and the big changes in weather that affect Tasmanian grapes from season to season, more than they do in any other region. Ripeness is more critical for red wine than for whites and sparklings.

We thought it was high time for our panel to take a closer look.

Five of our regular panel members assembled to taste the wines – educator and writer Peter Bourne, writers and authors Peter Forrestal and Huon Hooke, sommelier and writer Sophie Otton and me, wine-making consultant Nick Bulleid. We tasted the wines, masked, in small groups from young to old and grouped geographically within each vintage. The areas were not revealed, however, until after each flight.

The wines varied from poised and finely structured to quite robust, in a few cases even tough. Many of them supported my conviction that Tasmanian pinot noir needs time in bottle. Most of the good wines need at least four years from vintage and some rather more. Also, one must consider vintage variation. Tasmanian vineyards spread across the eastern half of the state, a large area, with diverse weather – on which there is more below – soils and aspects. This makes generalisations about “a Tasmanian style” worthless.

I thought for some time about how to order the notes below. Vintage would have been the most obvious and convenient choice, given the considerable vintage variation in Tasmania. Take 2002 and 2004, for

TOP TRIO
Pooley Family Reserve,
Freycinet Louis and
Milton are three pinots
doing Tassie proud.



TASTING



YOUNG AND OLD
2009 Derwent Estate
Wines will cellar well
and the 2005 Native
Point has aged nicely.

will be when the site and growing season are right. Here are some general comments on the vintages.

The spring prior to the 2010 vintage was wet, but a good flowering period led to big yields. Summer was mild with occasional rain and the harvest occurred in ideal, dry weather. As a result, the pinot noirs show ripe fruit and balance.

A poor flowering period prior to 2009 led to “hen and chicken” – uneven berry development – which ultimately led to low crops. As a result, some pinots show herbal or green overtones alongside otherwise ripe flavours. Most have plenty of weight.

The 2008 season was overall dry, with drought in some areas. A good flowering period led to big crops. Some large bunches did not fully ripen their tannins, so there is sometimes a slight additional bite to the finish. Acidities tended to be on the low side, but the pinot noirs were mostly very good.

For the 2007 vintage, the season started with a dry winter and spring, which brought widespread frost. This not only decreased yields dramatically, but caused hen and chicken. Also, some vineyard owners at harvest found it difficult to distinguish between fully ripe bunches and the under-ripe second crop. The result is that the good wines are excellent, while others may show some greenness.

2005 was a good all-round year, with mild weather and sufficient rain. Moderate crops came in with fully ripe flavours and tannins. This was an excellent year for pinot noir and the best wines are still approaching their peak.

instance. The first was a warm, drought year with low yields and powerful wines. Some reds were picked too late for ideal balance. 2004, in contrast, saw widespread rain, disease and large crops of mostly thin reds, although some whites were pleasant.

On the other hand, the more I wrote, the more it became clear that grouping by district would be most informative. (I need to use the general term “district” as Tasmanian producers have not yet decided on how they will choose and classify their regions.)

There are broad differences across the grape-growing areas. The north gets more rain than the south and the east coast, although the pattern there leans towards winter dominance. When the north does get summer rain, however, it can get heaps and, as the temperatures are generally warmer than in the south, disease can be more prevalent. The east coast and south have more even rainfall through the year, but they often also suffer from drought. The east coast gets the most sunshine. These are generalisations and conditions can vary on a small scale of, say, five to 20 kilometres. The closer you are to marginal ripening conditions, which many sites in Tasmania are, the more these variations will affect the result, but the greater the rewards

Coal Valley and Derwent

2010 Glaetzer-Dixon Family Winemakers Avancé (A\$28) gained widespread approval. I loved its concentrated red-cherry fruit and the way it delivered good weight and depth of flavour with a fine tannin balance. The line through the mouth and the length are both excellent. Hooke agreed, writing, “A pure fruit style with ripe-cherry aromas. It’s straight down the middle, coating the mouth from front to back. Superb wine with a good future.”

2010 Observatory Hill (A\$29) has an impressive purple colour but spawned different opinions. Otton gave it top marks: “Quite ripe, but with lovely characters interwoven. It’s plush, with purple fruits and other fragrances – violet, lavender and olive. Some savoury hints, like cloves.” I found the flavours somewhat jammy, with hints of dried fruits, but thought the wine delivered well with its balance and soft tannins. It walks a tightrope, but will find folks to follow.

WORTH THE WAIT
Lovers of more complex
pinots should try the
Cornwell Vineyard Devil of
a Red or the Clemens Hill.

