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DEEP BLUE

NEW ZEALAND'S WATERWAYS ARE THE
SECRET TO ITS DIVERSE PINOT NOIRS

POP STARS: THE RIVALS

CAVA IS GOING ORGANIC,
BUT SHOULD PROSECCO
FOLLOW SUIT?

HIGH FLYER

THE UAE'S LUXURY WINE
OFFERING IS TURNING HEADS

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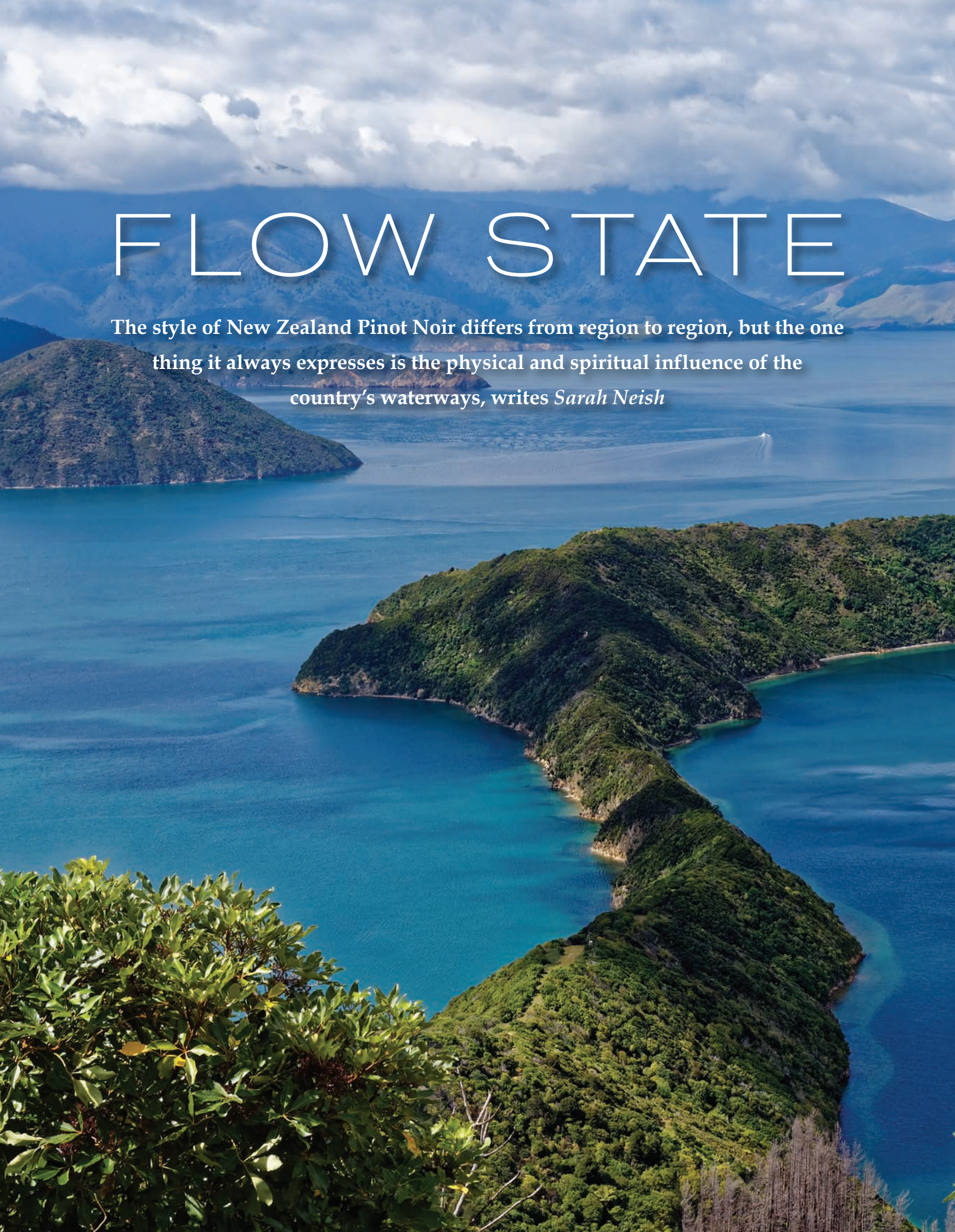
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FLOW STATE

The style of New Zealand Pinot Noir differs from region to region, but the one thing it always expresses is the physical and spiritual influence of the country's waterways, writes *Sarah Neish*



Feature findings

- The quality of New Zealand's Pinot Noir is soaring due to vine age, reduced yields and replanting in better locations.
- Pinot hectares have dropped steadily from 5,805ha in 2021 to 5,613ha in 2024, and exports have fallen too, making New Zealand Pinot an increasingly exclusive offer.
- The "vast volumes of water" surrounding New Zealand contribute oyster shell, tapenade and briney characteristics to its wines, while distinct mineral notes are often present from limestone ferried to vineyards via rivers.
- However, New Zealand Pinot is not without challenges, with few producers fetching top prices, and work still to be done to counter mass cultivation in Marlborough.

"WE ARE water people and it is water that binds us," said New Zealander Jeff Sinnott, a member of the Tuku Māori Winemakers Collective, at the long-awaited Pinot Noir NZ 2025 conference held in Ōtautahi Christchurch in February. Whether on the South Island or the North Island, almost everything circles back to water in Aotearoa New Zealand. Lapped on all sides by the cooling Tasman and Pacific Oceans, its rivers and winding tributaries carve intricate channels through the landscape, delivering life-giving energy to the country's communities, farms and, of course, vineyards.

Water trickles through the core of the nation's history, too. The undulating ocean waves transported the Great Fleet of wakas (canoes) belonging to seven Māori tribes to their new home of Aotearoa between 1250 and 1350, and oral pūrākau (stories), passed down through the centuries, are populated with ferocious octopuses, majestic whales and the benevolent protection of Tangaroa, god of the sea.

Today, fish scales are still a sign of generosity in Māori culture, and rivers are deeply revered spots, as highlighted by a legal ruling in March 2017, which saw the Whanganui river become the first

in the world to be granted the same legal rights as a human being.

New Zealand's wine industry is similarly awash with water-based symbolism, and for good reason. Maritime influence is something shared by almost all the nation's wine-producing regions, and is responsible for New Zealand's famously fresh, cool-climate wines. "Buffered by vast volumes of water that will take a while to heat up, New Zealand is in a fortuitous position," explained environmental scientist and conservationist Professor Tim Flannery at Pinot Noir NZ 2025, where more than 400 wine enthusiasts gathered to celebrate New Zealand's flagship red grape.

RIPTIDE OF ITS OWN

While Sauvignon Blanc has been greasing the wheels of the country's wine trade for several decades, Pinot Noir is creating a riptide of its own. The latest findings from Wine-Searcher reveal that Pinot now accounts for 32.4% of all New Zealand-specific online wine searches, nipping at >



Water people: Māori consider oceans and rivers to be sacred places

the heels of Sauvignon Blanc, which accounts for 35% of searches. Consumer interest and curiosity is there. Producers now need to find a way to tell their collective and individual stories, many of which, it struck me, have an intrinsic connection to water.

Modern Pinot production didn't begin in New Zealand until the 1970s, shortly after the first Pinot vines went into the ground in the US state of Oregon, another global big-hitter for New World Pinot. Wairarapa in the North Island was the

first region in New Zealand to really pay attention to Pinot, but it wasn't long before other regions – Marlborough, Central Otago, North Canterbury, etc – followed suit.

In the boom period of 1996-2005, Pinot plantings increased fourfold across New Zealand. But the variety is arguably on the cusp of its most important chapter yet. Vine age is playing a vital role in this, with older vine material creating more complex and elegant wines that are worlds apart from the “fruit bombs” of the past. Conversely, the worldwide decline in wine sales is presenting another important opportunity – the chance to grub up and replant vines in better locations, which is ramping up quality too.

“Marlborough got off to quite an awkward start with Pinot,” explains Nikolai St George, winemaking director at LVMH-owned Cloudy Bay Vineyards. “There are plants that are

virused, and issues that need to be resolved. Now that the market is flat, we can address this. We're pulling out a lot of plants that aren't as healthy, strong or productive as they should be.” Or, as Bart Arnst of Organic Winegrowers New Zealand puts it: “Marlborough is the engine room of New Zealand wine and the engine hasn't been serviced for a while, so now it's time to take the vehicle into the shop and fix it up.”

EXODUS INTO THE HILLS

In Marlborough specifically, there has been “an exodus into the hills for quality producers” over the last decade, explains Clive Jones, winemaker at Nautilus Estate, with many wineries pulling out underperforming Pinot from the valley

‘Marlborough got off to quite an awkward start with Pinot’



NZ Pinot in numbers

- Pinot Noir accounts for 5,678ha (14%) of New Zealand's total vineyard area, making it the country's second most planted grape after Sauvignon Blanc.
- According to the New Zealand Winegrowers 2024 report, Pinot accounts for 6.7% of the nation's total wine production.
- More than 1.5 million cases (8,492 million litres) of New Zealand Pinot were exported in 2024.
- According to data from Wine-Searcher, most New Zealand Pinots currently retail for between NZ\$12-\$16 (£5.30-£7.17), with few reaching the top price brackets.

Taste makers: New Zealand's waterway lend minerality and salinity to wines

floor, and moving it to more optimal hillside sites on the advice of viticulturist Mike Eaton. Although Eaton kickstarted the change in 1992 by moving Giesen's Clayvin Pinot vineyard uphill, it wasn't until irrigation was installed in the hills in around 2004 that the move became a more viable option, and dozens of producers joined him. "Hundreds of hectares have come out, so Marlborough Pinots are going to be really exciting in the coming years," adds Jones. It's true that Marlborough still holds the largest share

of New Zealand's Pinot plantings (2,733 hectares compared to second-biggest Pinot region, Central Otago, at 1,656ha), but yields are coming down.

"We all know that you can't overcrop Pinot and convince people that it's a good wine," notes Arnst. The numbers published in New Zealand Winegrowers' 2024 report tell the same story. Pinot Noir plantings have dropped steadily from 5,805ha in 2021 down to 5,613ha in 2024. The country's Pinot exports have also dipped from 10,868 tonnes shipped in

2021 to 8,492 tonnes in 2024 (the lowest since 2015), making New Zealand Pinot an increasingly exclusive offer. For these reasons, among others, Eric Asimov, chief wine critic for *The New York Times*, declared: "New Zealand Pinot is ready for prime time!"

So, what makes New Zealand Pinot stand out from its global peers? Due to the movement of its rivers and oceans, and the constant hum of seismic activity,

the nation's vineyards are an eclectic jumble of soils, offering winemakers a rich palette of textures and flavours to play with.

From bright and silky Marlborough Pinots born from clay and loess, and the earthy, savoury undertones of Wairarapa Pinots grown in alluvial, gravel and limestone, to the herb and violet characters expressed by Central Otago's sand and silty loam soils, the characteristics found in the wines are broad and fascinating.

And, because New Zealand perches atop two tectonic plates – the Australian and the Pacific – the ground is constantly shapeshifting. Central Otago, Marlborough and Wellington, for example, all have fault lines running through them as the result of the two

'New Zealand Pinot is ready for prime time'

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Ancestral wisdom: te Pā's Haysley MacDonald at the Wairau Bar



Marlborough Pinot is going "from strength to strength"

tectonic plates pushing against each other. It's not uncommon for shark teeth to be found atop mountains where land has been forced upwards over the centuries, and recent earthquakes, such as the one that struck Christchurch in 2011 with devastating force, are reminders that New Zealand's geology is far from static.

Water, too, plays its part in the evolving nature of the nation's soils. One need only visit the ethereal Patuna Chasm in Wairarapa to see first-hand how limestone is shunted down the river via

streams and waterfalls, and transported to the Martinborough Terrace, where it lends a unique pep and verve to wines.

Back in Marlborough, water also plays puppeteer. The frequent flooding of the 170km-long Wairau river, which flows through the region, deposits silts on the vineyard plains. When the famous Marlborough wind blows through, these silts are whisked up onto the valley slopes, adding a top layer of loess to the region's clay-based soils. "This really helps out with water-holding capacity

because clays can bake out dry," says Nautilus' Jones.

So, to recap, New Zealand Pinot is on the brink of a renaissance, with quality on the up and an expanding toolkit for the nation's winemakers to dip into, thanks to ever-changing geology and the movement of water. But how does this translate into diversity of flavour?

The hallmarks of Marlborough Pinot are bright, juicy, red fruit

characters such as cherries and plums, sometimes with a little spice, alongside crunchy acidity. "The tension between acid and tannin, freshness and fruit – that's what I love about Marlborough Pinot," says Cloudy Bay's St George.

But the strong winds in Marlborough (caused by the narrow Cook Strait, which acts as a wind funnel and intensifier), can bring significant vintage variation.

"Windy conditions during flowering can lead to very different styles from year to year," adds St George. "We've accepted that and think it adds interest." According to Jan Johns, co-owner of the organic and biodynamic Wrekin Vineyard in the Southern Valleys sub-region of Marlborough, that variation is part of the magic. "The beauty of Marlborough Pinot is that it really reflects the vintage more

'The tension between acid and tannin, freshness and fruit – that's what I love about Marlborough Pinot'

Success story: Pinot Noir New Zealand 2025

Between 11-13 February, the city of Ōtautahi Christchurch welcomed more than 400 winemakers, press and wine business owners to Pinot Noir New Zealand 2025. The event historically took place every four years, however the plug sadly had to be pulled on the 2021 edition due to Covid-19 restrictions, making last month the first time the trade had officially gathered to celebrate the nation's flagship red grape since 2017.

Across the three days a packed itinerary of international speakers and local experts explored what makes up the cultural heartbeat of New Zealand Pinot alongside delving into the latest exciting innovations in the vineyard and investigating how the country's Pinot is perceived by key export markets. Interactive tastings and food pairings were also available during the event, which culminated in a grand gala dinner to toast "all that we are, and all that we will become".

Close encounter: te Pā's Seaside Block is just 150m from the water's edge

than any other variety," she tells *db*. "The wines talk of the season and what happened with Mother Nature. That's why we're in this game, because not every year is the same. Otherwise, we'd make Coca-Cola, or beer."

ABUNDANT WATER LIFE

The coastal wind may be a force to be reckoned with, but it also brings an alluring hint of salinity to Marlborough wines. The powerful Wairau river rushes along until it meets the sea at the Wairau

Bar, and few producers have such a longstanding connection to the water here as te Pā owner Haysley MacDonald. His flagship vineyard (planted exclusively to Sauvignon Blanc in 2003) lies just 150m from the ocean's edge at the Wairau Bar, where MacDonald's ancestral iwi (tribe), the Rangitāne, first touched down 800 years ago.

The Māori fishing hook featured on te Pā's wine label conveys this unbreakable link to the local water, and to MacDonald's forefathers – some of the first settlers to arrive in New Zealand – many of whom are buried on the site of their original pā (settlement), overlooking the Bar. MacDonald explains that the vineyard is planted on what was once "the

old beachfront", but that over the years "the sea has moved".

"We still have really abundant water life here... whitebait, clams, trout, flounder, mussels," says MacDonald, who scatters crushed mussel shells, mixed with compost and hay, over his vine roots to "stop weeds coming through". An array of 13 different cover crops, including peas, beans and oats, are also sown every other row, and seaweed spray is used five or six times a year, which "makes everything lush, green and healthy". Unsurprisingly, te Pā's single-vineyard

**'The wines talk of the season
and what happened with
Mother Nature'**



Earth mother: Ata Rangi's Alison Paton



Martinborough Pinot has "textural and savoury interest"

Reserve Collection Seaside Sauvignon Blanc has an enticing salinity alongside generous aromatics of stonefruit, guava and lychee, and fleshy gooseberry and passion fruit flavours.

In recent years, however, Pinot Noir has taken on an increasing role in the Pā's portfolio. "Sauvignon Blanc is the majority of what we grow and sell, but you don't want to be a one-trick pony, so we launched a Pinot Noir [a blend from two different vineyards] in 2011, under our Pā brand," says MacDonald.

'Big companies have looked at Wairarapa over the years, but the sums just don't add up'

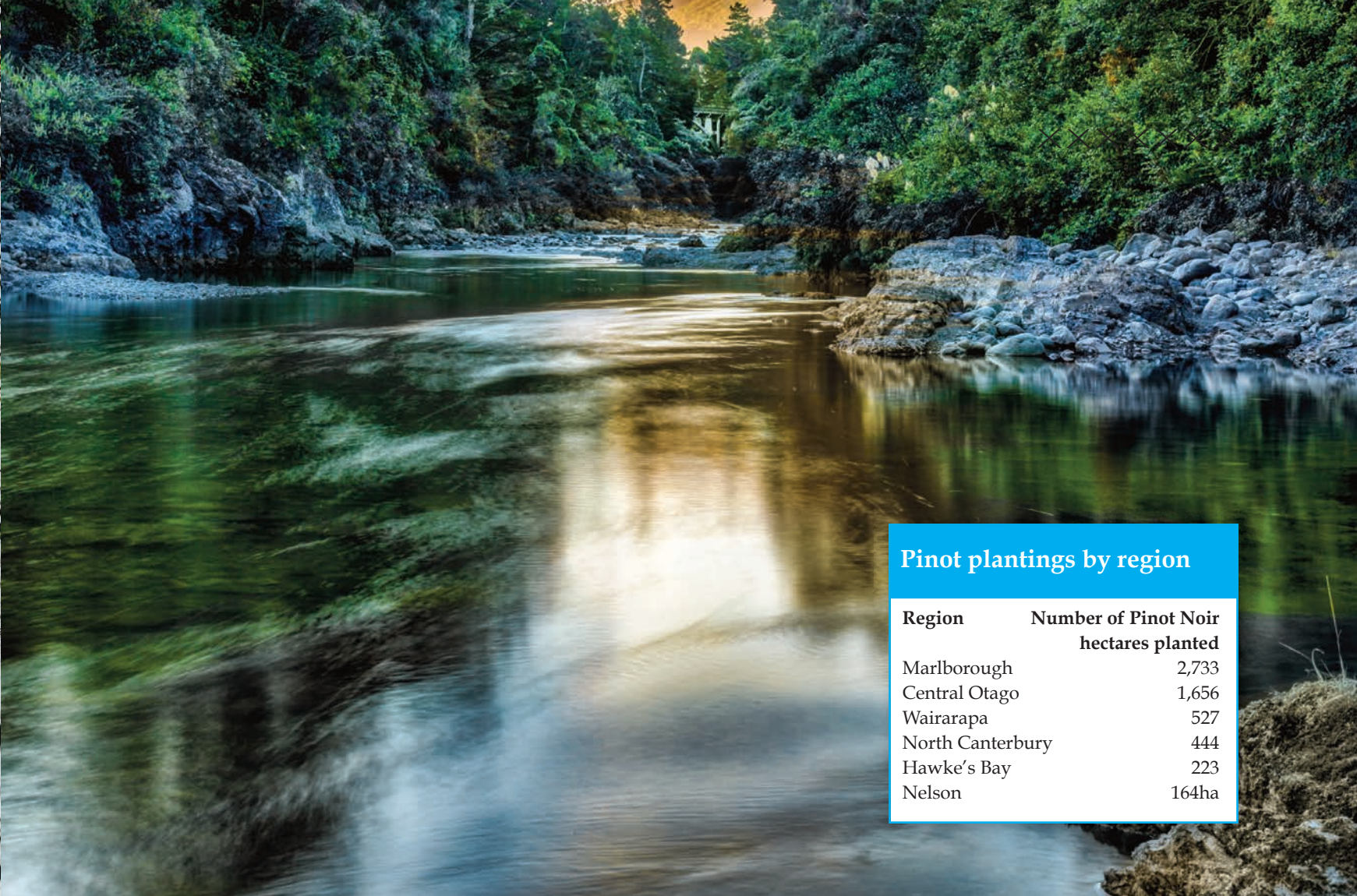
It wasn't long before the producer added a second – Pā Road Pinot Noir – to his stable, and this month MacDonald introduces a third premium expression, the Pā 2021 Reserve Collection Westhaven Pinot Noir, to the UK market for the first time. With an RRP of around £25, this single-vineyard Pinot from the Awatere Valley in Marlborough has spent 15 months in barrel and, according to winemaker Sam Bennett, offers "complex aromas of red fruits, liquorice, violets, tobacco and musk, with characters of cherry, cola, cranberry and cinnamon, and subtle coffee and mocha notes from the new oak".

Marlborough Pinot Noir is "going from strength to strength", says MacDonald. "Our 2024 Pinot Noir [still in barrel as of Feb 2025] will be the most exciting we've ever released. When I tasted it, I took the rest of the sample bottle home to enjoy, unfinned, unfiltered, straight from the barrel – it was exceptional."

LAND OF THE GLISTENING WATERS

At the other end of the scale from Marlborough's abundant production (11,981 tonnes in 2024) is the bohemian Wairarapa, which makes just 1% of New Zealand's Pinot. Roughly translated as "the land of the glistening waters", Wairarapa is also refreshingly free of corporate influence.

"Big companies have looked at Wairarapa over the years, but the sums just don't add up," says Alison Paton, general manager and co-owner of Ata Rangi, which was among the first producers to plant in Martinborough, one of Wairarapa's three sub-regions. "It's our low yields that make us stand out – Marlborough probably gets twice as much fruit on the vine as we get here."



Pinot plantings by region

Region	Number of Pinot Noir hectares planted
Marlborough	2,733
Central Otago	1,656
Wairarapa	527
North Canterbury	444
Hawke's Bay	223
Nelson	164ha

Big guns: the Ruamāhanga river plays a vital role in Wairarapa's Pinot

What Martinborough lacks in size, it makes up for with bucketloads of charm and small, boutique producers. "Martinborough evolved because the government did a lot of work trying to pinpoint new areas for different kinds of agriculture. They discovered that we have a similar climate to Burgundy, and tend to have really low rainfall through the final growing stage," Paton explains.

While other regions make "big, lush, fruit-driven Pinots", Martinborough's wines, she says, are "more about structure, complexity and elegance", with

a more textural, savoury interest. They also boast some of the most elevated tannins found in New Zealand due to strong winds, which thicken the grape skin and lend backbone, body and balance to the wines.

"The northwesterly wind is a big part of our growing. From October to December we have relentless winds of 50kmh-60kmh," says Chris Archer, winemaker for Archer McRae Beverages. "We measured our tannins last year, and they sat at about 220mg per litre in Martinborough, compared to Central

Otago which had 180mg per litre, and Marlborough which had 140mg-160mg. For comparison's sake, Burgundy has 120mg."

The persistent Martinborough winds, he adds, are unusually dry for the region.

"Martinborough sits in the bullseye of a water channel. Drive more than five minutes in any direction and your chance of rainfall massively increases."

Perhaps because of the absence of big companies, Martinborough has managed to hang onto a certain non-conformist ethos.

"I'm here to paint pictures of the landscape through wine and explore what my intellect wants, not crunch the numbers... I almost went broke in 2012," says Lance Redgwell, winemaker for Martinborough's Cambridge Road, with an airy wave of the hand.

While Redgwell and others perfect their brushstrokes, the real masterpiece of Wairarapa Pinot was painted by the mighty Ruamāhanga river, which has sculpted the region's dramatic cliffs and alluvial river terraces, shot through with limestone and fossils, over millennia. Big aggregate rocks are found in vineyard soils high up on the Martinborough

'Martinborough sits in the bullseye of a water channel. Drive more than five minutes in any direction and your chance of rainfall massively increases'

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Sure sign: Māori fish hooks symbolise strength, prosperity, and safe travel over water.

Terrace, with finer, smaller rocks tumbling further down; both lend a minerality to the region's wines.

But the ocean, although 45 minutes away, still manages to make itself heard. Redgwell struck gold when he discovered a distinctive "seam of salinity" in his Dry River Vineyard a couple of years ago. Sensing an opportunity, he picked the single parcel early, and fermented it separately "in the hope of capturing this voice", he explains, and Wilde One Pinot Noir 2022 was born. "To find salinity in

the after-juice, in red wines, is in my experience pretty rare," Redgwell says. "There was real oceanic expression." Describing the resultant wine as "modernist", he paired it with smoked fish and has been on "a treasure hunt" to find a similar saline vein in other local vineyards ever since.

Although salinity tends to speak most loudly in New Zealand's white wines, it's possible to find it in its reds too, with olive, briney notes present in everything from North Canterbury producer The Boneline's Iridium, which "speaks of a deep and local telepathy of watercourse", to Te Mata's Coleraine, one of the country's most revered expressions, crafted in Hawke's Bay.

According to Te Mata's senior winemaker Phil Brodie, the "oyster shell, marine and tapenade characteristics" of its hero wine, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, are present every year. "We love

these saline and marine notes in our Cabernet," he says. Coleraine, which has been dubbed by many a critic as New Zealand's 'first growth', starts from around £60 a bottle in the UK through retailer The Wine Society.

At Ata Rangi, Paton and her team have grown the business to a 10,000 cases-per-year operation from its first tiny commercial release in 1986. It still has only 25ha of vines at its disposal.

"For our 40th anniversary, we tasted a 26-year vertical of Ata Rangi magnums," says Paton. "We heard that one of our DTC customers was selling them on, so we bought them all back from auction house Webbs, because we knew they wouldn't fetch what they were worth. New Zealanders aren't big on spending a lot at auction, they expect a bargain." The wines, ranging from 1994 right through to 2019, were "beautifully integrated with no sharp edges," and whispered the story of how Pinot from Ata Rangi, and indeed Martinborough, has evolved over time. The signature earthy unami flavours of 1994 gave way to a touch of sweetness while hints of steely salinity unfolded into brambly, herby characters. "We are eccentric here, but we make wines we love," winemaker Helen Masters said at the time of the tasting.

RESTORING WETLANDS

New Zealand Pinot, however, is not without its challenges. Over-cultivation has impacted soil health in Marlborough, and due to the cash cow that is Sauvignon Blanc, many growers "don't really want

'To find salinity in the after-juice, in red wines, is in my experience pretty rare...there was real oceanic expression'



Custodians of the land: will New Zealand's next generation protect its Pinot?

to grow Pinot any more", says Adam Balasoglou, sales and marketing manager at Nautilus. "What it does mean is that we're getting less Pinot, but at a higher quality level."

One counter action to the mass cultivation in Marlborough is the re-establishment of 4ha of wetlands in the Wairau Valley by producer Grove Mill. "At one time, the whole Wairau plain would have been wetlands, so we wanted to return this pocket of land to how it was," says Grove Mill chief winemaker

Stu Marfell. "Before Marlborough had so many vineyards, there would have been loads of these little waterways running through the region. We planted about 30,000 native plants and trees initially, followed by another 1,000 per year."

It's a step in the right direction, but still a drop in the ocean when one considers the sheer size of Marlborough. If other producers were to do the same, however, and at scale, then the region could look very different in another 10 years' time.

Renewed wetlands could also help to underwrite the region's future.

Having plentiful trees is one solution to countering both future droughts (because the trees act like sponges, holding onto water, which vines can then access) and potential floods (healthy vine roots in biodiverse vineyards stretch deep beneath the soil before water starts to run off).

"A flow system with no breaks is crucial," to sustainable

viticulture, said Mimi Casteel of Hopewell Wine in Oregon, who was a guest speaker at the Pinot Noir New Zealand 2025 event.

The other big issue facing the nation's Pinot is pricing, with Wine-Searcher data revealing that few New Zealand Pinots reach the top retail price bracket of NZ\$70-\$100 compared to US Pinot, for instance, which is far more present at the top end. Richard Hemming MW corroborates this, saying that, of the 27 New Zealand Pinots he has on the wine list at 67 Pall Mall Singapore, the average price is NZ\$149 per bottle, compared to NZ\$264 for Pinots on the list from other nations (excluding France).

One possible solution is for New Zealand producers to consider holding back Pinot stock to release on the secondary market, which could help to nudge prices up.

Whatever direction the industry decides to row in, New Zealand's next generation of winemakers will have some tough decisions to make. But Pinot's legacy is in good hands.

"I think of the transference of knowledge between generations as being horizontal – much more like an ocean flowing back and forth like a moving current, rather than the linear 'passing down' of information from elders," says Jen Parr of premium Central Otago producer Valli Vineyards. "But I see the future. I see a glimmer and a sparkle on the water's surface." db

'We planted about 30,000 native plants and trees initially, followed by another 1,000 per year'