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Marlborough’s Sub Regions Impress Pinot Author

Benjamin Lewin MW was expecting to be able to taste the regional differences in New Zealand Pinot Noir. What he wasn’t expecting was the sub regional differences he discovered here in Marlborough.

Benjamin Lewin is an interesting character. A former molecular scientist, he threw away his career and sold his very successful scientific publishing company back in 1999, planning to follow his other passion - wine. Ever aware that he might not be taken seriously in the world of wine because of his scientific background, he decided to ensure he had credibility – he studied for his Master of Wine, achieving that in 2003.

Now he is a regular contributor to Decanter magazine and the World of Fine Wine and is the author of two highly successful wine related books.

The first *What Price Bordeaux* examined the history behind one of the world’s most renowned wine producing regions. His second *Wine Myths and Reality* took on the mystery and folklore that tends to surround wine production. Currently he is completing a book entitled *In Search of Pinot Noir* that takes more conventional wisdom and examines it in a concise and methodical way.

“One of the questions I asked in *Wine Myths and Reality* and now can go into more detail is whether the differences between the wines of different regions are due to something intrinsic, for example terroir including soil, climate and all the non man made effects of the site, or are they due to the choices made during winemaking? To what extent is wine reflecting an intrinsic property of a site and to what extent does it reflect the choices that a winemaker makes when he produces it?”

The book covers the history of Pinot Noir and the entire Pinot family. It focuses on old world regions and new world producers. Which is why he decided New Zealand deserved a dedicated chapter.

“The chapter I am doing the research for now is the Southern Hemisphere. This really focuses largely on New Zealand, basically Martinborough, Marlborough and Central Otago. There

will be something in the chapter on Yarra Valley and Mornington Peninsula, and there will also be a little bit on South America and South Africa, but in terms of where the defining force for new world Pinot Noir is coming from, it sort of splits in my mind between North America and New Zealand.”

He expected the three New Zealand regions would throw up different Pinot Noir characteristics, but he was “very interested” in the fact that Marlborough had distinct sub regional characteristics, something he wasn’t expecting.

“I am interested in that, because it is something that is completely obscure. It may not be as obscure in Marlborough itself, but it is outside of New Zealand. I think it deserves further exploration.”

The tasting arranged by Wine Marlborough categorised the 38 wines into sub regions, allowing Benjamin to compare.

“What I saw in the Southern Valleys, especially in the Brancott area was a more obvious sense of gravelly texture. You get a sense of the wine as you roll it around your tongue that there is some sort of texture here. Whereas from the Wairau I got much more of a superficial red fruit fleshiness and I didn’t get quite that sense of texture to it. I tried about three or four from Brancott area and five or six from Wairau and there was a real difference there. The wines from the Awatere Valley definitely had a leaner character, much less fleshiness to the fruits. These are differences I was not conscious of before I came here.”

It is not only sub regional differences here in Marlborough that consumers are likely to be unaware of he says. Regional differences are also something the industry needs to work on.

“In New Zealand it may be that people are really conscious of the differences between Martinborough, Marlborough and Central Otago, but it’s not the case in somewhere like London. If you go to a restaurant in London, your choice of Pinot Noir will be between old world and new world. The old world will be Burgundy and the new world is likely to be New Zealand, rather than America. But I don’t think consumers will draw a distinction between the New Zealand regions. Hopefully this book will take that on; to what extent the regional specificities are.”

With so many varieties to concentrate on, Benjamin says he chose Pinot Noir because it is one of only two varieties that is transparent to its site. The other one being Riesling.

“With each of them you see a range of differences that relate in some way to where they come from. I don’t think you see that in the same way with say Syrah or Cabernet Sauvignon. Pinot Noir is much more reflective of the site it comes from. But what I wanted to find out is

whether that reflection of site determines the wine, or whether it is the input of the winemaker.”

Impressed with what he was tasting here in New Zealand, Benjamin did have one major gripe. He believes we are selling our Pinot Noir too early.

“It is my belief that these wines are being drunk too early. While dining in Wellington I was really struck that the wine lists basically had Pinot Noirs from 2008 and 2009. There was the occasional 2007, but in all the evenings I ate out I found only one 2003 and one 2005 on the list. So for my money, the 08 and 09s, although the producers are producing them with the intention they can be drunk and enjoyed when they are released, are really too young.” He believes the region is underselling itself and in some ways short changing the consumer, who never get the opportunity to taste the wines as the mature.

“I understand there is huge commercial pressure to get them onto the market. The producer can’t afford to hold them and release them later. The restaurant can’t afford to hold them either. So what you are doing is offering the consumers a monotone view. I grant you that there is an impression out there that the consumer market wants wines that are bursting with fruit and are young. But for my money you actually see the fruit flavours of those wines and their potential complexity much better after a year or two.”

In his book, Benjamin will list the wines he has tasted and rate their ideal drinking age.

“Not everybody likes older wines. So I give a specific drinking age of a range of years for each wine. It starts when the tannins have softened and in almost every case that is not going to be the current vintage, but two or three years down the road. The end of the range will be when I think the wine will begin to turn from fruity to savoury notes. I say explicitly if you like fruity wines drink it before that range. But if you prefer wine with a slightly savoury overtone, you can drink these wines well beyond the range I have indicated.

“But even people who would prefer fruitiness I think would find the 08 and 09 vintage much more pleasurable and interesting and showing a much wider range of flavours two years from now. But they are never going to see that. I think you are short changing the region by not finding some way to achieve that.”

Perhaps one of the more interesting aspects of his book will be his questioning of history and how it relates to Pinot Noir.

“The last chapter of the book is called the Holy Grail, because people always talk about Pinot Noir being the Holy Grail, so the question becomes, to what extent are we prisoners of history? If Pinot Noir had been grown first of all, let’s just say here in New Zealand, in a site that is warmer and more reliable than Burgundy, and you had been growing it for 200 years

and then Burgundy had started planting only 20 years ago, would we consider New Zealand differently? Would we say, ahh, it's interesting that Burgundy is trying to make Pinot Noir, but the climate there is too inconsistent. It's too cold, it's too rainy, they can't really achieve the true fruitiness or fleshiness we look for in Pinot Noir. I guess the question I am asking is; to what extent is our view of Pinot Noir coloured by history?"

An interesting conundrum, which we will have to wait and see if Benjamin manages to answer. *In Search of Pinot Noir* should be in book stores by mid September.

On the subject of Pinot Noir, Marlborough shone at the recent Royal Easter Show. 21 gold medals were awarded to Pinots. Of those 21, Marlborough wines took more than half – 12 in total. Central Otago won seven golds and two went to the Wairarapa/Martinborough region.

So well done to Marlborough – the success is testimony to the quality Pinot Noir being produced in this region.

