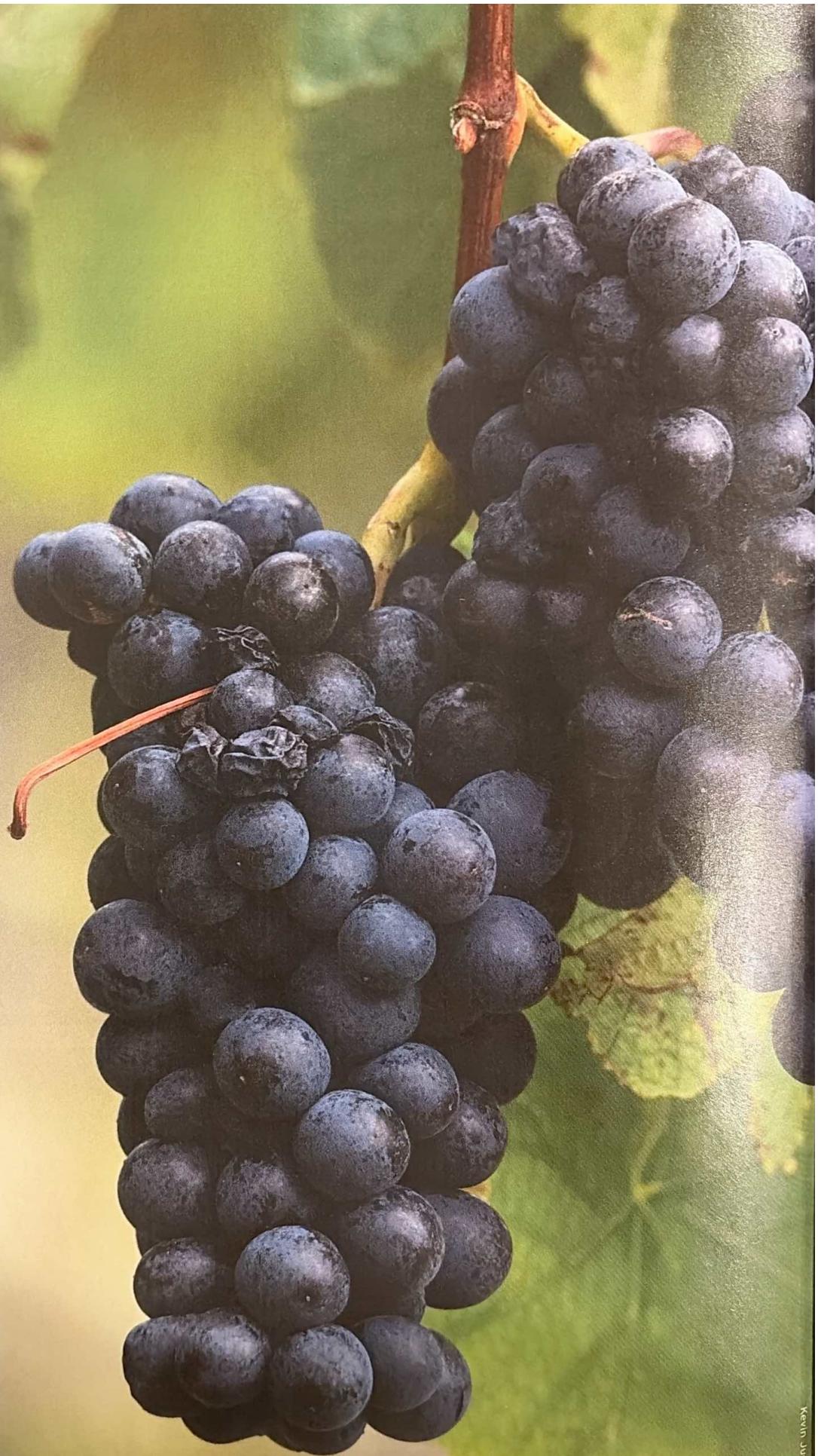


Pinot Noir grapes on the vine at Greywacke in Marlborough, New Zealand.



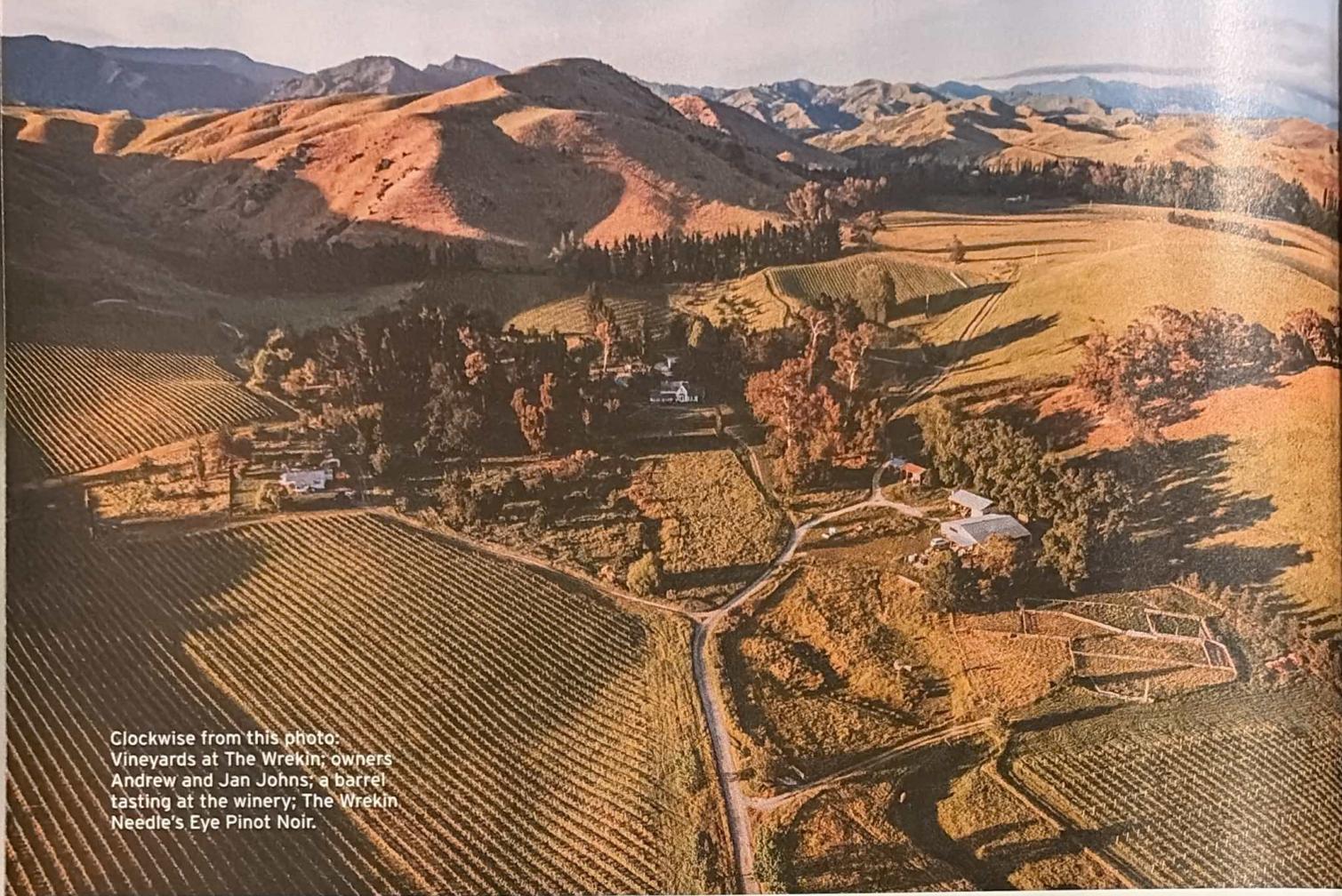
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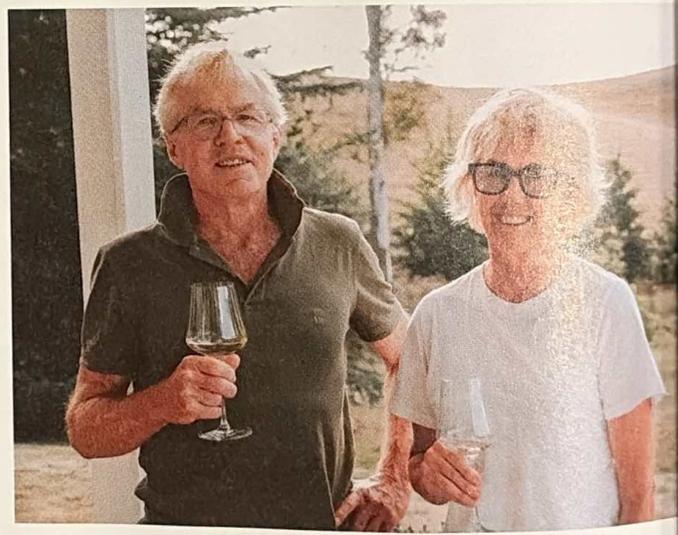
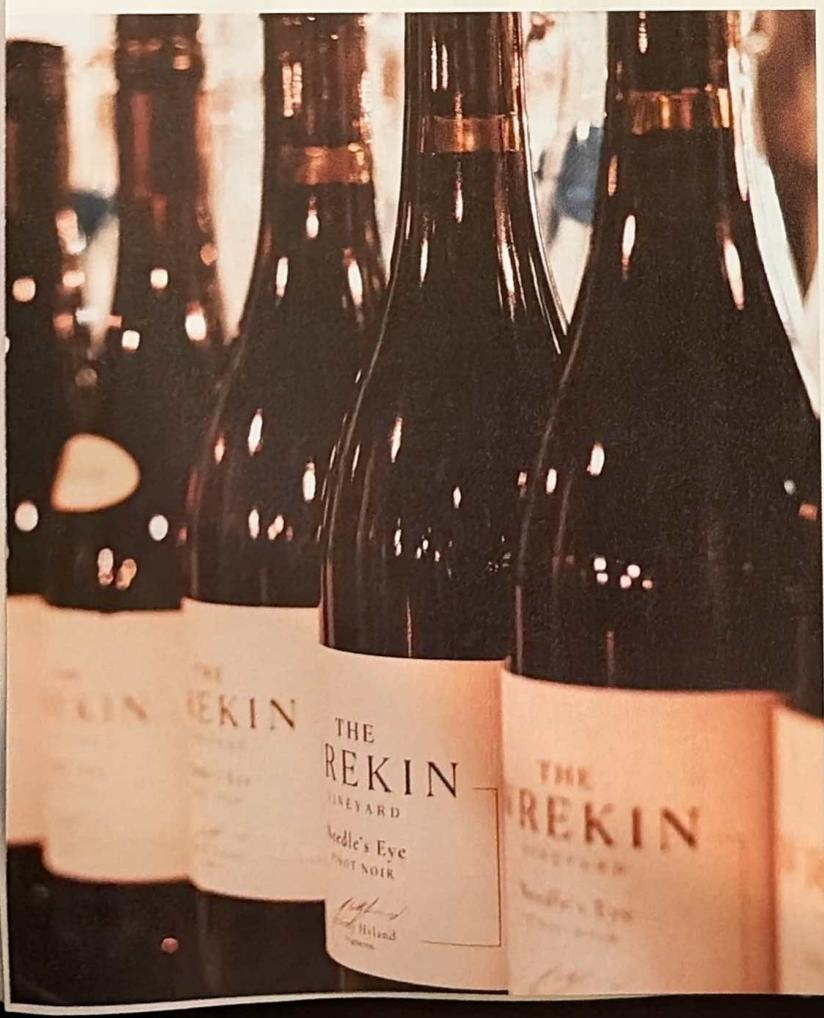
COLOR SHIFT

Renowned for
its white wine,
New Zealand finds
growing promise
in Pinot Noir.

Story By BETSY ANDREWS



Clockwise from this photo:
Vineyards at The Wrekin; owners
Andrew and Jan Johns; a barrel
tasting at the winery; The Wrekin
Needle's Eye Pinot Noir.



JAN AND ANDREW JOHNS
GROW 17 HECTARES OF
CERTIFIED-ORGANIC GRAPES
ON A MIXED-USE FARM
CALLED THE WREKIN, WHERE
THE REST OF THEIR 360
HECTARES ARE GIVEN OVER
TO MERINO SHEEP, BLACK
ANGUS CATTLE, OLIVES,
AND AGROFORESTRY. THEIR
PRACTICES ARE BIODYNAMIC.
THEIR CUSTOMERS ARE
MICRO-PRODUCERS.
SEVENTY PERCENT OF THEIR
VINEYARD CROP IS PINOT
NOIR, SOME OF WHICH THEY
KEEP TO VINIFY THEMSELVES
IN THEIR TINY GRAVITY-
FED WINERY. THE WREKIN
NEEDLE'S EYE PINOT NOIR IS
A SILKY, MIXED-BERRY RELISH
OF A WINE. THE WREKIN RED
ADMIRAL PINOT NOIR LAYERS
IN FLOWERS, HERBS, PLUM
SKIN, AND DEPTH. RIGHT
NOW, 2020 IS THE CURRENT
RELEASE FOR BOTH. SAYS
ANDREW, "THERE'S NO RUSH."

If all that sounds good, what if I told you that it isn't California or Oregon or Burgundy where the Johns grow their grapes? It's Marlborough, New Zealand. In a region dominated by big players, where nearly 70 percent of the 42,450 vineyard hectares are planted with quick-to-market Sauvignon Blanc, the fact that the Johns are focused on small-lot, age-worthy Pinot Noir seems astounding.

And, yet, they are not alone. Though its juggernaut is Sauvignon Blanc, New Zealand's second most-planted grape—12.5 percent of all vines—is Pinot Noir, and increasingly more of it is going not to sparkling wine or rosé, but into still red bottlings. A conference dedicated to New Zealand Pinot Noir lures wine professionals from around the globe. They come because they know that, especially in a world warming under climate change, the nation's location in the Southern Ocean's chilly Roaring Forties gives its Pinot Noir tremendous promise.

It's not only Marlborough. The remote Central Otago, Nelson on the South Island's northern coast, North Canterbury near Christchurch, and the stellar Wairarapa on the North Island all boast growing collections of Pinot producers. With eco-friendly agriculture and nuanced production methods now the norm, it's the right time to be exploring New Zealand's Pinot Noirs.

●
Like neighboring Tasmania, New Zealand (or Aotearoa, as it's named in Māori), is really just getting started with Pinot Noir. It may well be that the grape arrived in New Zealand in 1836, when British diplomat James Busby imported cuttings of more than 300 European varieties. There were isolated plantings of it before the turn of the 20th century when phylloxera and temperance took their toll. But white wine dominated the industry's mid-century recovery, and Pinot Noir really didn't pick up again until the 1970s, when customs officer and winemaker Malcolm Abel discovered a cutting from Burgundy's legendary Domaine de la Romanée-Conti smuggled in a traveler's gumboot. Today, the Abel clone predominates in New Zealand Pinot. Its small berries bring color and backbone to the wine.

In Marlborough, where the grape was first planted in the mid-1970s, winemakers have been slowly figuring out how best to treat Pinot Noir in the midst of Sauvignon Blanc's meteoric rise. For one thing, they've ripped up Pinot vineyards once planted on the valley floor. With the jagged Richmond Ranges to the north sheltering it from

rain and the Wither Hills blocking Arctic winds from the south, the region is, essentially, a big, dry bowl with valleys scraped out of it. Plentiful sunshine ripens the grapes; maritime nights cool them down, helping retain acidity. But the stony and sandy loam soils on the plains, where Sauvignon Blanc thrives, isn't great for Pinot Noir. The grape prefers the clay at higher elevations.

Siren Wine's juicy, whole-bunch Empress Chilled Red 2022; spicy Mahi Wrekin Single Vineyard 2023; savory Jules Taylor Wrekin Vineyard 2023; Corofin Wrekin Vineyard 2020 with its balance of firm tannins and zippy acid—though the winemaking yields distinct personalities, The Wrekin's terroir gives all of these Pinots their floral aroma and deep, cherry palate. Tucked into a vale high atop Marlborough's cooler Southern Valleys subregion, The Wrekin's Pinot grows on hillsides of wind-blown clay settled atop greywacke, New Zealand's sandstone bedrock. Plantings on a variety of slopes, aspects, and soil depths have allowed the Johns to explore Pinot's potential on their property. It's a process going on across the region.

"The wine and the focus on terroir have grown significantly," says Sanna Stander, production winemaker at Two Rivers, named for the Wairau and Awatere Rivers that cut through Marlborough. "We're just getting to know it. At first, the winemaking was focused on Sauvignon Blanc and the valley. Now, we're realizing it's all the little pockets that make Marlborough interesting."

Two Rivers Brookby Hill Pinot Noir 2021 shows a balance of ashy earth and lively acidity with a crunchy, lip-smacking mid-palate wrapped by darker dried-fruit notes. Grown on a steep clay plot in the Southern Valleys, the grapes come from vines that are 22 years old, which is getting up there for Marlborough Pinot. Stander naturally ferments the fruit, leaving 20 percent in whole bunches and aging it in a mix of barrel and tank. She doesn't filter or fine the wine, and she adds minimal sulphur.

"Our winemaking used to overpower the fruit, but with the vines becoming established, winemakers are letting that maturity show," notes Richelle Tyney, the winemaker at Marlborough's Greywacke. Picking the fruit earlier, treating it more gently during pressing and fermentation, and lightening up the toast on the barrels, she says, "we're allowing the fruit to speak to the terroir." Greywacke Pinot Noir 2021 is structured and concentrated but with a lovely florality. "The vineyard is almost 30 years old, and the fruit has intensity, purity, and lovely tannins, so we don't need to pull that from the oak anymore."

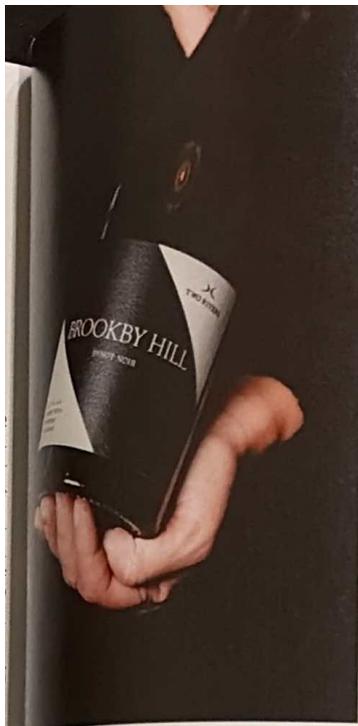
Along with a lighter touch in the cellar, Marlborough's Pinot producers have been taking a gentler approach to viticulture, to the benefit of both the wine and the environment. Lifted, floral Novum Pinot Noir from the regeneratively farmed Quarters Vineyard, where the long-horn cattle provide the compost; plummy and velvety te Pā Organic Pinot Noir, from founder and owner Haysley MacDonald, who is safeguarding land passed down by his Māori ancestors; intense, black raspberry Auntsfield Single Vineyard Pinot Noir, organically farmed on wind-blown hillsides, where song thrushes and Austral magpies sing in riparian zones installed to improve water quality—though just 4 percent of the region's vineyards are organic, these dynamic wines are indicative of a growing commitment toward earth-friendly practices.

Overall, Pinot Noir is New Zealand's most earth-friendly varietal. While 15 percent of Pinot is grown organically, just 3 percent of Sauvignon Blanc is, and some larger Sauvignon Blanc producers have been buying up organic vineyards and returning them to chemical farming to meet their bottom lines. In contrast, the Pinot-producing cohort here is looking at their economics through an ecological lens, leaning into regenerative practices to better manage evolving environmental issues. "Improvement in our viticulture is accelerating with climate change," says Auntsfield's general manager and viticulturalist Ben Cowley.

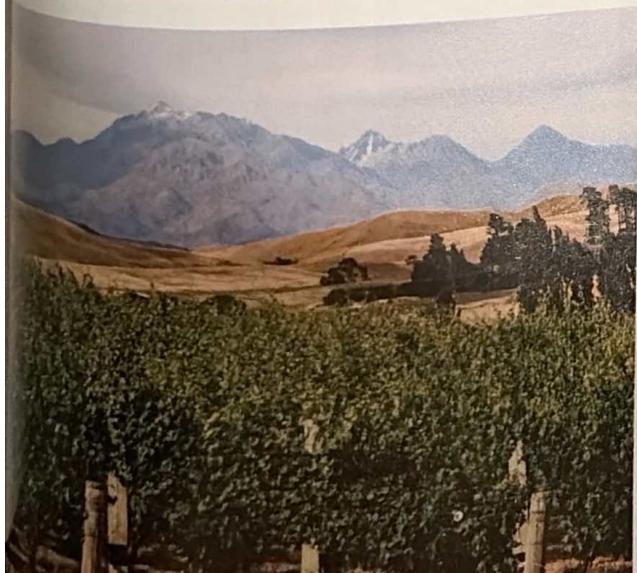
Larry McKenna is glad to see a lighter touch in both the cellars and the vineyards in his region, too. "We leaf plucked heavily and exposed delicate fruit to 100-percent sunlight, and the fruit doesn't need it. It develops ugly tannins, too much color, and clumsy wines. We need to have fruit that's shaded," says McKenna, who retired in 2022 from his longtime post as CEO of Wairarapa's Escarpment Winery.

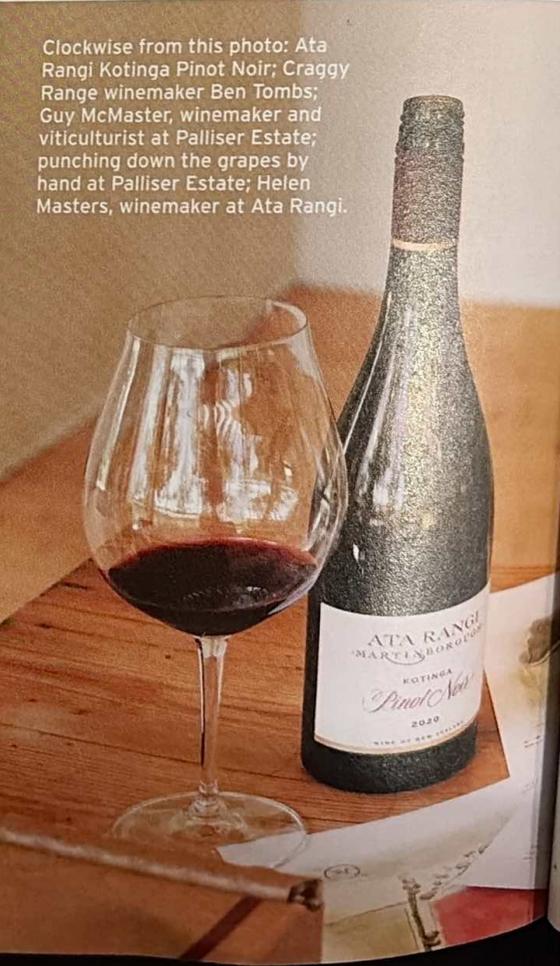
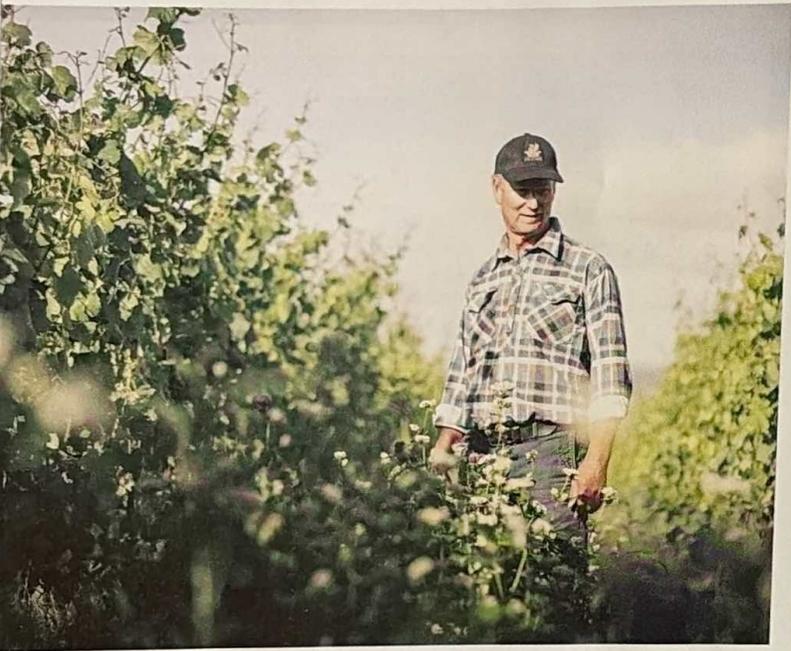
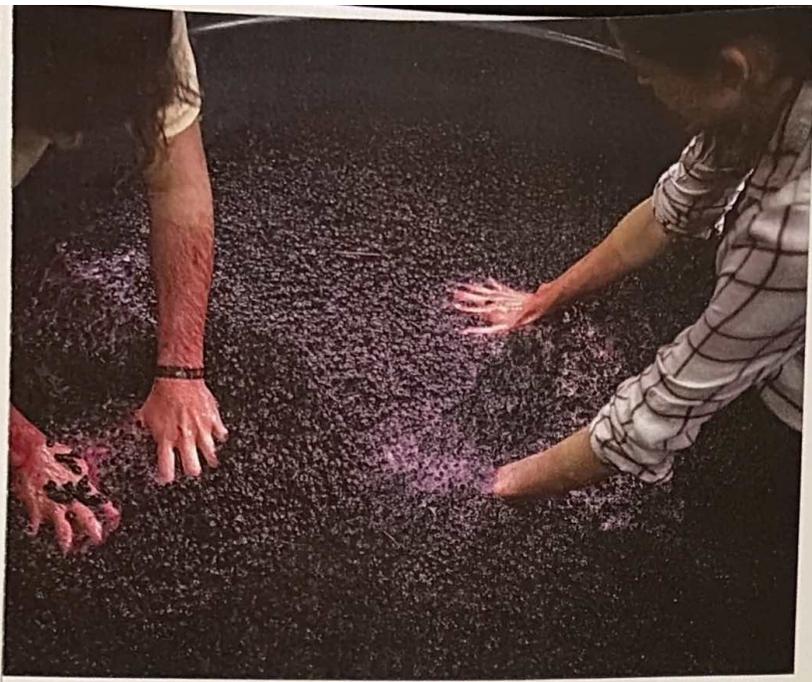
Compared to Marlborough, Wairarapa and other regions are minuscule, but they produce relatively more Pinot Noir. In Central Otago, where some 80 percent of the plantings are Pinot Noir, the daytime sun and the nighttime chill off the snow-capped mountains are fierce. The berries grow thick-skinned and dark in response, and the wines offer earthy intensity. A long, dry growing season brings richness to coastal North Canterbury's Pinot.

In Wairarapa, on the North Island's chilly southeastern corner, Pinot covers nearly half the 1,162 planted vineyard hectares. The region's most acclaimed growing area is Martinborough.



Clockwise from this photo:
Auntsfield's general manager and
viticulturalist Ben Cowley and
winemaker Luc Cowley; Richelle
Tyney, winemaker at Greywacke; the
te Pā Westhaven Vineyard; grape
harvest at Greywacke; Two Rivers
Brookby Hill Pinot Noir.





Clockwise from this photo: Ata Rangi Kotinga Pinot Noir; Craggy Range winemaker Ben Tombs; Guy McMaster, winemaker and viticulturist at Palliser Estate; punching down the grapes by hand at Palliser Estate; Helen Masters, winemaker at Ata Rangi.



If Marlborough, in its size and dominance, resembles Napa, Martinborough feels more like Sonoma. The eponymous town features an old-timey, restaurant-lined central square, not unlike Healdsburg's, with several cellar doors within walking distance. But the natural environment is purely Aotearoa. The Ruamāhanga River meanders past town, and you can wade through the smaller Ruakōkoputuna River, bumping up against eels and soaking under waterfalls just down the road from Escarpment and other wineries, which are backdropped by Kupe's Canoes, hills said to resemble the Māori god's upturned vessels.

Savory, structured wines heady with fragrance come from grapes planted on 20,000-year old terraces carved out by the Ruamāhanga and Huangarua Rivers. Soils are composed of mineral-rich and nutrient-poor alluvial gravel and clay silt. French settler Marie Zelie Hermance Frere Beetham cultivated New Zealand's first Pinot Noir in Wairarapa in the 1880s because those soils, and the dry, Continental climate, reminded her of home. Beetham's vines didn't survive the early 20th-century temperance movement but in the 1970s, soil scientist Derek Milne confirmed Martinborough's Burgundian potential. Convinced, his colleague, Neil McCallum, launched Dry River Wines in 1979. Milne followed, hiring Larry McKenna as vintner and founding a winery named after the town.

Winemaking styles have changed in Martinborough since those early years, notes Helen Masters, winemaker at Ata Rangi, one of the first wineries established in Martinborough. "There's a lot less use of oak now because it's coming from another country and covers up our terroir. We're also using more whole bunch, and that lends spiciness." Wild-fermented with 40 percent whole cluster and aged 11 months in large French-oak foudres, Ata Rangi Kotinga Pinot Noir 2020, a single-site expression from the organically farmed Kotinga Vineyard, is full of sour cherry flavor and aroma with hints of cedar, wild herbs, and smoke.

Martinborough wines naturally remain textural and savory because there's less diurnal swing here, notes Oraterra's chief winemaker, viticulturalist, and partner, Wilco Lam. His biodynamically farmed 2023 Pinot toes the line between acid and tannins, cherries and stones. But there's another reason for the structure of Martinborough's Pinot Noirs, says Guy McMaster, winemaker and grape grower at Palliser Estate: wind. "Flowering to fruit set, we

get rapid cellular division, and that thickens up the cell wall of the berries, so Martinborough's Pinot Noir has the most elevated tannins in New Zealand." Palliser Estate's organic Hua Nui Vineyard Pinot Noir 2021 is spicy and zesty on the nose, but it's also quite smoky and firm on the palate, a leathery quality intermingling with the cherrylike fruit.

"Those southerly winds in spring remind us we're in a polar region," notes Masters. Along with the perennial danger of frost, the Antarctic bluster keeps yields low here. The wind can blow so intensely, it snaps the vines. "That's why the Abel clone is a lifesaver in Martinborough because it's later to flower, so it doesn't get smashed by the wind." Escarpment Kupe 2021, made exclusively with Abel-clone grapes shows the clone's muscle in its crunchy, graphite-like tannins, yet it has plenty of fruity acidity, too. Wines like this are made to age.

The majority of wineries here are small, family-owned operations—Cambridge Road, whose Wilde One Pinot Noir 2022 tastes deliciously of charred strawberries and white pepper; Equilibrium Makers, whose Pinot exhibits a Burgundian earthiness; Dublin Street, which makes a savory Pinot Noir with espresso-like tannins that mellow with age to dates and prunes. But the promise of Martinborough's Pinots has lured some deep pockets, too. The largest property is Craggy Range, the winery of Brisbane-based entrepreneur Terry Peabody.

At the 250-hectare Te Muna Road Estate, Craggy Range national vineyard manager Jonathan Hamlet is overseeing the transition to regenerative agriculture—planting cereals and flowers under the vines to shore up microbial diversity in the soil; using straw and discarded wool from sheep shearing to keep down weeds; and restoring more than 25 hectares of native bush. "With regenerative practices, we're picking at lower Brix but getting better phenolic ripeness," he says.

That bodes well for Pinot Noir. Indeed, Hamlet has been ripping out 10 hectares of New Zealand's preeminent grape, Sauvignon Blanc, in order to plant more Pinot. "We're seeing huge growth in Pinot Noir," says Craggy Range chief winemaker Ben Tombs. "It's been on allocation, and we haven't had enough of it." With bottles like Craggy Ridge Aroha Te Muna—a Pinot Noir that presents both bright, red and rich, black currant flavors that roll into a firm, coffeelike finish—it's easy to see why the next big chapter of New Zealand wine will be written in red. ■