

A Visit to Burn Cottage Vineyard

26-Sep-2013



At the base of the Burn Cottage vineyard amphitheatre

One of the most exciting labels from Central Otago to appear lately is 'Burn Cottage'. It's a Pinot Noir only producer, and the initial releases have been very strong and true to the concept of terroir and vintage expression. The 2009 wine is a full, weighty wine, and I rated the 2010 my highest Pinot Noir last year with a 19.5+/20 rating. The 2011, which I reviewed earlier this year is a more elegant, but precise wine that reflects the season and it too is an excellent example.

In July, I drove past the vineyard, but did not visit due to time constraints, so I was extremely pleased to be able to catch up with Burn Cottage's general manager and associate winemaker Claire Mulholland on my Central Otago trip for the 'Spring Release' tasting. She took me for a quick tour of the vineyard and a visit to the winemaking facilities in Cromwell.

The Burn Cottage Property

Following Claire's stint as winemaker at Martinborough Vineyard, Claire headed back to home territory with a number of winemaking jobs including time consulting in Gibbston Valley and then winemaking at Amisfield. Over the course of time she noted with interest the developments of American wine distributor Marquis Sauvage and guru winemaker Ted Lemon of Littorai with the vineyard site on Burn Cottage Road in the Lowburn area. She soon found herself part of the team as general manager, and being fully involved in the winemaking, her own credentials adding considerably to the existing expertise and creating a great deal of local interest.



Jared Connolly and Claire Mulholland

Purchased by Marquis and Dianne Sauvage in 2002, the vineyard is part of a greater whole, that being the Burn Cottage Property, and is integral with the farm which was run from the start on biodynamic principles. The property is near self-contained, and running the property as an enclosed farm the goal. Biodynamic expert Peter Proctor was involved from the start. Jared Connolly, the vineyard manager and viticulturist has been there from the very start, and, living on site, continues to bring the vineyard and property to its full potential. A herd of Highland cows is part of the operation (manure!), bees are kept and olive trees are planted as part of biodiversity, with planting native trees and bushes in the programme.

The Vineyard

The vineyard is just on 11 ha, with 10.24 ha planted to Pinot Noir, the planting carried out from 2003 through to 2009. Some Riesling (0.51 ha) and Gruner Veltliner (0.24 ha) is part of the equation, being planted in 2007 and 2008, at the top of the property in an east-facing gully. The vines are close-planted at a density of approx. 5,000 vines per hectare. Claire walked me through part of the vineyard and up the hill to get a vista of the amphitheatre-like aspect. The vines looked healthy and pruned to one and two canes, indicating the aim of quality and sensitivity to the work of the vines as youngsters. The orderliness and care taken with the vines and land was very 'clear' (excuse the pun), and the biodynamic overlay very harmonious.

What I found extremely interesting is that each of the various blocks of Pinot Noir are planted to a variety of clones. This reminded me of Matt Kramer's address at the Pinot Noir 2013 conference where he admonished that the next phase in attaining true Pinot Noir complexity was the use of as many clones as possible. In essence, this is what Burn Cottage has done. Claire pointed out that it takes considerable work, vine by vine, to bring the growing and development of the different clones into sync, so they can be harvested together. I'm sure there are differences in the nature of the grapes at the time of harvest, but may be this is the complexity that Kramer was alluding to. Certainly, Marquis, Ted, Claire and Jared are at the beginning of their learning curve, and they are keen not to force nature's hand, and allow the vineyard to speak – hence the style of the 2011 wine.



Whole cluster sorting table

The Winery

Claire took me to Rogers Street in the industrial area of Cromwell to visit the Burn Cottage winery. Nearby are Rockburn, Quartz Reef, VinPro and COWCo. Occupying two small units, the operation is ultra clean and has the latest equipment. There's no shortage of resource here to ensure the best wine is made. Besides the small, open stainless steel fermenters and temperature controlled tanks, there are two sorting tables, one for berries and the other for whole clusters.

There's the mandatory barrel store with barriques, as well as large oak ovals. These beauties are being increasingly used by a number of top end producers and valued for their role in having a more harmonious and integrated wine. Martinborough vineyard has one of these, pride and joy for Paul Mason; Claire had obtained it as a priority purchase while working there.

There's certainly a bit of overkill, as until now, Claire and Ted were handling 23-25 tonnes of fruit. But 2014 looks to see a significant increase as the vineyard matures, and the yield is projected to eventually double to enable 5,000 six-packs of wine to be made. The overseas distribution channels are well-established with strong markets in the U.S.A. (of course), in Australia and the U.K. I'm sure that the output could be swallowed up there alone. However, there is stock allocated domestically, and already it sells out quickly. I can't see that changing, even with the full production! www.burncottage.com



Beautiful big barrels!