

## Mornington Peninsula Chardonnay and Pinot Noir

The Mornington Peninsula is a young wine region in global terms but we do have over 30 years of experience to draw on. It seems clear that the region is particularly suited to the Burgundian varieties, chardonnay and pinot noir. This may at first sight seem surprising given that Burgundy is a long way from the sea and the Mornington Peninsula is surrounded by water. In fact, Burgundy has a humid, rather than a classical continental climate and is closer to our climate with its maritime influence than drier regions away from the sea.

Within the Mornington Peninsula there is considerable diversity of climate, soil types, rainfall and altitude as well as the usual variations in topography, which give each vineyard site its unique characteristics (“terroir”). Despite this, one can see some regional characters in the grapes and the wines. The effects of “terroir” and winemaking (“the hand of God and the hand of man”) are superimposed on these more general characteristics. We now have enough mature vineyards in the region to attempt to define some of these characters.

What can we say about Mornington Peninsula chardonnay?

Probably the clearest and most important feature of Mornington Peninsula chardonnay is the high level of acid in the grapes when fully ripe in terms of sugar and flavour. The fruit from the cooler sites is so high in acid that the resulting wines cry out for a malo-lactic fermentation to bring them into balance. From the less cool sites, the wines are still acid enough to carry the effects of malo-lactic fermentation without losing acid balance, but from these sites winemakers can decide these issues from the viewpoint of style – some preferring a simpler, higher acid style and others preferring a softer more complex style of wine.

Another characteristic of chardonnay fruit from the Mornington Peninsula is in the fruit flavours, both in intensity and in type. The spectrum of flavours is from the citrus through melon flavours to stone fruit, reflecting the cool nature of the region. Flavour intensity in fruit from the best sites is great. This encourages winemakers to use techniques such as wild yeast fermentation, including solids in the ferments, warm fermentation temperatures and malo-lactic fermentation which add complexity and texture but diminish primary fruit flavours and aromas.

What about pinot noir?

Pinot noir is a variety that is fastidious. It will declare loudly that something is wrong when it is not planted in the right place, is not looked after properly, is over cropped or not pampered in the winery. Josh Jensen (Calera Vineyard) called it the “especially grape” – especially difficult and unforgiving. It is also especially rewarding sometimes.

It is now clear that there are regions in the “new world” in which pinot noir can produce wines of great quality. (There was a time not so long ago when this was not thought to be the case – that outside the côte d’or in Burgundy planting pinot noir was a waste of time). The areas around the city of Melbourne, known as the “dress circle”, are in this category. These are the Mornington Peninsula, the Yarra Valley, Macedon and Geelong.

Of these, the Mornington Peninsula is the most southerly, and has the greatest maritime influence. It is, as mentioned above, quite a diverse region. There are two main unofficial sub regions. The more northerly (“down the hill”), which includes Moorooduc, is warmer and drier with poorer soils than the more southerly part (“up the hill”) around Main Ridge and Red Hill, which generally is at a higher altitude.

The best wines from pinot noir from both sub regions show complexity of primary fruit aromas and flavours in the spectrum of cherries, plums and raspberries, with the “up the hill” wines tending to the red fruits and the “down the hill” wines to the darker fruits. Savoury complexity is common and, as vine age is increasing, we are seeing more tannic structure in the wines, to an unusual degree for new world pinot noir.

In general, the best wines from both sub regions have fine, complex aromatics, good mid palate weight and length and fine tannins.

In terms of longevity, the (almost) universal use of closures that are consistent and do not allow the ingress of significant amounts of air into the bottles, (screw cap and “Diam” mainly) means that there is virtually no inconsistency and premature oxidation of the wines. If cellared under proper conditions, one would expect the chardonnays to live for five to ten years, although most consumers would regard three to five years as the time when most wines are drinking at their best.

In general the pinot noir wines would have a longer life expectancy in bottle than the chardonnays, particularly those which have been made to encourage the extraction of tannins. As the structure of these wines seems to be increasing (see above), one would expect the more recent wines to live for longer, say, ten to fifteen years.

What does the future hold? On the positive side, increasing vine age and the introduction of clones (especially of pinot noir) that used not to be available in Australia, promises an increase in wine quality. Uncertainty about climate change is of concern. Our climate in recent years has been warmer than, say, ten to fifteen years ago. This has been associated with improved wine quality, but clearly, further significant warming would not be welcome. Our maritime situation may mitigate some of the predicted changes. We remain cautiously optimistic and believe that we can expect to continue to grow and make wine of exceptional quality from these varieties for many years.

Richard McIntyre, May, 2010