



The mysterious appeal of Pinot Gris

by Colin Ford

Pinot Gris enjoys huge popularity at present among New Zealand wine drinkers.

More than just popular, it's the fashionable variety. Supermarket shelves are stacked with it and the wine list of every brasserie and bistro is crammed with it. Yes, we kiwis love our Pinot Gris.

In 2003 there were just 316 hectares of Pinot Gris planted across New Zealand. In 2012 that figure was 1,764 hectares. That's five-and-a-half times as much in the space of a decade. Pretty impressive growth in anyone's book!

In 2009 New Zealand grew 11,410 tonnes of Pinot Gris. At, let's say, 700 litres of wine per tonne of grapes, we're looking at production in 2009 of around 8 million litres or 885,000 cases.

In that year we exported 2.036 million litres of Pinot Gris or the equivalent of 226,000 cases. That means we drank nearly 6 million litres here - or 661,000 cases worth. Roughly two bottles for every man, woman and child in the country.

Pinot Gris' spiritual home is in Alsace, France; a region that borders France and Germany in the foothills of the Vosge mountains and cleft by the Rhine river. The people are passionately, steadfastly French

despite their decidedly Germanic sounding surnames and placenames, lasting evidence of the region's history as a oft-exchanged territory between two of Europe's great warring powers.

In Alsace, the climate and soils, the history, culture and people come together to produce wines from the Pinot Gris variety that are first and foremost, wonderfully textural - they simply feel good in your mouth. This is a great quality when wine accompanies food. Dry examples tend to have restrained aromatics with a mineral-like character and pure, focussed pear aromas and flavours. Sweet examples can be rich and almost unctuous, yet retain the superb balance and the lovely texture in the mouth the variety is reknowned for.

Italy too makes its share under the name Pinot Grigio. Typically these are relatively full-bodied whites with restrained fruit; dry, crisp and refreshing and again well suited with food.

In Germany, Pinot Gris is known as Rulander - and they make a lot of it - virtually none of which makes it to New Zealand.

Now, I love wine deeply. I have been involved in the wine industry at some level for my entire working life and I would like to think that I am one of the New Zealand wine industry's most

passionate advocates. But I have a confession to make... When it comes to Pinot Gris in this country, I just don't get it!

I don't get why as a country we're so head over heels in love with Pinot Gris, because frankly, as a country, we suck at it!

Clearly, as the tasting in the spring 2012 edition of WineNZ shows, there are some truly outstanding examples made here and some really pretty good ones too. But there's also a lot, that to me at least, are pretty bloody ordinary.

By ordinary, I mean that the wines fail to excite. So many seem to be stuck in some kind of stylistic limbo and in the absence of being emphatically anything, they turn out emphatically nothing... lost somehow.

Some take the aromatic approach to style... But Pinot Gris isn't actually all that aromatic as a variety. If I'm looking for aromatic, give me emphatically aromatic Riesling or Sauvignon Blanc. These are varieties where the vibrancy and prettiness of fruit can truly shine in New Zealand conditions.

To me, we seem to really struggle with balance in Pinot Gris here. In many examples, wines are either dry and flammably alcoholic or

corpulent with residual sugar, lacking the concentration on the palate or phenolic ripeness to allow Pinot Gris' textural qualities to shine.

I admit I'm not a grower or a winemaker so I have no right to go off on this tangent, but, well, I feel the need to get this off my chest.

My theory is that in most of New Zealand's winegrowing regions, it is too sunny and too cool for this variety. To really excel with it, we need to find terroir that have fewer sunshine hours, enabling growers to control sugar levels and hence enabling winemakers to better control the alcohol levels in the wines. These terroir also need to be warmer, allowing better flavour and phenolic ripeness in the grapes, which can be translated to purity of flavour and improved texture in the wines.

This combination of less sunshine yet more warmth may sound contradictory, but in fact, it's not. Look at Marlborough for example, one of the sunniest regions in New Zealand and also one of the coolest. For Pinot Gris, I think we need the opposite.

This country and our wine industry have achieved enormous success in our brief, brief history. I have no doubt that over time, the definitive New Zealand style of Pinot Gris will come. In my view, we're just not there yet. Either that, or I just don't get it. CF **CF**