

Opulent Otago

For a prized pinot, touch down in New Zealand's South Island to experience a delightful mix of scenery and sophistication.

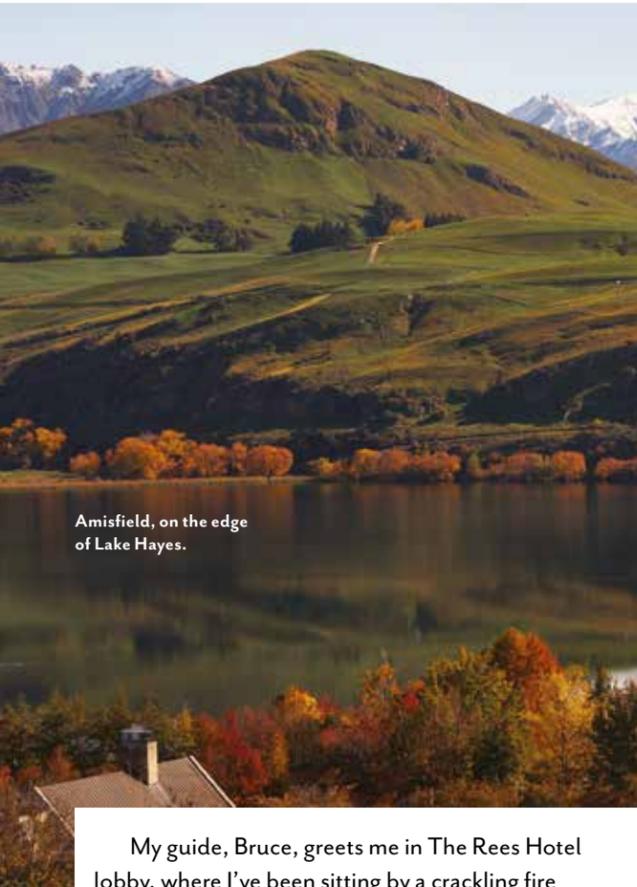
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Queenstown is perpetually drunk on adrenalin, offering visitors the opportunity to bungee, jet boat and snowboard to their heart's content. However, beyond the thrill-seeking facade exists a robust luxury market hinged on Central Otago's superb wine selection.

There's nothing like local knowledge (and a personal driver) to aid the wine tasting process, so I've booked a full day with Odyssey New Zealand. Odyssey pitches the upper market with group tours of no more than six, and also curates private tours to suit personal preferences – the option I've selected. »



Amisfield, on the edge of Lake Hayes.



Peregrine winery cellar door.

role as that of a caretaker – I just guide the wine into the bottle.” At Felton Road, this means no filtering or additives, resulting in a pure product.

Sharing a similar patch to Felton Road is Desert Heart, where we make a quick stop to sample a range of pinot noirs. The facility contrasts Felton’s sleek operation with a rudimentary shed at the end

of a dirt road, but bags a prime view of the turquoise Kawarau River. The winery also creates some luscious pinots, which have been poured in First Class by Air New Zealand – proof you can’t judge a book by its cover.

Next, it’s on to an old sheep station that is now home to the Peregrine winery. We’re escorted through the barrel hall and invited to meet assistant winemaker Ben, who is in the process of topping up barrels. “We get pretty good harvests here, and it was a hot summer with a big yield,” he says of the freshly picked 2018 vintage, shouting over dance music that seems to assist the creative process behind a refined cellar door.

The buzzy mood softens as we pull into Amisfield on the fringe of glassy Lake Hayes. This will be our lunch stop, but not before sampling a diverse wine list drawn from a single estate at the foot of the Pisa range. Our host Kenny says the winery loves paying homage to sauvignon blanc, given it’s the hero grape of New Zealand. However, thanks to Otago’s cool climate, Amisfield’s sauvignon blancs are more subtle than those produced in the Marlborough region, which make up the bulk of New Zealand’s wine exports. A special style is Amisfield’s fumé blanc – a textural, slightly spicy wine that absorbs coconut notes from oak and is only sold via cellar door.

My guide, Bruce, greets me in The Rees Hotel lobby, where I’ve been sitting by a crackling fire watching the fog lift from Lake Wakatipu to reveal the chiselled Remarkables mountain range. Bruce left a career in the police service to pursue a string of hospitality ventures, and now takes his love of wine on the road to shuttle guests between Queenstown’s finest wineries.

The Central Otago region has a reputation for its pinot noirs. So to start our day we’re heading to the top of the pecking order with a visit to Felton Road, a prestigious, boutique operation with pinots so highly regarded that vintages sell out well before the liquid hits bottle.

Given Felton Road’s high-end clientele, tastings are by appointment only, and I have the pleasure of touring the facility with head winemaker Blair Walter. As a science-loving kid raised on a farm, winemaking was a natural career path for Walter, who has been at Felton Road since its foundation in 1996. “We’ve always focused on the best quality wines and try not to get distracted by growth,” says Walter. “We hit our planned full production of around 12,000 cases per year in 2006 and have been the same size ever since.”

When asked about his approach to creating such a respected product, Walter believes quality grapes and a light touch is the secret. “The best wines are made with very little interference,” he says. “I see my

I’m soon to discover that Amisfield’s menu is rather special too as we sit down to a selection of sophisticated flavours augmented by artistic presentation. Biting into delicate red leaves of pressed elderberry and pickled walnut while sipping a silky pinot noir, it’s easy to see why the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge popped in for a visit in 2014.

Although pinot noir is the prize grape of Central Otago and accounts for around 70 per cent of the region’s vines, a visit to the area confirms some exciting white creations. Upon entering Chard Farm – a dusty pink building at the end of a river-hugging dirt road – I’m presented a glass of white. “What do you think it is?” asks host Pauline. I guess sauvignon blanc. “That’s what most say, but it’s a chardonnay,” she says. “The reason I blind taste is because most people’s perception of a chardonnay is buttery and creamy, but here it’s not always the case.” I’m next presented with a gewürtztraminer with hints of Turkish delight, and finish with a Tiger pinot noir, produced from a single vineyard in the Lowburn sub-region and lauded as the winemaker’s favourite.

While the wineries around Queenstown typically draw from estates in the semi-arid and relatively

warm (by New Zealand standards) Cromwell Basin, Central Otago also encompasses the picturesque town of Wanaka. So the following day, I tackle the Crown Range by winding my way up the highest sealed road in the country for some stellar views and, of course, some stellar wine. I’m visiting winemaker Sarah-Kate Dineen from Maude at her label’s newly opened tasting room overlooking Lake Wanaka. After cutting her teeth at some of Australia’s best-known wineries with husband Dan, the time was right to return home to capitalise on a vineyard planted by her parents in 1994. As one of the oldest vineyards in Central Otago, the grapes are used for the couple’s top-end Mount Maude range, while three other vineyards also supply the Maude label.



A selection of Desert Heart wines.



The view of Lake Wakatipu from The Rees Hotel.

Sarah-Kate highlights the Mount Maude chardonnay as her favourite from the stable, commenting that the style sells so fast it barely sees the market. Similarly, the current vintage of Mount Maude pinot gris is already dusted, making a trip to the cellar door a worthwhile exercise to snaffle the remaining gems.

Another cellar door worth visiting in Wanaka is Rippon, if for nothing other than its aesthetics. Locals describe it to me as the most beautiful vineyard in the world, which is no small claim. As I walk towards the cellar door along a sloped grassy path, the bold statement makes sense as a carpet of golden vines rolls towards Lake Wanaka. With Ruby Island forming an elegant centrepiece in the bay and mountains dusted with snow to my left, the scene is first-rate. And after a few days sipping my way around Central Otago’s finest, I’d say the wines are first-rate too. ■