



Wine

BY MICHAEL COOPER

Spoilt for choice

If you want to drink pinot gris, how do you choose from the 300-odd labels available?

Pinot gris is popular – very popular. Mouthfilling and smooth, it is an easy-drinking wine, the sort you can offer anyone. But with over 300 labels crowding the shelves, which ones should you buy?

One problem is that pinot gris is often bland – some winemakers liken it to “working with white paint on a white background”. A vigorous variety, it tends to yield heavy crops, which produce dilute, boring wines. To achieve the rich stonefruit and spice flavours of fine pinot gris, it is crucial to crop the vines lightly.

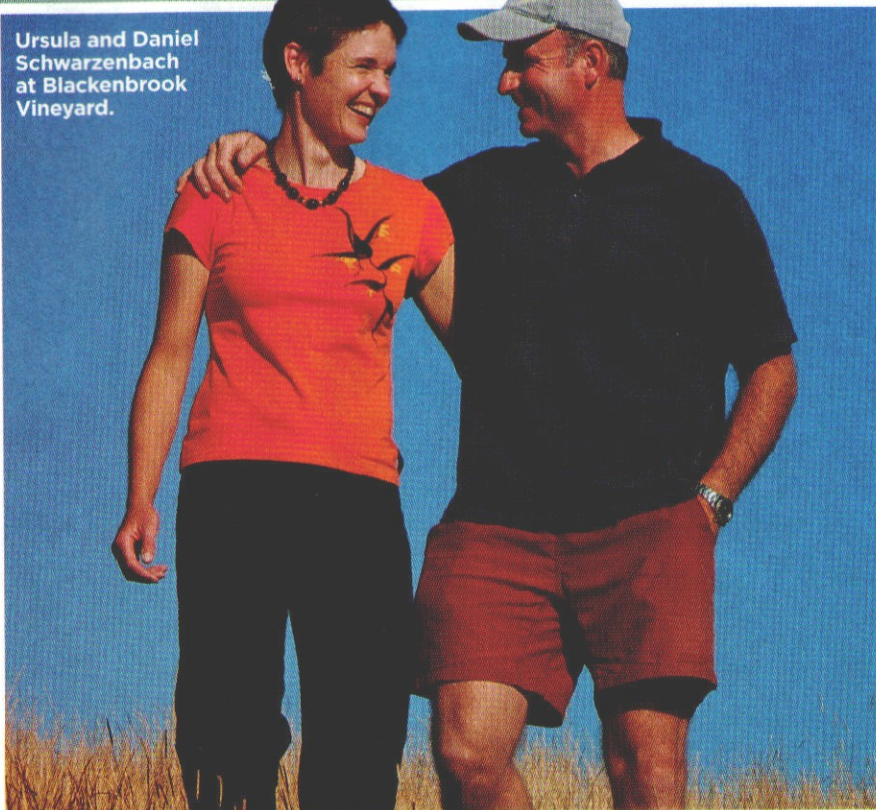
Daniel Schwarzenbach has long yearned to make a great pinot gris. “Before starting our own vineyard, I worked as a cellar hand for Domaine Zind-Humbrecht in Alsace, one of the top pinot gris producers worldwide. It was a fantastic experience and I couldn’t wait to get home and start planting ...”

Today, in rolling country near the coast at Tasman, Schwarzenbach and his wife, Ursula – they were both born in Switzerland – produce one of this country’s most striking pinot gris. In the classic mould of Alsace, Blackenbrook Vineyard Nelson Pinot Gris (\$27) is typically a powerful, high-alcohol wine, enticingly floral, with a strong surge of peach, pear and spice flavours, hints of apple strudel and honey, gentle sweetness and lovely vibrancy and richness.

Dry River has a cult following for its trickle of top-flight Martinborough wines. For many years after its debut in 1986, Dry River towered above other New Zealand pinot gris by virtue of its exceptional body, richness and longevity. “There was a time when people only wanted to taste our pinot gris,” recalls the founder, Neil McCallum.

What does Dry River Pinot Gris (\$55)

Ursula and Daniel Schwarzenbach at Blackenbrook Vineyard.



taste like? Sturdy, weighty and well-rounded, it is slightly sweet, with a rich array of stonefruit, lychee and spice flavours. Delicious in its youth, it also flourishes with cellaring. “The price keeps it as a niche wine,” says McCallum.

Since its first “commercial” vintage in 2005, Greystone has stood out among Waipara’s producers for its classy aromatic white wines – pinot gris, riesling and gewürztraminer. Pinot gris, the winery believes, is “our most successful variety to date”.

Greystone Waipara Pinot Gris (\$29) is benchmark stuff. Fragrant and full-bodied, it is a softly textured medium style with stonefruit, pear, lychee and spice flavours, showing lovely delicacy, ripeness, harmony and richness.

Terrace Edge Waipara Valley Pinot Gris (\$21) offers great value. Richer and more complex than most New Zealand pinot gris, it is enticingly scented, with substantial body, a hint of honey, gentle sweetness and deliciously rich peach, nectarine and spice flavours.

Terrace Edge is a small vineyard owned by Bruce and Jill Chapman. The wines are made by Belinda Gould, best known as winemaker until recently for one of Waipara’s top producers, Muddy Water. The pinot gris is a consistently impressive wine, full of personality. Why they sell it for just over \$20 is a mystery.

One of the highlights of Villa Maria’s extensive range is its gloriously scented, very fresh and rich Single Vineyard

Seddon Pinot Gris (\$32), which ranks among the country’s greatest examples of the variety.

Seddon Vineyard is perched high on the southern bank of Marlborough’s Awatere River. An exposed river terrace, it is a warm site, cooled by evening winds off the slopes of Mt Tapuae-o-Uenuku.

A powerful, sturdy wine, Villa Maria Single Vineyard Seddon Pinot Gris is very floral and fruity, with a slightly oily texture. It offers notably concentrated, lush flavours of pears, lychees and spices, with a long, dryish finish.

Another label with “best buy” credentials is Waimea Nelson Pinot Gris. Nelson’s second-largest producer, Waimea Estates is owned by Trevor and Robyn Bolitho, who planted their first vines in 1993. Winemaker Trudy Sheild has worked at Domaine Bott-Geyl, a respected Alsace producer of pinot gris.

Deliciously full-bodied, it is a medium-dry style, soft and rich, with a slightly oily texture and a perfumed bouquet. Only \$22, it is a star on the show circuit. ■

Wine of the week

Terrace Edge Waipara Valley Pinot Gris 2010
(★★★★)

Fleshy, rich wine with concentrated peach, nectarine and spice flavours and a slightly sweet, softly seductive finish. \$21.

