

# VICTORIAN NOBILITY

## STATE OF PLAY

# PINOT NOIR



THE YARRA VALLEY AND MORNINGTON PENINSULA PRODUCE SOME OF AUSTRALIA'S MOST NOBLE EXPRESSIONS OF THE BELOVED PINOT NOIR.

Words **Stuart Knox**

**P**inot Noir has fascinated winemakers and wine-lovers for centuries, with it being recognised in France as a high quality variety as far back as the Middle Ages. Fast forward to the beginning of Australian wine and you will find that Pinot Noir was included in some of the earliest plantings by James Busby in the 1830s.

It is a notoriously difficult variety to grow, with thin skins leaving it sensitive to temperature fluctuations and prone to disease pressure. Those thin skins mean that it is better suited to cooler regions, but with cooler regions come a myriad of other challenges in the ripening process. One last challenge in its production is that it does not respond to high cropping levels, meaning the return per acre is meagre in comparison to many other varieties. So why the fascination? Humanity always enjoys a challenge and Pinot produces some of the finest wines ever made, so the reward is definitely worth the effort.

Pinot Noir produces light to medium-bodied wines, often showing cherry and berry fruits with savoury elements in the spectrum of mushroom, truffles and damp earth. Often acid and tannins are interplayed to bring vibrancy and structure. The greatest examples show amazing complexity, building and growing across the palate, a sensation which the late Len Evans AO OBE described as 'the peacock's tail'.

#### VICTORIAN REVIVAL

In our modern era of winemaking, the Yarra Valley was revived in the late 1960s, with the Mornington Peninsula not far behind in the early 1970s. Both

regions continue to be at the leading edge of premium Pinot Noir production in Australia.

The two regions, while only separated by approximately 100 kilometres, are a fantastic contrast of style. Tom Carson of Yabby Lake (Mornington) and Serrat (Yarra) describes the wines of Mornington, and Yabby Lake in particular. "I find the wines a little bit darker, more brooding, with quite good concentration and tannin extract."

The maritime influence on the Mornington Peninsula makes every vintage a unique challenge for the region's makers. Barney Flanders of Garagiste sources fruit from across the entire Mornington region, from Tuerong to Balnarring and Red Hill. While he acknowledges there are different soil types and elevations that will have an effect on individual sites, it's the bodies of water that really change the ripening of each vineyard. "Aspect to prevailing winds and whether you're closer to Port Phillip Bay or Western Port. How your sites relate to that and the weather patterns." This is how Barney explains the variations across the region and why one vineyard may be picked up to a month later than another.

When we turn to Tom's home vineyard at Serrat, and the Yarra in general, he says, "The wines are typically more of those red fruits and florals and I find the wines are more silky and finer when young...a lovely balance that comes through right from the get-go." Steve Flamsteed of Giant Steps sees those same Yarra characters and believes over the past 10 or so years there's been an emerging Yarra Valley style that embraces

#### CRITTENDEN ESTATE THE ZUMMA PINOT NOIR 2018

MORNINGTON PENINSULA, RRP \$57

For the Zumma range, Crittenden Estate sources fruit from a small portion of their original home vineyard, which they've been tending since 1982. They draw inspiration from the great wines of Burgundy for this Pinot, which is reflected in its beautiful depth of flavour. In the glass, it's light to medium red, while the nose exudes aromas of whole bunch spice with red fruit and earthy notes. Bright and vibrant, it features wild ferment complexity adding to the ripe strawberry and raspberry core, with hints of green olive and mushroom and well-judged charry oak.

#### RED CLAW PINOT NOIR 2019

MORNINGTON PENINSULA, RRP \$30

The Red Claw label is by Mornington Peninsula experts, Yabby Lake and the range is designed to be enjoyed when young and bright. From the excellent 2019 vintage, this Pinot Noir benefitted from even ripening, resulting in intensity and gorgeous flavours. Presenting a bright mid ruby colour, it has a nose offering cherry, cranberry, Italian bitters and rhubarb aromas. Masses of red berry fruit on the palate with varietal touches of orange rind, white mushroom and forest floor, vibrant acidity, supple texture and a long, fine finish.

#### TARRAWARRA ESTATE RESERVE PINOT NOIR 2015

YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$60

The 2015 vintage was ideal in the Yarra Valley with its warm days and cool nights during ripening allowing for fine flavour development and retention of acid. The result was fantastic wines like this reserve beauty from Tarrawarra Estate. Medium brick to garnet coloured, it appeals with aromas of blood plum, dark cherry, leather, clove and mocha. While it's drinking close to its peak, it features primary red fruits that are still very fresh, chocolate, game and earth complexity, cedary tannins and a dry, savoury finish.

This desire for complexity drives all the winemakers I spoke to. They all aim to keep as many of their single vineyards, individual blocks and even specific clones separate during vinification and maturation.

those traits. The understanding is that Yarra Pinot doesn't have dark colours, but has wonderful elegance and perfume. They don't naturally have a great deal of tannin, but what tannins are present have a more silken feel. Vintage in the Yarra is relatively steady in comparison to Mornington owing to its continental climate. Tom talks about the Yarra and his winemaking being more consistent. "A bit of whole bunch works every year, colours and balance appear pretty early."

Consistency of weather allows better fruit set and thus a slightly less challenging viticultural season. Kelly Healey of Rochford, only two vintages in at this winery, but with many years of Yarra experience, sees his role as a babysitter, caressing the vineyard characteristics through the winery. He has access to multiple sites that offer variation in altitude, soil and aspect, providing the light and shade for the estate bottlings.

#### CLONAL CHOICE

In any conversation about Pinot Noir, the discussion invariably turns to clonal selection. While all varieties have different clones available to vigneron, the variety and characteristic differences

of the Pinot clones is distinct. Lindsay McCall of Paringa Estate planted his first Pinot Noir in the late 1980s. At the time, he was limited to a few local clones, MV6 (Mother Vine clone sourced from Maurice O'Shea plantings in the Hunter Valley) and other UC Davis stock. In the 1990s, he was able to secure another vineyard and graft part of the Chardonnay over to a selection of the Dijon clones (777 and 115).

"We're catching up on the newer clones of Pinot, which is quite exciting. I hadn't planted for 20 years then suddenly we can start doing it again," Lindsay tells me, with the excitement noticeable in his voice. These recent plantings have been made up of Abel, 667 and Pommard. The reason for this excitement? The key to great Pinot is unforced complexity and all these clones bring different characters into the final blend.

This desire for complexity drives all the winemakers I spoke to. They all aim to keep as many of their single vineyards, individual blocks and even specific clones separate during vinification and maturation. This provides an array of flavours and textures to build the ideal blend for bottling. These multiple components also give them the opportunity to drill down on what each block provides and how it has manifested based on vintage conditions, viticultural and vinification methods. This allows for experimentation in small batches that, in worst case scenario, won't have a detrimental effect on the final wine.

A thread appears among all these winemakers that viticulture is taking the starring role in their wines. A strong focus on vineyard health, massive reduction on systemic treatments and moving towards sustainable, bio-dynamic and organic practices. By reducing these chemical inputs, native vineyard yeast populations

are healthier and wild ferments seem to be the favoured method amongst them. Going hand in hand with this is a move to larger fermentation vessels. Lindsay waxed lyrical about his three *foudres*, large wooden vats, which he ferments his reds in. If he could fit more in the winery, he'd buy more in an instant. "They do things to Pinot that stainless steel just can't."

All of these winemakers have been enjoying the characters that large oak ferments provide. On that same theme, Kelly has been using large rectangular *caves*, or vats, that mimic the type used in Beaujolais. Barney has been getting great results with concrete fermenters and Steve is currently designing a new winery for Giant Steps that will include concrete vats for red fermentation. These larger, thicker vessels warm up more slowly, but then dissipate heat more slowly as well, allowing for a more gentle extraction of colour, flavour and tannins.

#### WHAT'S OLD IS NEW

With a variety as noble and respected as Pinot Noir, tradition is always a factor for discussion. For many years, particularly the 1990s, Australia prided itself on going out on its own and trying new things. We saw that across many wines, including Pinot. Lots of oak and other winemaker artefact disrupted the subtle nature of the fruit. Fortunately things have changed, with this group of winemakers very conscious of letting the vineyard shine. A resounding agreement across them all is that everything old is new again. The traditional ways of Pinot Noir production are providing the best results.



**STONIER PINOT NOIR 2019**  
MORNINGTON PENINSULA, RRP \$30

Brian Stonier was one of the pioneer vigneron of the Mornington Peninsula, where he planted Chardonnay in 1978 followed by Pinot Noir in 1982. Since then, Stonier Pinot Noirs have attracted international acclaim, praised for their expression of the unique Mornington Peninsula terroir.

Pale red in the glass, this elegant wine attracts with pretty and lifted red fruit aromas, along with mushroom, pot pourri and background toasty oak. Flavourful with lovely whole bunch notes adding to the red berry fruit, cedar, undergrowth and floral characters, fine tannins and touches of rose petal and espresso on the juicy finish.



**RANGE LIFE PINOT NERO 2018**  
MORNINGTON PENINSULA, RRP \$28

Range Life specialise in Italian varieties, which is why they've chosen the Italian name for Pinot Noir for this wine. A pale ruby coloured stunner, it has a complex and intense mix of red and blue fruit aromas, crushed red petals, and funky struck match lift. Silky and seductive with a deliciously complex array of red cherry, tea smoke, bramble, crushed herbs and wet stone minerality. Varietal yet deluxe with terrific texture and complexity and an intriguing finish.

**PARINGA ESTATE PENINSULA PINOT NOIR 2019**  
MORNINGTON PENINSULA, RRP \$32

This Pinot combines fruit from Paringa Estate's warmer and cooler vineyards, resulting in a beautifully balanced mix of bright fruit and vibrancy. It shows strawberry, cherry, Campari and five spice aromas, while the fine and detailed palate has cherry and strawberry fruit, attractive spice, olive and Italian bitter notes, fine tannins, a supple mouthfeel, and juicy acidity.



**MR. HUGH BLUE RANGE ESTATE VINEYARD PINOT NOIR 2018**  
MORNINGTON PENINSULA, RRP \$45

Mr Hugh's wines are made only in small quantities from his favourite vineyards. This Pinot comes from one of his standouts in the Mornington Peninsula. It's a bright, medium Pinot red with aromas of ripe strawberry and background notes of clove, pine needle and tilled earth. Delivers fine red berry fruit and fine tannins with a plush mouthfeel, roundness and length with youthful energetic charm.

**STICKS PINOT NOIR 2019**  
YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$24

A classy and complex Pinot that ticks all the varietal boxes and is a great example of the classic Yarra Valley style. Medium garnet in the glass, it presents an attractive lift of red liquorice, herbs, red fruits and earth on the nose. The palate is light to medium-bodied with a sweet mix of red fruits, silken texture, lovely whole bunch stalky notes, vibrant acidity and classy oak in support. Very savoury with graphite notes on the finish.



**ROCHFORD LATITUDE  
PINOT NOIR 2020**  
YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$27

Pinot Noir is the flagship variety for Rochford and their expertise shines in this stunning example. The Latitude range is crafted from fruit sourced from multiple Yarra Valley vineyards – in 2020 the fruit came from the Briarty 9, Hill Road and Gembrook vineyards.

Pale ruby in colour, this wine allures with aromas of dark cherry, raspberry, bay leaf, cedar and forest floor. Bright and juicy, it has a fresh mix of red fruit, gentle cedary oak, attractive undergrowth and graphite complexity, fine-boned tannins and an elegant finish. Long and velvety with no rough edges – it's beautifully easy-drinking.



**TOOLANGI PINOT NOIR 2019**  
YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$30

The Toolangi vineyard in the Yarra Valley is home to just three varieties – Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Shiraz – so the team is dedicated to producing them at their best. Their 2019 Pinot is a great example with its fragrant and elegant aromas of cranberry, cedar and white pepper. A very light-bodied style with an earthy yet juicy mix of savoury red fruits, attractive mocha and herbaceous elements, soft acidity and background oak. A Beaujolais-like Pinot.

**COOMBE FARM PINOT NOIR 2018**  
YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$40

From the former home of world famous opera singer Dame Nellie Melba, this Pinot has the elegance to match that of Australia's operatic legend. Pale to mid ruby in the glass, it displays fragrant cranberry, cherry, white mushroom and spice aromas. Light to medium weight, it features an attractive mix of red berry fruit, complex five spice and Campari notes, savoury tannin harmony and a long, juicy finish.

**OAKRIDGE OVER THE SHOULDER  
PINOT NOIR 2019**  
YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$24

Oakridge are pioneers of the Upper Yarra Valley and since starting in 1978, they have established a reputation as Pinot Noir specialists. The proof is in the tasting of this bright mid garnet coloured expression. Fresh red and dark berry aromas with subtle charry oak show on the nose, while the palate has intense raspberry and dark cherry fruit with light herbaceous undertones, fresh vanillin oak, bay leaf and white pepper.

**DE BORTOLI VILLAGES  
PINOT NOIR 2019**  
YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$25

For this Pinot, De Bortoli hand picked fruit from their own Yarra Valley vineyards, as well as grapes from other premium sites. The result is a nose with lifted notes of earth, mushroom and red berries. A lighter style, it has bright acidity and fine yet ripe white pepper-like tannins driving the core of red berry fruit. Shows savoury, earthy notes that balance the sweet core of fruit.



**HELEN'S HILL THE SMUGGLER  
PINOT NOIR 2017**  
YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$60

While Helen's Hill wines express the best of the Yarra Valley, they also show the unique characteristics of their Coldstream site with its hills, microclimates and iconic regional soil. The Smuggler, their Reserve Pinot, features fruit from a single vineyard and a single clone.

The resulting wine is pale garnet in the glass with a nose of bright strawberry, earth, mushroom and whole bunch spice. Layered and textural, it presents red berry fruit characters along with mushroom, undergrowth and clove, ripe tannin foundation and silken line and length.



**INGRAM ROAD PINOT NOIR 2019**  
YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$22

Another beauty from Helen's Hill, the Ingram Road is made to enjoy in its youth when its ripe characters are at their best. From the 2019 vintage, this medium ruby coloured drop presents aromas of cherry, redcurrant, white mushroom and black tea. A light and fine example of Pinot Noir, it features a silken mix of red fruit flavours along with notes of whole bunch spice, earth and citrus rind. Beautifully balanced with fine tannins and bright acidity.

**LIV ZAK PINOT NOIR 2018**  
YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$38

Liv Zak is a label by Warramunda Estate that's made to celebrate wines of "character, vibrancy, sophistication and texture". This Pinot does just that with its pale ruby colour and aromas of red cherry, cranberry, bitters and earth. A smooth Pinot with silken tannins underpinning the red fruit core, touches of black tea, five spice and whole bunch stalky notes, and a fine finish.

**BOAT O'CRAIGO BLACK SPUR  
PINOT NOIR 2019**  
YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$35

Boat O'Craig have vineyards in both Kangaroo Ground and Healesville with fruit for this coming from the latter. Its conditions are perfect for Pinot, creating alluring drops like this one with its aromas of forest berries and undergrowth with hints of cola and white pepper. Rich, warm and supple with savoury dark cherry, blackberry and blueberry, subtle stalky complexity, notes of damp earth and vanilla and toasty oak support.

**SOUMAH PINOT NOIR 2019**  
YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$28

Soumah have a unique ability to pack so much flavour into a wine that is only medium bodied. Bright Pinot garnet in the glass, it shows aromas of stalky strawberry with earth, white mushroom and fine oak. Dense Pinot power is present on the palate with impressive core richness and sinewy tension, and fine powdery tannins in support. A rich dry red style, it has great all-round appeal.



**THE COLDSTREAM GUARD  
PINOT NOIR 2018**

**YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$38**

This Pinot comes from Levantine Hill, where the dedicated team pursues perfection. Their efforts are certainly evident in this light to medium red coloured Pinot with its open and expressive aromas of mulled strawberry, prune, forest floor and clove. Plush and polished, delivering a riot of red berry perfume and velvet umami throughout, enhanced by damp earth, mushroom and stalk and charry barrel harmony.

**HELEN & JOEY INARA  
PINOT NOIR 2020**

**YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$25**

Helen and Joey is one of the newer wineries to emerge from the Yarra Valley in recent years, and they look set for a long, successful future with wines like this. Floral red berry fruit, red plum, spice and cedar oak aromas lead to a palate that's very soft, supple, bright and fleshy with ripe cherry, strawberry and cranberry, velvety tannin harmony, latent power, and background cedar oak.

**TREAD SOFTLY PINOT NOIR 2020  
YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$22**

Tread Softly is a range of wines crafted from famed varieties grown and sourced from regions that showcase them best - Yarra Pinot in this case. This bright mid red coloured 2020 vintage has a nose of sweet red and dark berry fruit lift with notes of vanilla and cola. Fresh and youthful with layers of cherry, blood plum and blueberry, hints of fresh vanillin oak, velvety tannins and crunchy acidity on the lovely long, savoury finish.

**GIANT STEPS APPLEJACK VINEYARD  
PINOT NOIR 2019**

**YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$65**

The high altitude of the Applejack vineyard creates an extended growing season - perfect for Pinot. Very fine ruby with a fresh blue tint in the glass, this is a refined style with elegant strawberry lift and energy on the nose. Bright red fruits deliver sensational umami with fine hints of stalky astringency and Campari-like savoury notes. Integrated tannins are plush and velvety.

**LONG GULLY ESTATE PINOT NOIR 2020  
YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$38**

If you can get your hands on this 2020 vintage from Long Gully Estate, do so, because while yields were down, quality was right up there. Bright pale ruby coloured, it presents youthful red and blue fruit, crushed herb and spice aromas. Light and fresh with raspberry, red cherry and strawberry characters, touches of rose water, plum jam and sweet spices. A juicy, uncomplicated Pinot Noir that's easy-drinking with crunchy acidity.

**ROB DOLAN TRUE COLOURS  
PINOT NOIR 2019**

**YARRA VALLEY, RRP \$24**

Using fruit sourced from throughout the Yarra Valley, Rob Dolan has crafted a Pinot that's medium density red in the glass with clean cherry, strawberry, white pepper and cedary oak aromas. A favoursome entry of ripe red berry fruit in a soft and savoury frame with silken tannins, lovely acid crunch and well-judged oak in support. Very varietal with mere hints of whole bunch complexity.