

Flavourable aspects

The vigneron around Arthurs Seat on the Mornington Peninsula are producing pinot noirs of great finesse

✦ By numbers alone, the Mornington Peninsula

is barely a blip in the world of pinot noir. Single villages in Burgundy make more pinot than the entire region, but numbers do not tell the story. Its unique cool climate position, wealth of quality sites and dedicated group of winemakers are also key. The result is that tucked away in the hills of Melbourne's playground is a gently undulating landscape from which some of Australia's finest pinot noir is crafted.

The dominant feature of the Mornington landscape is the grand Arthurs Seat formed about 370 million years ago that rises up close to the western coastline. This long, quiet volcano provides the backdrop for the vast majority of vineyards established in its shadow.

Arthurs Seat and Red Hill are also the basis for gentle rivalry between the vigneron located at higher altitudes closer to the peaks and those on the flatter coastal fringe to the east — up the hill and down the hill the locals call it.

Yet the highly unpredictable nature of the local terrain probably makes position and aspect more vital predictors of quality than altitude or lack of it. Nowhere is this clearer than at Stonier, one of the region's lowest-lying vineyards near Merricks Beach, and only 70 metres above sea level.

All the wines from Mike Symons, whether their entry-level or single vineyard stars, show tremendous elegance and finesse with superb purity of pinot noir fruit — no lack of class here.

Similarly, near the peak, local legend Nat White of Main Ridge crafts some of the region's finest pinot noir. These wines are immensely subtle, reserved and elegant yet with latent power — they unfold in the glass rather than impress with upfront fruit.

Being one of the coolest wine regions on the mainland also ensures that the finest wines are made on vineyards that maximise heat during the growing season. North to northeast-facing slopes of Red Hill, with their increased solar radiation, provide a natural advantage in that should the season turn cold there is still adequate sun to fully ripen the grapes.

Top-notch viticulture is also a key. Viticulturists train their vines to soak up every available centimetre of available warmth while giving adequate protection should a baking summer emerge.

Along with aspect and viticulture, prevailing winds are also vitally important, possibly more so than in any other region in the country with the region bordered by water on three sides. Mornington, at the southern tip of the Australian mainland, is highly exposed to winds from all directions. From the west comes the Port Phillip Bay breeze, gently cooling the vines.

Similarly the Westernport Bay breeze also moderates temperatures in the warmer months. Exposure to brisk southerlies, though, sometimes drawn from Antarctica, and proximity to the cool Great Southern Ocean are both key moderating influences, especially for pinot



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noir, because of its suitability to temperate and relatively humid regions. When the sun is scorching for some regions further north, the Mornington is often saved from the worst of the summer heat by refreshing afternoon winds bursting in from the ocean.

This most seductive of grapes is difficult to grow; it requires a unique combination of climate plus good vineyard sites to eke out the best from it.

With only 40 vintages under its belt, the Mornington Peninsula is already showing its potential with fantastic, regional styles from Dexter, Paringa Estate, Kooyong, Ten Minutes by Tractor, Yabby Lake, Eldridge, Moorooduc, Willow Creek, Paradigm Hill, Scorpo. Undoubtedly, the best is yet to come.

Stonier Windmill Pinot Noir 2010

A beautiful and beguiling pinot noir showing the impact of stalks with very pretty lifted wild strawberry, Chinese

five spice and herbal elements. Concentrated yet fine with juicy acidity, it is superb now but will be even better in 8-12 years' time.

Staindl Pinot Noir 2008

Fragrant and seamless with bright mid-ruby hue, the wine shows layers of secondary earth, spicy, truffle characters overlaid by regional blood orange characters. Graceful and elegant with very pure pinot characters finishing fresh, dry and lively with lacy tannins.

Main Ridge Half Acre Pinot Noir 2006

Subtlety is the key here with bottle age seeing the development of savoury almost cedary characters well integrated with primary raspberry/Campari fruit. Dry and poised in the mouth with silky tannins, the wine's balance is perfect with a long and bright finish — and it will easily live for another 8-12 years.