

Welcome to Bannock Brae Estate and Central Otago

Crawford Brown: Well, hello! I'm Crawford Brown, Bannock Brae Estate. Along with my wife, Catherine, we run a small vineyard, part of which you can see behind me here. We're primarily interested in Pinot Noir production, and I'm going to talk about that soon.

But you might be interested to know that we are relatively young in this industry. We bought the bare land behind us ten years ago and planted it in three different clones of Pinot Noir, 1998 and 1999. Our first commercial vintage was 2001, for which incidentally we won a Gold Medal, which was a very nice surprise for us, and that record has continued through to our current vintage, sitting just here, which is our 2006.

Now, in my previous life I was also involved in beverages. I was a brewer for many, many years and became Master Brewer in New Zealand for Lion Nathan, which some of you may have heard of. And in this part of the world, Central Otago is my home stomping ground. I was born and raised in south of the South Island, and so my entire life has been pretty much around this area and I know it very well.

Grape growing in Central Otago started relatively recently. Many people said, oh, it couldn't be done. How wrong they were. Pioneers a few years before us had discovered that it was, in fact, a fantastic place for the production of Pinot Noir and other wines, especially recent ones, wines that categorized as cool-climate wines. And as we have been growing here and looking at the behavior of grapes, it's become very obvious to us that Pinot Noir especially has some characteristics which are very difficult to find areas that will suit its growing habits. It is, of course, the wine of Burgundy, and when we think of Burgundy and try and translate its latitude to the Southern Hemisphere it's actually south of Stewart Island, south of the country of New Zealand in what's known is the Great Southern Ocean. Obviously you can't grow grapes there; but this is about as far south in the Southern Hemisphere as it's possible to grow grapes.

Now, we are filming this right in just before Christmas, our summer solstice, and at this time of the year even here, 250 km near the equator than Burgundy is, we get about 40 minutes less sunshine per day than they do in Burgundy. But we also have to remember that here our light is incredibly intense. One thing at this time of the year during the Southern Hemisphere summer, the sun is 6% closer to us than Northern Hemisphere summer enjoys, and because we're an island nation in the middle of the largest ocean in the world, our area is particularly clear, and the intensity of light is tremendous. I'm sure that these factors have a lot to do with the stunning wines that we are able to produce here, not just ourselves, but other people in this area.

Now, in fact, as our name might suggest, Bannock Brae, we are a little subdivision of Central Otago better known as Bannock Burn. We're several well-known names, such as Felton Road, Mount Difficulty, Carrick to name a few, and we're particularly blessed in this area with the climate and soil conditions that we have. For instance,

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it is a very dry climate; we are technically a desert with less than 300 millimeters of rain a year. We enjoy very a short, but intense summer period of about two months, particularly January-February, when temperatures can get very hot indeed, and then a long autumnal period, where we have warm days and cold nights. And this has the effect of allowing the vine, the Pinot Noir vine and its berries, to properly mature without forcing them. When Pinot Noir is grown closer to the equator, we often find - in fact, always find -- that the grape becomes sugar-ready before it's physiologically ready; and so the winemaker is forced to pick it, but you can end up with a thinner-bodied, even a green-tasting wine. But here we are able to ripen the grapes fully, and that occurs at the same time as the grape becomes sugar-ripe.

Few places in the world allow Pinot Noir to do that. Certainly Oregon is another well-known place, and certainly Burgundy. But the grape-growing area of the world where Pinot Noir grows in a stunning manner is probably something round about 1% or a little less than 1% of the total grape-growing area. So we are particularly blessed here.

Our particular vineyard is 8½ hectares. For those of you who are not familiar with metric, I think that translates to 21 acres. Our annual production is round about 2½ to 3 thousand cases a year. It gives us enough wine to export some of it. We certainly export to the U.S.A., also in Denmark, Hong Kong, Singapore and soon Australia. And New Zealanders have grown to like our product tremendously, so we're happy to say that a large percentage of our output is consumed within our own country, and I'm very pleased about that.

I would like to talk about our wines a bit more, and I'll do that in another segment; but hopefully what I've discussed so far about Central Otago and Bannockburn region in particular, I hope it's whetted your appetite, and we'll catch you later.