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SOUTHERN VINTAGE

John Hawkesby on the Central Otago wine trail.



Snow-capped mountains offer a cathedral-like backdrop and vines run almost to the banks of a reflective lake or gloriously turbulent technicolour river.



Many wineries now boast cafés, bistros or fully-fledged restaurants turning out superb food from local produce.

Picture courtesy Amisfield.



Pic Destination Queenstown

Wine tourism is big business for New Zealand, and it's one that is growing in popularity among both local and international imbibers.

To date, Hawke's Bay and Marlborough have been the two most-visited wine regions, but Central Otago is fast becoming the new kid on the block.

Apart from producing some excellent wines, especially Pinot Noir and Riesling, the lower reaches of the South Island offer some of the most spectacular scenery in the world. The mountains, the valleys, the wild-open landscapes and the light produce astonishing vistas.

As the well-travelled English writer Robert Joseph noted in his book *Wine Travel Guide to the World*: "If anyone was seeking to award a prize for the most beautiful, most tourist-friendly wine region in the world, Central Otago would be among the frontrunners. Where else can you – depending on the time of year – visit a winery, then go waterskiing or snowboarding on the same day?"

The vineyards of this region are among the most picturesque and photographed in the world. Often pictured with snow-capped mountains as a

cathedral-like backdrop, vines run almost to the banks of a reflective lake or gloriously turbulent technicolour river.

The intensity of cloud-free sunlight, along with fresh, cool evenings, produces outstanding, flavoursome Pinot Noir and crisp, lively Riesling.

South of this rapidly expanding wine-growing region is the fabled tourist capital of Queenstown. But alongside the resort town's dramatic setting, its funky ambience and plethora of adventure activities, the region's wine-growing is the big tourism story.

Not only are the vineyards accessible and visually delightful, many now boast cafés, bistros or fully-fledged restaurants turning out superb food from local produce.

Amisfield, on Lake Hayes Rd, an easy 20-minute drive from Queenstown, not only produces excellent wine but has a world-class bistro set in a large, rustic building made from rough-hewn timber beams and the stone schist that evokes the area's gold-mining heritage.

The view over glorious, tranquil Lake Hayes ought not to be missed.

At Cairnmuir Rd, Bannockburn, is another must-visit winery. Here, taking in the spectacular view across to the Carrick Range, is Carrick Vineyard.

Amisfield (opposite page) has a world-class bistro set in a large, rustic building made from rough-hewn timber beams and stone schist. Queenstown (above) is a wonderful base from which to explore Central Otago's 75 wineries and 177 vineyards.



Picture courtesy Carrick Vineyard.



Pictures courtesy Chard Farm.

One of the area's foundation wineries, Chard Farm (opposite page) boasts a highly dramatic setting. To get to the winery you skirt a precipitous bluff high above the magnificent Kawarau Gorge. The intensity of cloud-free sunlight and fresh, cool evenings produces outstanding, flavoursome Pinot Noir (above right). Felton Road's Block 3 Pinot Noir is consistently rated among the best wines New Zealand produces (right).

The panorama sweeps across Lake Dunstan and the air fills your lungs with an evocative mix of flowers and an earthy freshness that screams "good health". The well-crafted wines here include Pinot Gris and an excellent winery-only Chardonnay.

From its debut in 1997, Felton Road, also in Bannockburn, has become the premier Central Otago winery. Consistently rated among the best wines New Zealand produces, their Block 5 and Block 3 Pinot Noir have already reached exalted cult status. Owner Nigel Greening and chief winemaker Blair Walter have succeeded brilliantly in matching grape varieties to soil types, and although there's no café here, it's worth making an appointment in the tasting room.

No Central Otago wine tour would be complete without a visit to Chard Farm, in the Gibbston Valley.

One of the area's foundation wineries (established in 1987), Chard Farm boasts a highly dramatic setting. To get to the winery you skirt a precipitous bluff high above the magnificent Kawarau Gorge.

To make such a brief sweep of the many fine wineries and vineyards to visit is a bit like skipping through the Louvre in 20 minutes – you really ought to set aside a few days to capture the

essence and character of this fabulous area.

This will also give you an opportunity to stay at one of Queenstown's newest gems: the Queenstown Park Boutique Hotel. Touring the vineyards of Central Otago is a genteel, sophisticated and rewarding experience – why should your accommodation be anything less?

On the cusp of a tree-framed park (the Wakatipu Rugby Club) and a short three-minute stroll to the centre of Queenstown is the bespoke, ultra-hip, 19-room Queenstown Park. Modern and sharp, it manages to combine minimalism with sensible comfort, sleekness with serenity, edginess with equilibrium and pure luxury.

The Park View rooms are large, restful and inviting, with muted brown, chocolate, camel and white decor. The linen is exquisite and the pillows are the largest I've ever encountered.

A large, full-length gilt-framed mirror revolves to reveal a television. Clever, comfortable and homely: it's a mix that is often hard to get right.

The large windows frame The Remarkables and the glass-walled bathrooms are very New York. The kitchenette has everything you could think of, plus a touch of the obligatory Philippe Starck. The sign for the door is not the usual "Please Don't Disturb" but a more subtle "Hush – Please Come



Pictures courtesy Felton Road.



The bespoke, ultra-hip Queenstown Park Boutique Hotel is a short three-minute stroll to the centre of Queenstown.

Complimentary canapés and fine wines are served in the avant-garde foyer.



Back Later". I'm sure you're getting the picture.

There's no restaurant and frankly none is required – there's an overload of them a couple of minutes away. But for \$20, courtesy of Scottish chef Nick Lyon-Dean, I got the best hotel breakfast I've had anywhere in the world: homemade toasted muesli and more styles of fruit than I knew existed, followed by whatever you fancy. I opted for the gloriously fresh, perfectly poached eggs.

At 6pm, complimentary canapés and fine wines are served in the avant-garde foyer. It's a nice, homely touch which typifies our delightful hosts, Donna Fallon and John Etheridge, who seem to get everything just right.

Says Donna: "We need and want to be hands-on; we need to deliver what we feel people want. It's a big commitment, 24/7, but we're happy to do anything if required."

Partner John agrees. "We're providing a unique hosted, personal, intimate, hotel experience for people from 25 to 75."

Barely a year old, the Queenstown Park Boutique Hotel is a stunning addition to a special part of the country. One gets the feeling that, like a good Otago wine, it will age gracefully. 