

Pinot Noir – Spotlight on 777

Part of the Dijon family

By Nick Hoskins

Pinot Noir 777 belongs to the so-called “Dijon” group of clones for this variety. Although selections were apparently taken from a number of sites around Burgundy, the process was overseen by Professor Raymond Bernard who taught at the University of Dijon in the 1970s and 1980s and also worked at the nearby ONIVINS research station. As I understand it, Professor Bernard was involved in the selection process from the experimental vineyard in the Cote-d’Or in 1981.

“Triple Seven” was first imported to New Zealand by Martinborough Vineyard. The imports came directly from Raymond Bernard and were released from quarantine in 1992. Today, of course, such importations must flow through ENTAV-INRA®, the official French government agency responsible for selection work. At the time, however, there were no agreements with accredited nurseries in other countries, and private importations played an important role in developing the national vineyard. The clone is sometimes referred to as “B777,” but whether that indicates Bernard or Burgundy is a moot point. (I’d welcome hearing from anyone with additional information on this clone.)

Following the clone’s release from quarantine, Martinborough Vineyard contracted a nursery for propagation and grafting. Pinot Noir 777 was grafted onto two different rootstocks, one of which was later found to be infected with Grapevine Leafroll-associated Virus Type 2 (GLRaV-2). And so began the clone’s somewhat chequered history in New Zealand.

It is well documented that GLRaV-2 can affect graft compatibility, bunch structure and fruit set. After establishing the initial plantings, Martinborough Vineyard kindly allowed the Wairapa Grapevine Improvement Group to distribute Pinot Noir 777 (circa 1998). The bud wood, which was collected from Martinborough Vineyard, formed the basis for all source blocks throughout New Zealand. In 2003, Dr Roderick Bonfiglioli and the team at Linnaeus laboratory discovered that some of this source material tested positive for GLRaV-2. By that point, 777 had probably suffered further genetic degradation, since GLRaV-2 infected scion wood had in the meantime been grafted onto other rootstocks, some of which may have had minor viruses such as Grapevine Fleck Virus and Grapevine Rupestris Stem Pitting.

The viral history of 777 may have a bearing on the clone’s somewhat inconsistent performance around New Zealand. It was certainly one of the reasons



Figure 1 Pinot Noir 777 ENTAV-INRA®

Riversun Nursery Ltd. decided to reimport 777 from ENTAV-INRA®.

In the field

The information on Pinot Noir 777 in the ENTAV-INRA® catalogue describes the clone as having low to medium fertility with medium to small clusters and medium to small berries. In New Zealand, 777 does have small bunches and berries; it is also low cropping and early ripening. The growth of 777 is less vigorous than many of the other Pinot Noir clones, and the fruit set can be variable – especially in cool conditions.

In the winery

The winemaking information from ENTAV-INRA® describes 777 as having strong aromas with good structure and well-balanced tannins. In New Zealand, the response to the early import of 777 (via Martinborough Vineyard) has been mixed: it is often described as a solid performer but not noted by many winemakers as their “standout” clone. There’s an emerging consensus that 777 appreciates some hot temperatures during the ripening phase. Under those conditions, it performs very well.

Biographical note:

Company viticulturist for Riversun Nursery Ltd since 1998, Nick Hoskins was previously the vineyard manager for Martinborough Vineyard. Nick now resides in Wairapa: in addition to his viticultural consultancy services, he also operates a vineyard management company.