

Pinot Noir – the Abel clone

The New Zealand selection

By Nick Hoskins

The Abel selection of Pinot Noir comes complete with a colourful and uniquely New Zealand pedigree. Back in the 1970s, a Kiwi traveller returning from France (rumoured to be a Rugby player, no less) tried to bring in cuttings illegally – legend has it that the material was tucked into his gumboot.

The cuttings were confiscated by a New Zealand Customs Officer named Malcolm Abel, who coincidentally happened to be an Auckland winemaker. The confiscated goods were said to have been taken from the fabled vineyards of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti in Burgundy.

Understanding the significance of the smuggled plant material, Malcolm Abel paid for it to be put through quarantine at Te Kauwhata, the state-owned viticulture research station (accession number TK01022). When the material was released, he planted the vines in his vineyard in Kumeu.

The story might have ended there were it not for the Ata Rangi vineyard and winery in Martinborough. Soon after purchasing the original Ata Rangi block, winemaker Clive Paton worked a vintage with Malcolm Abel, and subsequently planted some of the new material in his own vineyard. Sadly, Malcolm died a short time later and so never realised the significance of his work. The Abel Vineyard was eventually absorbed by urban sprawl.

Clive Paton and the Ata Rangi team have always rated the Abel selection very highly, and many of their original award-winning Pinot Noir wines were made solely with Abel grapes. Today, some people even refer to the selection as the “Ata Rangi Clone” and the winery’s website (www.atarangi.co.nz) carries an informative history of Abel and the role it has played in the wines.

Care needs to be taken when sourcing Abel material because the original vines at Ata Rangi were not marked: all collections of cuttings had to be supervised by Clive himself. Over time, some of the original vines have also become infected with GLRaV-3 (Grapevine Leafroll-associated Virus, Type 3), which is a destructive disease that spreads rapidly in the vineyard.



Figure 1 Pinot Noir Abel

In the field

Abel is a fertile and productive selection, so cropping levels need to be regulated, especially in the establishment phase. Vines can easily be overcropped, but to produce good wine yields must be controlled.

The Abel selection has more vigour than ENTAV-INRA® clones 114, 115, 667 and 777, and tends to mature later. Bunches are relatively large and cluster weights are on the heavier side for this variety. The Abel selection does not appear to have any particular susceptibility to disease.

In the winery

Abel makes excellent intense and complete wines with very good colour and tannin. While many winemakers blend Abel with their other clones, some extremely good Pinot Noirs are being made with a large portion of Abel, including the Ata Rangi wines and Larry McKenna’s “Kupe” from Escarpment.

Biographical note:

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