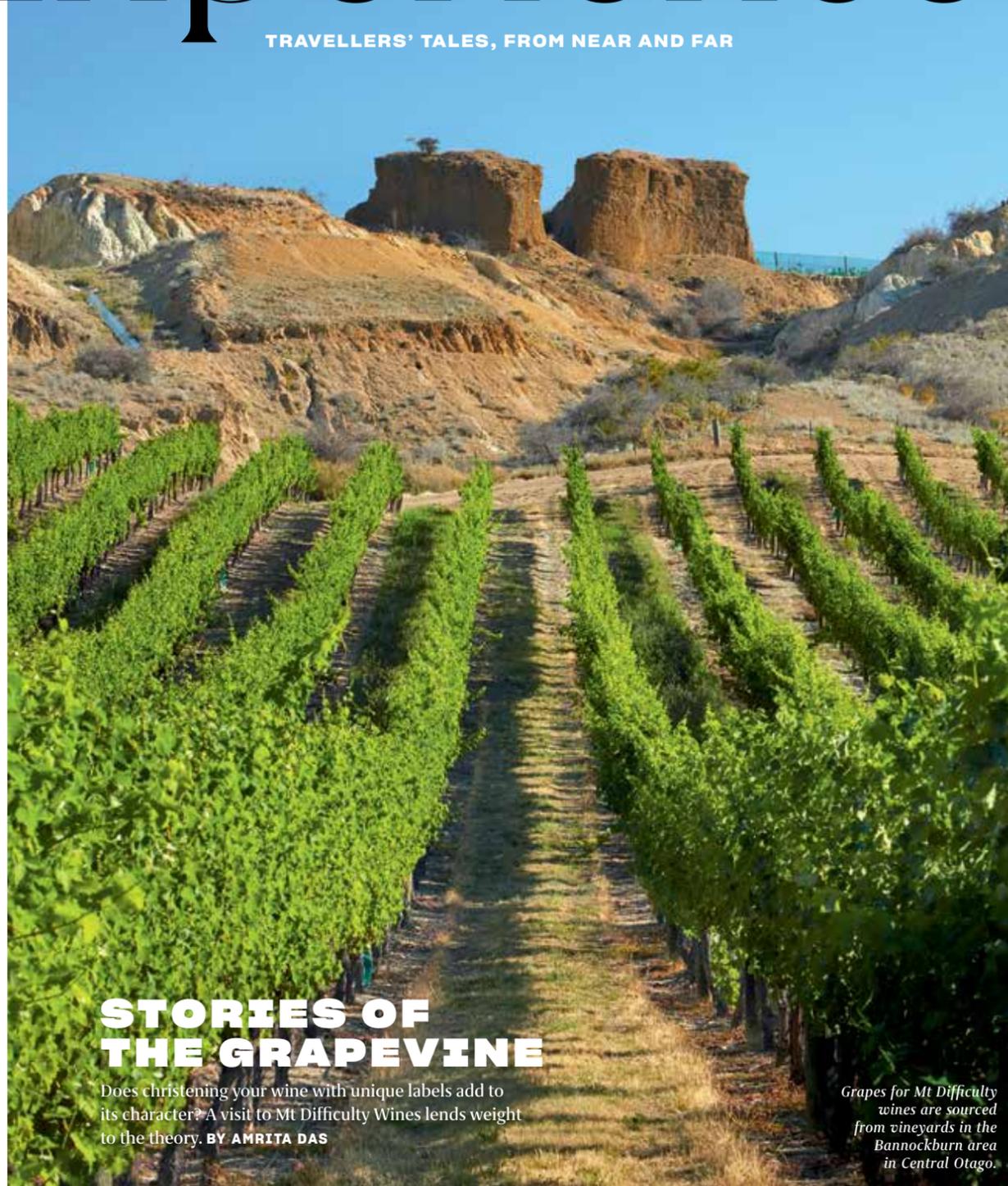


Experiences

TRAVELLERS' TALES, FROM NEAR AND FAR



STORIES OF THE GRAPEVINE

Does christening your wine with unique labels add to its character? A visit to Mt Difficulty Wines lends weight to the theory. **BY AMRITA DAS**

Grapes for Mt Difficulty wines are sourced from vineyards in the Bannockburn area in Central Otago.

DAVID WALL/ALAMY



“Do we know why it is called Mt Difficulty Wines?” I asked Sue Hawkins, my guide, as we drove to the winery, located around 60 kilometres from Queenstown in New Zealand. Sue wasn’t too sure.

During my stay in New Zealand’s South Island, I had noticed how such peculiar brand names didn’t surprise the locals. Whether it was my next destination—Mt Difficulty Cellar Door and Winery—or vineyards with names like Bald Hills, Doctors Flat, and Desert Heart, none of the locals seems to think they were strange monikers.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

In Central Otago, such nomenclature stems from geography. Take Mt Difficulty Wines: their first vines were planted on the foothills of Mount Difficulty, whose name was coined by the explorer William Rees when he failed to guide his flock of sheep across River Kawarau to the narrow Kawarau Gorge because of the steep slopes of the mountain.

The other reason is rooted in the winery’s history. In the 1990s, the ‘Gang of Four’—as Molyneux, Mansons Farm, Full Circle, and Verboeket Estate are colloquially called—decided to become a team under a single brand. After much deliberation, they unanimously picked Mt Difficulty Wines for the label.

One of Central Otago’s bestselling Pinot Noir, Roaring Meg, too, finds its name’s origin in the geography. A hydroelectric power plant was set up

▲ *The Cellar Door and Winery Restaurant of Mt Difficulty offer sweeping views of Bannockburn’s rugged landscape.*

▼ *The star at Mt Difficulty is Pinot Noir, but they do not shy away from experimenting with other grapes.*

by the rapids of the turbulent stream named Roaring Meg—in a section of River Kawarau. There’s an even better story behind the stream’s name. The name, Roaring Meg, goes back to a local icon of the 1860s when Central Otago was a flourishing site for gold-mining. Legend has it that two saloon girls, Annie and Meg, asked some miners to help them cross the river. Annie was calm while being transported, but Meg was loud and boisterous. As a result, two sections of the river were nicknamed Gentle Annie and Roaring Meg.



WHAT'S IN THE GLASS?

Since the alpine desert of Central Otago is infamous for its low rainfall, the grapes are small but they have a high concentration of flavour. Owing to these factors, 76 per cent of the wine produced in Central Otago is Pinot Noir.

In Mt Difficulty Wines, what began with a handshake among the Gang of Four soon expanded to procure neighbouring vineyards like Gibbston Valley. Even though Pinot Noir remains special at this winery, they have not shied away from experimenting with Chardonnay, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris, and even Chenin Blanc.

Roaring Meg and Mt Difficulty Pinot Noir are the blended wines at this winery. While Roaring Meg is a mix of berries from Bannockburn farms and Wanaka Valley, Mt Difficulty Pinot Noir focusses on blending from within the Bannockburn vineyards.

"Roaring Meg was our second label—in response to people wanting affordable Pinot Noir," revealed Mel, as we walked into Mt Difficulty Cellar Door to taste some reds. Mt Difficulty bottles about 30,000 cases of Roaring Meg annually, as opposed to 10,000 of Mt Difficulty Pinot Noir, their premium range.

I noticed that only one bottle had been preserved for nine years. Most others were younger wines.



▲ *At The Winery Restaurant, all main meal options come with suggested wine pairings.*

▼ *Mt Difficulty bottles about 30,000 cases of Roaring Meg and 10,000 of Mt Difficulty Pinot Noir every year.*

Mel answered my query with a laugh. "In New Zealand, we don't have an overtly good relationship with ageing wines. About 90 per cent of wine sold is drunk within 48 hours." This bottle of Mt Difficulty Pinot Noir 2010 was, hence, a treasure of sorts.

The conversation turned towards the production of wine from single vineyards. These are carefully grown and picked, studied for consistency over a period of time, and then, if qualified, are labelled as single vineyards.

COURTESY OF MT. DIFFICULTY (2)



DAVID WALL/ALAMY (2)



▲ *Pinot Noir grapes amid autumn foliage.*

▼ *Mount Difficulty was named by an explorer who failed to guide his flock of sheep across River Kawarau due to steep slopes of the mountain.*

GETTING THERE

Queenstown is the nearest airport, 54 kilometres by road. **Singapore Airlines** (singaporeair.com) connects Delhi and Mumbai to Queenstown with two stops en route.

STAY

Olivers Lodge and Stables in Clyde is a heritage house dating back to 1869. It is 30 kilometres from **Mt Difficulty Wines** (mtdifficulty.nz). *Tariff starts from ₹18,000 for two, including breakfast; holiverscentralotago.co.nz*

DO

Participate in a variety of races at **Highlands Motorsport and Tourism Park** (highlands.co.nz); pedal on the scenic Otago Central Rail Trail with **Trail Journeys** (trailjourneys.co.nz); visit the many art galleries here, including **Alan Waters' Art Gallery** (alanwatersart.co.nz) and the **Höglund Art Glass Gallery** (hoglundartglass.com/new-zealand); pan for gold at the **Goldfields Mining Centre** (goldfieldsmining.co.nz); gear up for adventure with **Goldfields Jet** (goldfieldsjet.co.nz).

Mt Difficulty Wines has focussed on blocks in Bannockburn for single vineyards (also because Bannockburn has an appellation), but they are now opening up to other vineyards like Gibbston Valley and Lowburn Valley.

The flavours of Gibbston Havoc Farm are distinctly different from Bendigo Ghost Town—even though both are labelled Pinot Noir 2016. Gibbston has spicy notes and reminds me of mulled wine on Christmas. On the other hand, Bendigo is smoother, though a bit tannic. "Gibbston has an ageing potential of seven to 15 years," Mel added.

But I was still curious as to why Mt Difficulty Wines chose not to age its reds, unlike Europe. "Central Otago's Pinot Noir has been made as a variety that you don't need to put away for 30-50 years. In just five years, it levels out," Mel said.

The fact that the winery itself is just 20 years old allows it to experiment with its viticulture and wine production. Even though they unanimously agree that the Bannockburn Mansons Farm Pinot Noir 2013 (single vineyard) is their best vintage Pinot Noir produced till date, they continue to experiment with different varieties and their clones. This enthusiasm and passion is personified

when a bottle of Syrah is produced in front of me for tasting.

Mt Difficulty Bendigo Ghost Town Syrah 2016 is nothing like any Shiraz I have tasted before—its distinct flavours fill the entire mouth beautifully. How successful is Syrah in a region that is dominated by fine varieties of Pinot Noir? "This one was presented for blind tasting among 44 New Zealand Syrahs and came third. I believe it did quite well considering it is the only Syrah grown in this region," Mel summed up.

I brought home a bottle of the beautiful wine. When I recently opened it for a group of friends, they were intrigued by the 'ghost town' on the label. I happily narrated the story of Bendigo, which was once a gold-mining region. It now lies abandoned with old machinery and remnants of the former residents' huts—a ghost town.

I suppose New Zealand has found its best keeper of history and master storyteller: wine. +