

I have spent time in Central Otago since my childhood, and as a wine writer, have written about its wines for many years. I have watched with genuine admiration as this region has moved from an improbable experiment to one of the world's most compelling sources of Pinot Noir and other fine wines. What has struck me most, visiting and revisiting, is the indelible connection between the landscape, its people, and its wines. They are not separate chapters. They are the same story told three ways. That is now at risk.

The proposed Bendigo-Ophir gold mine would place large-scale industrial infrastructure inside one of the country's most singular winegrowing environments, in one of Central Otago's most distinctive sub-regions. Bendigo produces some of Central's most powerful, characterful wines. The notion that this terrain - this specific terrain - could host a mine of that scale and emerge with its identity intact is, from any serious wine perspective, very difficult to sustain.

Unlike the mining industry, the international fine wine market does not trade in commodities. It trades in coherent narratives of place. When sommeliers in London or buyers in New York or wine-drinkers in Tokyo reach for a Central Otago Pinot Noir, they are reaching for something that carries a very particular set of associations: indelible landscape, environmental stewardship, and artisanal authenticity. Central Otago has the highest proportion of organic and biodynamic vineyards in New Zealand, a fact that is not incidental to its premium positioning but integral to it. Its wines command some of New Zealand wine's highest prices and most premium market positions, both at home and abroad. A development that destabilises any one of those associations carries reputational risk that is readily understood in advance, yet will be genuinely difficult to reverse after the fact.

This matters especially because Central Otago is, as I have written before, a region still in the middle of its story. Unlike Burgundy, which has centuries of codified identity to draw on, Central is still deepening its understanding of subregional terroir, still discovering what its unique soils and fragile landscapes are capable of producing. That process of cultural and viticultural maturation is vulnerable precisely because it is unfinished. Reputations under construction are more readily jeopardised than those already fully formed, and history shows the damage done during a formative period tends to outlast the cause of it.

I am very conscious of what the region's producers have built collectively. The cohesion and collaboration of Central Otago's tightknit wine community is striking. The sense, as Rudi Bauer (coincidentally, one of Bendigo's most revered winemakers) once put to me, that it is better to work together to make the whole region better, is not a given in a wine region. It is rare, and it is part of what makes Central's wine community so uniquely special. A development of the proposed mine's nature will bring many pressures - environmental, reputational, social and economic - that risk upending all of this.

The economic case for the mine is made in terms of a fixed operational lifespan. The case for Central Otago wine is not. It compounds, year on year, vintage on vintage, as vines age and winemakers deepen their knowledge and the region's name carries further weight in ever more markets. These are not equivalent propositions, and they should not be treated as such. Long after the mining companies are gone, the landscape, the wines, and the community will endure.

I write this not as an 'activist' but as someone who has followed this region's development with professional attention and, I happily admit, considerable personal affection. I have spent many hours walking, biking, running, and simply spending time with my family very close by the proposed mine site. The thought of an open-cast mine in the midst of its beauty and fragility is mind-boggling. My view, formed over many years spent both in Central Otago and in writing about its wines, is that what is being proposed here carries risks that are starkly asymmetric. There is no upside for the wine community, only irreparable and irreversible downsides. That asymmetry deserves to be stated plainly. Some decisions cannot be undone. This is one of them.

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