

PinotFile[©]

Is Small Better?

Wine newsletters and promotional material from wineries would have you believe that small case production of Pinot Noir always translates to high quality. This has some truth to it in that Pinot Noir does not lend itself to many of the large production techniques used for making other red wine varietals. Many great American Pinots are essentially hand-crafted in less than 600 case quantities— much like great Burgundy. However, small production often translates to high prices (\$40 or more) and is no guarantee that the wine will be a winner. Like Burgundy, you have to know the **producer**— this is the most important factor in choosing a Pinot Noir wine. You can then look to appellations or specific vineyards whose terroir produces a Pinot suitable to your tastes. Acquiring knowledge of Pinot Noir is a life-long hobby, and the only way to learn is to start drinking and comparing different producers, different vineyards, and various vintages. Small production creates a challenge to source and acquire the good stuff, but the journey is full of surprises.



On the following page is a guide to the best producers of California and Oregon premium Pinot Noir. It is not inclusive and reflects my own drinking experiences and biases. You can depend on these producers to deliver consistently, especially those that are starred (my personal favorites). Remember that some producers (ie Siduri) access grapes from multiple appellations and states— I have organized the list so that the producer is listed according to the location of the winery.

One relevant comment to start the year is in order. The reviews and recommendations of Pinots in the PinotFile are unique among wine newsletters. I do not believe in number scores and so you won't see any unless I add them from well-known sources to validate my own opinions. For the most part, I do not do horizontal tastings of several producers side-by-side. The inherent error in these tastings is that the wine is tasted usually over a brief time. When I review a wine, I have spent an hour or two with it alone, with and without food, getting to know it thoroughly.

Pinot Noir: It's the Ultimate Expression of Winemaking

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Years of research in France have determined that the size and amount of bubbles in Champagne determine the taste more than the grape. The smaller the bubbles are, and the more bubbles there are, the more flavor is released when the bubbles travel on their way to the top of the glass and burst.

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Guide to the Best Pinot Noir Producers 2003

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

Old Reliable Guard: Au Bon Climat, Babcock, Byron, Cambria, Fiddlehead, Foxen, Gainey, *Hitching Post, Lane Tanner, Longoria, Ojai, *Sanford, Talley, Whitcraft.

New Puppies: *Bonacorssi, *Brewer-Clifton, Domaine Alfred, Drew Family, Foley, Flying Goat, Lafond, Loring Wine Co, *Melville, Rusack, Sea Smoke, Stephen Ross.

Note: Look especially for Pinots from Santa Rita Hills.

SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS

Old Reliable Guard: Bernardus, *Calera (Mt Harlen), *Chalone (Pinnacles), *Morgan, Peter Michael (winery in Sonoma), Talbott.

New Puppies: Belle Glos, Lucia, Pisoni, Roar, Testarossa.

Note: Pinots from this area tend toward a high-extract style.

SANTA CRUZ

Old Reliable Guard: Cinnabar, David Bruce, Mt Eden.

New Puppies: Clos La Chance.

CARNEROS

Old Reliable Guard: Acacia, *Ancien, Beringer, Bouchaine, Etude, Hanzell, *Saintsbury, Schug, Truchard.

New Puppies: Abiouness, Domaine Carneros, Domaine Chandon, Gloria Ferrer, Kazimer Blaise.

NAPA

Old Reliable Guard: El Molino, Patz & Hall, Sinskey.

New Puppies: Kuleto Estate, Miner Family Vnyds, Mendelson.

RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY REGION

Old Reliable Guard: Davis Bynum, *Dehlinger, Dutton-Goldfield, Gallo, Gary Farrell, Hartford Court, Iron Horse, *Kistler, Lynmar, Marimar Torres, Martinelli, *Merry Edwards, Mueller, *Rochioli, *Scherrer, Sebastiani, Siduri, Williams Selyem.

New Puppies: August Briggs, Brogan, Chasseur, Davis Family, DuMol, Failla Jordan, Gold Ridge, Hansel, J, La Crema, MacMurray, Papietro Perry, Rutz, Saxon Brown, Seven Lions, Skewis, *WesMar.

Note: More quality producers than any other appellation. The heart of California Pinot Noir.

SONOMA COAST

Flowers, Hellenthal, Landmark, *Littorai, Marcassin, Whitethorn.

Note: A relatively new appellation. Many producers outside this region access grapes here.

MENDOCINO

Old Reliable Guard: Edmeades, Greenwood Ridge, Husch, Navarro, Lazy Creek.

New Puppies: Adrian Fog, Bannister, Claudia Springs, Copain, Elke, *Esterlina, *Goldeneye, *Londer Vnyds.

Note: New producers are releasing the best Pinots from this region.

OREGON

Old Reliable Guard: Archery Summit, Argyle, *Beaux Freres, Bethel Heights, Brickhouse, Chehalem, Christom, *Domaine Drouhin, Domaine Serene, Elk Cove, Erath, Ken Wright, King Estate, Panther Creek, *Ponzi, *Rex Hill, St Innocent, Willakenzie.

New Puppies: Adea, Bergstrom, Coleman Vnyds, *Hamacher, Lemelson, Owen Roe, Patricia Green, *Penner-Ash, Raptor Ridge, *Shea Wine Cellar, Sineann.

Note: Many single-vineyard high-priced releases. Look for Willamette Valley appellation releases that sell for about \$20 and are excellent value wines.

Best Vintages

There are several generalizations to keep in mind with regard to vintages and Pinot Noir. In California, there are very few poor vintages and Pinot Noirs tend to be very consistent year in and year out with exceptions. Outstanding years have been 1991, 1994, 1997, and 2001, but essentially every year in the 90's was very good.

The weather is much more of a factor in Oregon and Burgundy and the vintage should be a top consideration in any purchase of Pinot Noir wines from these regions. The best vintages for Oregon Pinot Noir were 1992, 1994, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002.

Classic red Burgundy vintages in more recent years have been 1988, 1990, 1993, 1996, 1999, and 2001, with 1990 and 1996 being the most outstanding. The 2002 vintage is very consistent, according to the Burghound (Allen Meadows), with high quality wines from the lowest Bourgogne to the top Grands Crus. However, there were very few "masterpieces" made. Buyers should look to wines at the village and Bourgogne level as they represent excellent and consistent value. "The vintage produced fresh, sweet and vibrant wines that presently speak more of Pinot Noir than terroir," according to Allen. He feels the best 2001s are every bit as good, or even better than their 2002 counterparts and should not be ignored either. As far as 2003. Allen feels this vintage will produce a broader range of quality than any year since 1983, ranging from superb to the undrinkable. The point is, buy 2001 and 2002.

Hospices of Sonoma

The first-ever Hospices of Sonoma charity auction was held in November, 2003. The three-day event is modeled after the traditional auction in Burgundy, the Hospices de Beaune, held also in November each year. The event was hosted by Brice Jones (founder of Sonoma Cutrer Winery) at his new Pinot Noir winery in Sebastopol, Gold Ridge. Proceeds of the charity event go to Children in Life-Threatening Circumstances.

More than \$160,000 was bid for 25 lots of 2003 barrels of Pinot Noir produced primarily in the Russian River Valley and Sonoma Coast appellations. The top six lots of wine were made by Dutton-Goldfield, David Bruce, Gary Farrell, La Crema, Rutz, and Rochioli.

The event will be held next year November 12-14, 2004. For details phone 1-707-829-2433.

Auctions

It is always interesting to peruse the auction catalogues and auction websites to see what is hot. Among California producers, Brewer-Clifton, Marcassin, and Sine Qua Non draw the most interest and the highest prices. It is obvious by the number of bottles offered at auction that many buyers of these wines only purchase them to resell for a 100-500% profit on the auction market. Sadly, very few of these cult wines are actually drunk and are either kept as trophies or sold. Among red Burgundies offered for auction, DRC, Dugat, Jaye, Ponsot, and Leroy seem to draw the most interest and the highest prices. Buyers for these wines have to have a lot of spendable income. 1990 Ponsot Clos de la Roche goes for \$7,000 a case plus a 10-17% buyers premium! Dugat's Charmes Chambertin in great years sells for \$600-700 per bottle and the Griottes Chambertin for \$1500-1700 per bottle plus the buyers premium. The thirst for wines like these seems unquenchable. The biggest auction house, Acker-Merrall-Condit, sold 1.6 million dollars worth of wine in their October auction with 92% of the lots sold. This seems astonishing, especially since the storage conditions for these valuable wines is impossible to accurately verify.

“Have some wine,” the March Hare said, in an encouraging tone.

Lewis Carroll: *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

If You Drink No Noir, You Pinot Noir


Princeofpinot.com

How much wine does one grapevine make?

One vine yields 18 lbs of grapes.

One vine makes six bottles of wine.

One acre has 450 vines.

One acre yields four tons of grapes.

One acre makes 240 cases of wine.

One bottle pours five glasses of wine.

One barrel has 60 gallons of wine or 25 cases of wine.

Oregon: It’s the Weather and the Soil

California is a warm region and can easily ripen Pinot Noir to maturity. The fruit is picked in late summer when the temperature is still warm and the grapes are ripe and jammy. In Oregon, Pinot Noir is picked at the very end of the growing season in October when the weather is cool (65 degrees in the daytime and 40 degrees at night). The Pinot Noir grapes are fresh with high-acidity, more close to Burgundy than California. Oregon is at the mercy of the weather and in cool vintages the grapes may not ripen fully.

There are two main soil types in the Willamette Valley: the volcanic Jory soils of the Dundee Hills (the eastern part of the Willamette Valley), and the sedimentary, sea floor, high-

sand Willakenzie soils to the west. These two soil types have a big influence on the Pinot Noir grapes, producing wines with distinctively different flavor characteristics. The volcanic Dundee Hills soils tend to produce wines similar to the Cote de Beaune in France, with up-front red fruit, and a lighter style. The Willakenzie soil produces wines more akin to the Cote de Nuits region of Burgundy, with intense dark berry fruit and big black-cherry flavors. Grapes from the two distinct soil types can be blended to produce a flavor profile that is very enjoyable and quite different from that from one soil type only.

