

PinotFile[©]

Wayfarer Farm

The Sonoma Coast is calling many California Pinot Noir vintners. Some have christened this area California's "Golden Slope". Planting vines close to the Pacific Ocean, but just far enough inland on south-facing hills to ensure adequate heat to ripen the grapes, these winemakers are producing Pinot Noirs with distinctive flavor intensity and complexity. The right spots give nice warm daytime temperatures coupled with cool coastal winds and morning and evening fog. Some areas are risky, as not every year will bring enough warmth to ripen the grapes. Grapes from Summa Vineyard, for example, Burt Williams' favorite at Williams Selyem, only ripen on an average of one in four years. Many vineyards, such as Hirsch (many producers), Coastlands (Cobb), Blue Slide Ridge (Turley, Martinelli), and Camp Meeting Ridge (Flowers, Kistler) have been prime producers that are consistent from year to year.



Jason Pahlmeyer, a Napa vintner known for distinctive Merlot, Cabernet blends, and Chardonnay, purchased land on the Sonoma Coast in 1996. The site is a 70 acre organic farm above the fog line that produced vegetables and fruit for upscale Bay Area restaurants. 30 acres have been planted to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in a 4:1 ratio. A winery will be completed on site by 2004 and the first releases will be in 2005 or 2006. The wines will be released under the Wayfarer Farm label.

Pahlmeyer drew inspiration for this venture from Helen Turley. He has stated that tasting her Pinot Noir from the Sonoma Coast was an epiphany—the finest Pinot Noir he had ever tasted and better than any Richebourg or La Tache that he had experienced.

**Pinot Noir Is
The Most
Seductive Of All
Wines: The
Official Wine Of
Valentine's Day**

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A new Caymus Vineyards Pinot Noir from the Sonoma Coast is also in the works. Winemaker Chuck Wagner stopped making Pinot Noir from Napa Valley Grapes several years ago, but plans to try again. He is experimenting with wine from young vines planted in the coastal AVA.

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Whitethorn Winery

The January-February issue of *Wine & Spirits* has a feature on “The Year’s Best Pinot Noir”. Over the last year, the magazine critics tasted 491 Pinot Noirs and 14 wines received top praise. Several of these were your usual top performers such as 2000 Dehlinger Russian River Valley, 2001 Acacia Beckstoffer Las Amigas Vineyard, J. Rochioli 2001 Estate Russian River Valley, 2001 Williams Selyem Yorkville Highlands Weir Vineyard and 2001 Hirsch Vineyard, Domaine Serene 2001 Yamhill Cuvee, 2001 Flowers Sonoma Coast, 2001 Navarro Methode a L’Ancienne, 2001 Sanford La Rinconada Vineyard, 2001 Testarossa Sleepy Hollow Vineyard, 2001, 2001 Iron Horse Thomas Road, 2002 Patz & Hall Carneros Hyde Vineyard, 2001 Sebastiani Sonoma Coast, and 2001 Wil-lakenzie Estate Pierre Leon. Not surprisingly, most wines averaged \$50 in price. The two notable values were the Navarro (\$20) and the Sebastiani (\$15).

Tied for the top score (93) among all Pinot Noirs was the 2000 Whitethorn Sonoma Coast Hirsch Vineyard Pinot Noir. This little-known Pinot Noir producer, is located in the Humbolt, California community of Whitethorn and works with Hyde Vineyard and Hirsch Vineyard grapes. The Whitethorn wines have been the darling of the Bay Area Restaurant scene including the French Laundry, Boulevard, Chez Panisse, and Rubicon.

The winemaker at Whitethorn Winery is Tasha McCarkle who started this winery very quietly in 1991. Her initial wines were made with 1 ton each of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Her production now has increased to about 1500 cases including 500 cases of Pinot Noir. McCarkle was the one time winemaker at Simi Winery. You won’t find a fancy website or promotional material on the winery.

I have purchased a few bottles over the years from Hi-Time (the only source I know of in Southern California) and found them to be striking examples of well-made Pinot Noir. The 2000 Hirsch Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$50) is a big, bruiser of a Pinot Noir, like many of its kind from the Hirsch Vineyard and is a candidate for several years of aging in the cellar. This wine has more body and spice than Tyra Banks on the Victoria Secret runway.

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Dacanter Pinot Noir Awards

The January issue of *Decanter* reported the results of the magazine’s tasting of 140 California Pinot Noirs. Two wines received 5 stars and six wines garnered 4 stars. The winners:

Five Star

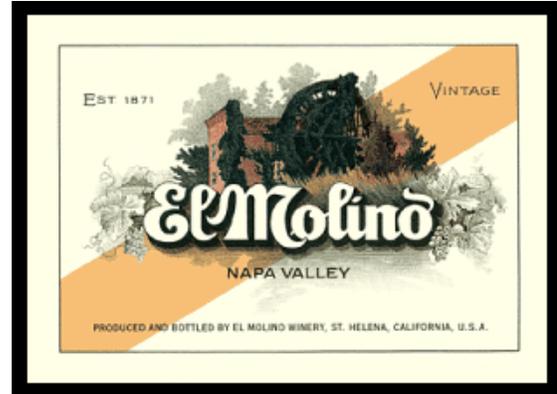
- 2001 Domaine Alfred Chamisal Edna Valley Pinot Noir (\$14, Wine Exchange)
- 2001 Morgan Double L Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir (contact winery)

Four Star

- 2001 Au Bon Climat Isabelle Morgan Pinot Noir (\$40, Wine Exchange)
- 2001 Sea Smoke Southing Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$40, contact winery)
- 2001 Waterstone Carneros Pinot Noir (\$25, best value, new label to me, 945 cases, available at www.puntwines.com and www.wine.com)
- 2001 Domaine Alfred Chamisal Califa Edna Valley Pinot Noir (\$32, Wine Exchange)
- 2000 Williams Selyem Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$39, sold out, secondary market only)
- 2001 Acacia Lee Vineyard Carneros Pinot Noir (\$50, contact winery)

El Molino Winery

Pinot Noir from Napa— you bet! El Molino was one of the first wineries in the Napa Valley, founded in 1871 by W.W. Lyman. Located 3 miles north of the town of St Helena, the winery functioned until the advent of prohibition in 1921. Originally Zinfandel, Napa Claret, and Riesling were produced. These wines were shipped by rail to the city of Napa and on by boat to San Francisco. After sixty years of inactivity, the winery was purchased and restored in 1981 by the Oliver family, with the aim of producing world-class Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.



The Rutherford Star vineyard is uniquely ideal for producing Pinot Noir and the wines reflect the distinct terroir. Organic farming practices, gravity flow in the subterranean cellar, and underground cooling produce a high quality wine capable of many years of evolution in the cellar. The greatest vintages for El Molino Pinot Noir have been 1984, 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000. The wines have frequently garnered recognition in the wine press with scores around 90. The current 2000 vintage release is 60% Star Vineyards, Rutherford fruit and 40% Carneros vineyards. 75% new Francois Freres oak is used to age the wine for 1-2 years. 900 cases were produced. This wine is big and rich but can be enjoyed now. About \$50 at Hi-Time and through the winery at www.elmolinowinery.com. The historic winery can be visited by appoint-

Pinot Glut, Part II

Last week I commented that the number of new wineries entering the competitive Pinot Noir world was astonishing. Low and behold, this week I pick up the Wednesday Food section of the *Los Angeles Times* and there is a feature article on the proliferation of Pinot Noir Vineyards and Pinot Noir wines on the market.

The numbers quoted in the article were eye-popping. In the past two years, **more than 100 new California Pinot Noir labels have been launched** (either totally new brands or new labels for existing wineries). The number of vineyard acres now planted to Pinot Noir has skyrocketed with 17,000 producing acres in California compared with 6,000 acres in 1994. Another 7,000 acres will come into production in the next two years (a 40% increase in production).

The good news about the frenzy for Pinot Noir is that there is plenty of high-quality Pinot Noir easily available to the consumer. Unlike Burgundy, where very small quantities of the better wines reach the states, California Pinot Noir in every price range is everywhere. But like Burgundy, the consumer must spend some time learning about vintages, vineyards, and producers. The vintage will often offer clues to the style of Pinot Noir that is in the bottle. One growing season may produce a small crop with small berries and a very big, concentrated style wine. Still other vintages may be characterized by a large crop, and lead to a more elegant, feminine style of Pinot Noir. Since Pinot Noir readily reflects the terroir it comes from, the location of vineyards is very important. Older vineyards in the Russian River Valley and Santa Maria Valley are always reliable, and newer vineyards in the Santa Rita Hills, Santa Lucia Highlands, and the Sonoma Coast are becoming recognized. Price is no measure of quality. An expensive Pinot Noir (over \$50) can be downright vegetal and unpleasant. Get to know the best producers with excellent track records and your chances of enjoying your investment are greatly enhanced. I have found that somewhere around \$25 the quality of Pinot Noir generally picks up, and the majority of solid wines are priced in the \$30-50 range. Pinot Noirs exceeding \$60 in price rarely deliver the pleasure that the price would suggest.

“When you fall in love with wine, you end up loving Pinot Noir,” says Gina Gallo, winemaker for Gallo Sonoma brand and the force behind the planting of more than 600 acres of Pinot Noir.



Patricia Green has become a well-respected Pinot Noir winemaker in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. For several years, she was the winemaker at Torii Mor. She had a falling out with the owners and now makes her own wine. In her current lineup of releases, her most expensive wine is called ‘Notorious’ - the not so hidden meaning being ‘no-Torii-us’.



Over-Extracted Pinot Noirs (Pinot on Steroids)

Unfortunately the anthem “Bigger is Better” does not apply to Pinot Noir. The elegance and silky texture of Pinot Noir make it one of the best wines to sip and drink with food. However, a disturbing trend has developed in which winemakers are trying to make highly-extracted, high-alcohol wine that they feel will garner high scores and satisfy the consumers thirst for buxom Pinot Noir. The sorry fact is that this type of Pinot Noir (“Pinot on Steroids”) does not complement food and is a poor reflection of what the wine can be when made properly.

Ted Lemon, noted winemaker at Littorai commented on this trend in his latest newsletter. After tasting a number of inexpensive American Pinot Noirs, he remarked that “they were large in scale and alcohol, with rough tannins and dark, extracted flavors... .the aromas were dominated by various shades of oak... ..essentially they tasted as if they were the winemaker’s rejects from reserve bottlings... .reserve bottlings that are driven by the media’s insatiable appetite for pinot on LSD.” Of course if you like this style of Pinot Noir then you are a happy camper.

He goes on to say that “inexpensive pinot should be like generic Burgundy with flavors and aromas faithful to its geographic origin, refreshing and vibrant on the palate, a wine which calls for a second glass without much thought or damage to the liver.”

I could not agree more with these comments. Lets leave the extraction game to the Cabernet and Syrah boys.