

**PINOT PRIMER**  
**The wine that launched 1,000 words**  
Patrick J. Comiskey, Special to The Chronicle  
Thursday, September 12, 2002

Lovers of Pinot Noir never seem to run out of adjectives to describe their favorite wine. Fruit flavors that run a gamut of red cherry, black cherry, raspberry, cranberry, wild strawberry, loganberry, blueberry. Aromas of mint, rose petal, anise, white mushroom, black pepper. Elements of tea, forest, molasses, bone, textures of velvet and moss.

And that's just for starters.

It's hard to imagine that a single grape is enough to inspire this much verbiage. But Pinot Noir offers a global tour of flavors, tastes, textures and impressions.

Why the diversity? Fickle, thin-skinned, temperamental, prone to mutation, Pinot Noir is like a sensitive child, responding to the place where it's grown,

reacting to extremes, firming up, fleshing out, or just plain shutting down when things aren't just right. If the weather or soil isn't to its liking, it can become petulant and unruly. Too much heat, and you'll get a stewed prune quality, stripped of acidity or "snap;" too little, and you'll get something green and unpleasant, resembling artichoke soup.

But, in a good vintage, in the hands of a good winemaker, Pinot Noir is like a map in a glass. Few wines express soil and climate with such a clear voice, revealing a vineyard's unique stamp on a vine, that thing the French call *terroir*.

Pinot is a subtle grape that can yield a subtle wine. By contrast, Cabernet Sauvignon is all about depth and power, taking over your mouth like marines taking a beachhead. Pinot Noir isn't like that. Rather than full body, Pinot produces medium, even light-bodied wines; rather than the deep, "iron glove" textures of Cabernet, Pinot Noir offers supple, rounded, sensuous textures; in place of power, there's nuance and subtlety. It's a wine that requires a lot of attention as you drink it and, like most serious pleasures, it takes time to unfold.

Pinot Noir has acted out its mysterious ways for hundreds of years in Burgundy, where the grape originates and, many would say, reaches its pinnacle.

But on the West Coast, where Pinot Noir has been growing steadily in acreage and vine age since the 1960s, regions are finally developing flavor profiles --

a distinct handprint of tastes, aromas and textures.

What follows is a style primer for the American coast, from north to south. Your next assignment is to conduct your own Pinot Noir celebration: Grab a corkscrew and a glass, and find a few hundred adjectives of your own.

## **OREGON**

Oregon is on a roll. Or maybe it's on several rolls at once. Until just a few years ago Oregon wasn't sure what it could boast about. There was Pinot Noir in the ground, and lots of it, but little consensus about what it was supposed to taste like.

In good vintages, the wines from this then-young region showed great promise. In bad vintages -- overly cool, or too much rain at the wrong time -- the wines could be watery, green-tasting or irritatingly tart.

Then, at just about the generation mark of the industry, with new winemakers emerging from older, pioneer wineries, the Willamette Valley had four dry, warm vintages in a row. In other words, just as the talent pool started to rise, the weather gave them the opportunity to prove themselves. As a result, styles of Oregon Pinot Noir have gone from a muddled voice to a chorus of voices, each with a unique character -- so much so that there's talk of creating five new AVAs or sub-regions to break up this large appellation.

The Willamette Valley has soil types which result in a narrow but distinct spectrum of flavors that range from deep earthy blueberry to cherries dipped in red clay. Both, however, exhibit cool weather character, which many compare to Burgundy: taut as a drum skin, firm in the mouth, often with cool autumn, herbal and fallen-leaf aromas that make these wines exotic, alluring and ageable.

The firm textures and high acid of Oregon Pinots make them ideal for pairing with oil-rich fish such as salmon, served off the grill with a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil or plank-roasted in traditional Northwest style.

## **CALIFORNIA**

There are those who would say that California's a lousy place to grow Pinot Noir. It's hot, after all, and the grape grows best in cool areas. (You'd almost never mistake an Oregon Pinot for a California one. The latter is always going to be fruitier.) So for good Pinot in California, you have to hug the coast where it stays cool enough to give the grapes "hang time," let them grow and ripen slowly, resulting in wines of pleasing complexity.

### **SONOMA COAST**

Just a few craggy ridgetops inland from the Pacific in western Sonoma County lies one of the hottest land grabs in wine country, hotter than the Gold Rush in July. But the Sonoma Coast's outer reaches are among the coolest areas to grow grapes in California, which makes it ideal for Pinot Noir. If Napa has its cult Cabs, Sonoma's cult Pinots come from the coast, in perpetual high demand and snapping up top dollar -- so much so that all along this vast appellation, new properties are being developed by both tiny wineries and big players alike.

That cool Pacific character translates to a wine of thick-skinned depth, with smoky sea spray aromas and flavors of black cherry juice garnished with a sprig of mint or rosemary. Moreover, Sonoma Coast Pinot feels like nothing else in your mouth: rich and gritty, with mouth-watering acids and a prickle of peppery tannin.

Play up the notes of pepper and rosemary in a Sonoma Coast Pinot with a pepper-crusting breast of duck, seared in a pan and served with a mild green peppercorn sauce.

### **RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY**

If Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir roars over your palate like the wind over a ridgetop, then a Russian River Pinot is like the fog. It creeps in on its little cat feet over your mouth, plush and cushiony. The lasting impression is almost always the wine's gentleness, its soft textures and balance of earth and fruit flavors.

The Russian River is close enough to the Pacific to benefit from cool nights, but far enough away to have decent daytime heat. Pinot Noir loves that kind of contrast, and comes forward with ripe, accessible fruit -- a black cherry so juicy it bursts when you bite it -- along with moist, sensuous forest scents that make you think of redwood valleys.

Those forest scents bring to mind any preparation with mushrooms, especially those that grow in redwood groves. A roasted game hen served with chanterelle risotto would pair especially well.

### **CARNEROS**

Pack plenty of layers when you visit Carneros, which straddles Napa and Sonoma counties -- fog from the San Pablo Bay dominates the mornings and, unlike other Pinot environments, it's windy in the afternoon. A typical day in July can see a temperature shift from the low 90s by day to the mid 40s at night -- just the kind of flux that Pinot Noir loves, and that can produce very distinct character in the better vintages.

For all that wind and weather, what you notice first about a good Carneros Pinot is the smell of earth -- clays and loams that often give off aromas of mushrooms, sage, even bacon. The fruit is almost always the light red type -- wild strawberries, Rainier cherries -- and these fruits often combine with earthy aromas, yielding something delicate, yet weirdly exotic, like, say, the peaty humidity of a coastal cranberry bog.

A Carneros wine offers many contrasts, and is well-paired with food of the same stripe -- pancetta-wrapped scallops on a bed of French lentils, for example. It's a match that puts sweet, smoke and earth all on a plate, just as you'll find it in the glass.

### **MONTEREY/CENTRAL COAST**

Pinot Noir in the Central Coast is found mostly in the Santa Maria Valley and the Santa Rita Hills near Santa Barbara. That's pretty far south as far as the map is concerned, but these are cold areas, receiving direct blasts of cool Pacific air almost daily. That's because many of the mountain ranges in this region move from west to east, rather than from north to south, as they do in almost every other coastal range.

You can taste the sea in these wines. There's a smoky scotch burn to the flavors, almost like slow-burning kelp, with dried raspberry fruit notes lined with scrubby thyme, tomato leaf and other green-herb nuances.

Heading north, the chilly, windswept Santa Lucia Highlands are emerging as a new Pinot region, based largely on the reputation of Pisoni Vineyard, one of the most coveted parcels of land on the coast. Many of California's most progressive wineries purchase fruit from Gary Pisoni, which produce wines so thick and chewy it's as if the grapes grew an extra layer of skin to protect them from Monterey Bay blasts. The result is a blueberry depth of flavor that's unlike anything else in California.

A Pinot from Pisoni has the depth and richness to stand up to herb-rubbed pork loin. With other Central Coast Pinots, a smoked roast turkey is likely to pick up the smoky, scotch-y elements.

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#### Prime Pinots

Here are wines that represent each style. They retail for approximately \$25- \$30.

#### -- Oregon:

-- 2000 Rex Hill Willamette Valley Pinot Noir

-- 2000 Willakenzie Estate Willamette Valley Pinot Noir

#### Sonoma Coast:

-- 2000 Flowers Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir

-- 1999 La Crema Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir

#### Carneros:

-- 2000 MacRostie Carneros Pinot Noir

-- 2000 Clos du Val Carneros Gran Val Vineyard Pinot Noir

#### Russian River:

-- 2000 Merry Edwards RussianRiver Valley Pinot Noir

-- 1999 Alderbrook Russian River Valley Pinot Noir

#### Central Coast:

-- 2000 Au Bon Climat Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir

-- 2000 Babcock Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir

#### More expensive:

-- 2000 Siduri 2000 Santa Lucia Highlands Pisoni Vineyard Pinot Noir

-- 2000 Tantara Santa Lucia Highlands Pisoni Vineyard Pinot Noir

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