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Between Alsace and Italy, the U.S. Pinot Gris

By FRANK J. PRIAL

The pinot noir grape gives us some of the world's finest red wines. True Burgundy lovers would drop the "some of."

But pinot noir has given us some pretty good white wines, too. It's a prime constituent in Champagne, of course, where it is vinified as a white wine, but there is more. Pinot blanc and pinot gris, better known to many as pinot grigio, are both mutations of pinot noir.

Over the last decade, pinot gris has captured the fancy of many growers and winemakers in the United States, as Americans seek high and low for a chardonnay substitute. Pinot gris can be found in California, Washington, more recently on Long Island, and particularly in Oregon.

With this growing selection of American pinot gris reaching the market, the Dining section's tasting panel decided to take a look at 22 of them. Fifteen came from Oregon's vineyards, five from California, and one each from Washington and New York. Chardonnay is America's benchmark white wine, and it is not surprising that our pinot gris resembles it to some extent.

The handful of pinot gris we were enthusiastic about we appreciated for their apple or honey aromas, or their pure flavors. Those were some of the qualities we found in a 2001 Rancho Zabaco Reserve from the Sonoma Coast, which we gave our highest rating, two and a half stars out of a possible four, and from three Oregon wines that we awarded two stars — a 2001 WillaKenzie Estate, 2000 Chehalem and 2000 King Estate. But a lack of acidity or an overdose of sweetness and a one-dimensional quality held back too many of the plodding others.

The panel was made up of two regulars, Eric Asimov and I, and two guests, the wine directors of New York restaurants: Charles Scicolone from I Trulli and David Gordon of the Tribeca Grill.

Actually, my favorite was the WillaKenzie Estate, from the Willamette Valley in Oregon (\$15). It had a touch of sweetness but good acid balance to go with it. Mr. Scicolone liked its texture and Mr. Gordon its floral aromas. Mr. Asimov was the dissenter here, finding it bitter and thin. What was surprising to all of us was its high alcohol content, weighing in at 14.6 percent.

Oregon makes more pinot gris than it does chardonnay, although its total production is dwarfed by California's. But Oregon is serious about its pinot gris. It even has a law that says the wine must be called pinot gris and not pinot grigio.

Tasting Report: A Little Fizz to Go With the Apple Aromas

WillaKenzie Estate \$15 **

Willamette Valley 2001

Prial's favorite; he found moderate sweetness balanced by acidity. Scicolone liked the texture and finish, and Gordon found floral aromas and a bit of effervescence. Only Asimov dissented, calling it thin.