

Sonoma Produces The Best Pinot Noir In California, And Cattleya Makes Some Of The Best In Sonoma

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More than once I have said that the most of the best California Pinot Noirs are being made in Sonoma, where there is more likelihood the wines will actually taste like Pinot Noir rather than like so many of the jammy blockbusters of Napa.

Of course, the remarkable thing about California wine regions is that one doesn't need a century or more of development to make an excellent Pinot Noir that will rival some of the best in Burgundy, where they tend to be somewhat lighter in body but have more complexity and nuance.

That said, it is still quite an achievement for a woman from Colombia, where vineyards are "virtually non-existent," to achieve such eminence in Sonoma in little more than a decade.

Bibiana González Rave, 46, born in Medellín, says that she rarely drank wine at home but even so had a fantasy of becoming a winemaker. She first studied chemical engineer-

ing, then—speaking no French—moved to France in 2001, working the vineyards in Côte-Rôtie at Domaine Stéphane Ogier and Domaine Clusel-Roch then in Bordeaux at Château Haut-Brion & La Mission Haut-Brion, earning a BTS degree in Viticulture and Enology from Cognac followed by a degree in Enology from the University of Bordeaux, graduating with honors. She then took the usual grand tour of estates in California, South Africa, and France for several years. By the end of 2011, she founded Cattleya Wines in Sonoma; four years later she was awarded "Winemaker of the Year" by the San Francisco Chronicle.

She is married to Jeff Pisoni, winemaker for Pisoni and Lucia Vineyards. They have two sons.

The orchid *Cattleya Trinae* on her labels is the national flower of Colombia, known for its succulent leaves and vibrant blooms, and, she says, she aims for "complexity in the



Cattleya



aromatics and texture on the mouthfeel” as her hallmarks. “I craft my wines with a long finish that develops in the mid-palate with ample generosity. I pay no attention to ‘numbers’ when making harvest decisions, but I do believe in precision with wines driven by acidity and tannins.”

Her Appellation Blend Chardonnays are limited to 350 cases, and I’ve thoroughly enjoyed the light touch she uses in her 2022 Cuvée Number Five (\$60) and those from her series The Collection: 2022 Cattleya, Beyond the Threshold (\$65) and 2022 The Temptress, Russian River Valley (\$75), which emphasize fruit and acid over oak.

But it is her Pinot Noirs, within the same two lines, that really impress me for their finesse and complexity. I never expect California winemakers to mimic the Pinots



of Burgundy—different soils, different climates, different techniques—but Cattleya sets a standard for vying with the essential flavors of the varietal that make great Burgundies so special.

Rave calls the color of her Appellation



series Sonoma Coast 2022 (\$65) “brooding deep ruby,” and it does indeed have a long finish after tantalizing the mid-palate with its fruited heft. Of the same vintage’s Appellation Russian River Valley Pinot (\$65) she says, “This classic cuvée began its journey from grape to glass in the pre-dawn hours of August 31st 2022. A ten day cold soak on 10% whole cluster fruit preceded an additional 8 day primary native fermentation. Extraction of its deep color and extremely pure fruit profile was done by punching down the cap twice per day for the entirety of primary fermentation. Upon completion, the wine was transferred to 65% new French oak barrels where malolactic fermentation took place prior to sixteen months of slumber in the cellar. Bottling of this unfiltered and unfiltered Pinot Noir took place on February 2nd, 2024.” Being unfiltered and unfiltered gives the wine a richer profile and deep color. Alcohol is 14.3%.

The Collection series Pinots are fancifully named: 2022 Cattleya, Belly of the Whale’s name refers to rebirth, “symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or accumulating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, appearing to have died.” Whatever. It’s a stunning wine from Petaluma, racked

to 75% new French oak barrels where it aged for 18 months, unfiltered and unfiltered, 14.5% alcohol, bottled March 1, 2023 (\$85).

The Goddess Sonoma Coast (\$125)—“the epitome of all that is feminine”—certainly has some lovely spice to it along with dark fruit flavors and moderate tannins. The grapes come from the Gold Rock vineyards just five miles from and above the Pacific Ocean and made from a blend of Pinot Noir clones 777 and 115. Rave’s romantic streak allows her to enthuse over this beautiful Pinot, “The meeting with the goddess is the final test of the talent of the hero to win the boon of love. This is seen as the ultimate adventure and is represented by the marriage of the hero to the goddess. Here we taste femininity and masculinity converge in this singular wine.”

By the way, there is also some of the 2021 vintage you may purchase through the winery’s website .

Duty required me to taste these wines upon release last April, but I wish I could have let them reside in my cellar for at least two more years. For if these Pinot Noirs don’t require the Rip Van Winkle sleep of Grand Cru Burgundies like Romanée-Conti, they will certainly evolve for some time. When they are fully mature, I hope Bibiana González Rave will let us all know. Meanwhile I expect her vintages of the future will get better and better.