

Best of the Best California Pinot Noir

With quality rivaling Burgundy premiers crus, these versatile reds are setting new benchmarks

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POINTS



Of all categories in wine, none seem to be on as ascendant a trajectory as California Pinot Noir. The varietal is grown successfully from the reaches of the Northern California coast down through Santa Barbara. Inland sites, both mountain and valley, also provide compelling wines. The vineyard base features both old vines, which serve as an example of how important healthy old vineyards are to quality, and newly developed sites that exploit the best of modern viticultural techniques to result in great wines nearly right out of the gate.

While Cabernet Sauvignon still commands the marketplace spotlight, Pinot Noir has nearly caught up. The best wines are consistently at Burgundy's premier cru level at a fraction of the price. A small handful of bottlings now flirt with grand cru quality and as producers hone their craft and the young-vine vineyards settle in, it seems inevitable that quality will rise even further and become even more consistent. Adding to the scenario is a range of styles, all driven primarily by terroir rather than winemaker or market influence.

"Beautifully ripe and showy, this is a "wow" wine, with a range of mulberry, boysenberry and raspberry coulis notes framed by licorice, apple wood and bramble accents. While the fruit gushes, a racy hibiscus accent helps keep the finish defined and focused. Drink now through 2034. 120 cases made."

reviewed by James Molesworth

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In Southern California, Santa Barbara has cemented itself as a world-class wine region, focused primarily on Pinot Noir and its Burgundian sibling Chardonnay. Here, the wines display a vibrant, taut feel in terms of structure and abundant minerality, while offering alluring red fruit, red tea and incense aspects. Sta. Rita Hills has been the source of the top wines, which bristle with tensile energy and pinpoint fruit. The area's early pioneers helped draw the map, which is now being fully exploited by the likes of a new generation of producers, including Domaine de la Côte, Brewer-Clifton and Racines.

In Northern California, Sonoma is the clear lead region, while its smaller nested AVAs add pixelation to the map. Carner-

os and its broad, rich, dark-fruited style provide contrast to the punchy pomegranate and hibiscus profile of Russian River Valley bottlings. Along the western coast the wines are marked by an ocean breeze-fed minerality that pierces a beautifully pure red cherry, raspberry and incense character. Of note is the area around the towns of Freestone and Occidental, now ground zero for a wave of wines underscoring the qualitative surge. The winemaking talent working here is impressive: Thomas Rivers Brown, Mark Aubert, Steve and Catherine Kistler, Matt Courtney, Paul Hobbs, Jeff Mangahas, Jason Kesner and **Bibiana González** among them.

Recent vintages have been strong; 2018 featured wines of density and structure;

2019 flowed with exuberant fruit; 2021 stands as the current benchmark; and 2023 looks to be compelling. Even the in-between years turned out some excellent wines, as the cooler-than-Napa weather in Sonoma and the early ripening Pinot Noir (versus Cabernet Sauvignon) allowed producers to potentially escape the difficulties of 2020 (wildfires) and 2022 (excessive heat).

At this point, the only benchmark California's Pinot Noir producers have to set for themselves is their wines' ageability, which means proving en masse that their wines develop in bottle over time, more than just simply enduring. Wine is a long game, and right now California Pinot Noir producers are playing it well.