

Pinot Noir – Wine’s Holy Grail

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

WHEREAS CABERNET SAUVIGNON grapes can produce excellent wines throughout the world, most wine aficionados believed the only great Pinot Noirs were from France. Most of the world’s greatest Pinot Noirs do come from the Burgundy region of France, but one can buy excellent examples from California, Oregon, and New Zealand.

In general, buying Pinot Noirs from France (Burgundy) is a crapshoot. Regardless of the producer (most important) or vintage, more wine purchase disappointments have been made from here than in all other regions of the world, including all varietals. The reason is that Pinot Noir is the most difficult to grow and to make. Add in the vagaries of the weather and one is primed for disappointments. It is also true that most wine experts believe that their greatest heights of enjoyment come from great Burgundy. I have been fortunate to taste many legendary and very expensive Burgundies, and I have only been to the “top of the mountain” with two such wines.

Following up on a hot tip from a friend in 1985, I bought all of the remaining bottles I could locate of 1978 Grands-Echezeaux from Louis Gouroux at \$40 a bottle. Over the next 15 years, I drank all of these with family and friends with nary a disappointment. Until two years ago I was reconciled to never having such an experience again. But a friend suggested we celebrate our birthday by bringing our best wines to a restaurant in Los Angeles. Imagine my excitement when he brought the world’s most legendary Burgundy, a 1985 Domaine Romanée-Conti, Romanée-Conti. While he lucked out with ample wine smarts by buying this wine upon release, albeit at a hefty price, it had climbed in value to \$15,000 per bottle. Others in the group asked for my impression. After searching for my breath for several minutes, I said that all I could imagine as its equal would be to shrink the famed ballerina Dame Margot Fontayne to one gram and insert her into my mouth and have her dance. A crazy wine analogy, but they all thought it was a propos. I continued to build a collection of great red Burgundies from 1985 to 2000 but never came

close to experiencing what these two wines showed me. This notwithstanding, many great wines come from the Cote d’Or. The more intense, bigger wines come from the sub region named Côte de Nuits and the more feminine ones from the Côte de Beaune.

My favorite producers include Daniel Bocquenet, Bouchard Père et Fils, Joseph Drouhin, Dujac, Faiveley, Louis Jadot, Méo-Camuzet, Georges Mugneret/Mugneret-Gibourg, Jacques-Frédéric Mugnier, and Roumier. Any of these produce wines will be memorable and expensive if they are Grand Cru and cost \$150-plus, but most also produce wines named for the Burgundy villages that are less expensive and are well-made examples of Pinot Noir. In between the village wines (\$40-plus) and the Grand Cru are the Premier Cru designated wines named for the specific vineyard sites. These wines are often the best choice if you intend to store them for one to two decades (in a great vintage, e.g., 1999 and 2005).

Switching to the New World, Oregon has been producing good examples for several decades. One excellent by-product of global warming has been the improvement in recent vintages. My favorites include Antica Terra (winemaker Maggie Harrison hails from Barrington Hills), Archery Summit, Argyle, Eyrie, Ken Wright, Patricia Green, Penner-Ash, Soter, and Torii Mor. Many people think Oregon’s success with Pinot Noir comes in part because the vineyards lie at the same latitude as those in Burgundy. In essence, Pinot Noir demands cool climate conditions.

Many experts believed the climate in California was too hot to produce great Pinot Noir. For many years, only wines made at Williams-Selyem made me doubt this. Over the past decade, great Pinot Noirs have been made in California by having the vineyards planted in valleys lying east to west, which allows the cool air from the Pacific Ocean to moderate the otherwise too-hot climate. The most heralded regions include Sonoma Valley, especially Russian River Valley and the Central Coast. Favorites include Aubert (Reuling), August West, DuMOL, Walter Hansel, Paul Hobbs, Kistler, Kosta Browne, Paul Lato, Loring, Marcassin,



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Radio-Coteau, Roar, J. Rochioli, Sea Smoke, and as in the past, Williams Selyem.

New Zealand has been producing pleasing Pinot Noir over the past decade. The main regions are Martinborough (Old World type of Pinot Noir) and Central Otago. My favorites from the former include Ata Rangi and Martinborough Vineyard. From Central Otago, I love Felton Road, especially Block 3 and Block 5, Mt. Difficulty, and Rippon.

Pinot Noir is a food-friendly grape. Favorite pairings include veal, chicken, rabbit, and salmon. It is also great with many vegetables, especially mushrooms. No matter what grape you prefer now, many experts think that as you age, you will grow to prefer sophisticated, complex Pinot Noir. Santé! 🍷