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Special Report

California pinot very popular

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Long the forgotten player in California's 40-year-old wine revival, pinot noir suddenly has become very chic. Restaurateurs report it selling hotter than hot cakes; retailers can't keep it on shelves; and vintners, whose California pinots receive 90-point scores in national publications, are now allocating their wines—selling small lots customers on mailing lists at previously unimaginable prices.

It is not difficult to understand why California pinot noir has become popular. A decade ago, most renditions tasted either thin and vegetal or fat and blowzy. Today, they are rich, ripe and balanced. No wonder pinot is hot.

That's also the problem. Many of these wines, particularly many of the pricey ones, are so rich that they can seem hot and heavy. They may be tasty in a simple sense, but they display little subtlety on nuance, and thus fail to offer pinot noir's classic charm—full of flavor coupled with finesse rather than power. So as a general category, while in California pinot noir today is better than ever, it still has a way to go.

Like all the classic wine grapes grown in California, pinot noir came from Europe—in this case, from Burgundy in France, where the top red wines remain exemplars of what this finicky grape variety can achieve. Much as classified growth Bordeaux long served as a model for vintners making California cabernet sauvignon, premier and grand cru Burgundy still has to be the model for those working with pinot noir.

After four decades of success, California cabernet has realized an identity of its own, one related to but now independent from Bordeaux. Despite the current vogue, California pinot noir, with little record of sustained success, is nowhere near being ready to declare that sort of independence.

This does not mean that California winemakers should ape their French counterparts. Since growing

conditions in, say, the Napa Valley are very different from those in the Cote d'Or, Napa grapes will have very different physiological characteristics. Vintners there need to work with (not against) those characteristics, to make wines that can bespeak their viticultural origin of terroir.

At the same time, California winemakers also have to remember the stylistic attributes that distinguish any first-class pinot noir—the seductive silky texture, the fragrant bouquet, the relatively light body, and the multilayered, always evolving flavors.

These attributes, although historically associated with one place, actually transcend place. They are not themselves Burgundian, but rather are this grape variety's greatest expression, no matter the specific terroir.

Despite their newfound popularity too many contemporary California pinots display very different characteristics.

Instead of feeling smooth and sleek on the palate, they see heavy and ponderous. Their aromas are deep and dark, their color dense, their flavors forceful. In short, they taste as though they have been made with a completely different grape.

Happily some California wines do display classic pinot charm. They tend to be made by vintners who know the French models well, and so aim to fashion wines that emulate (but do not replicate) their enticing character.

I have tasted nearly 200 California pinot noirs during the past few months. Sadly those that displayed genuine finesse, grace and elegance were rare. Most of the others were fine, meaning flavorful without flaw, but they really didn't taste like pinot.

The following 14 wines (listed in a rough order of preference) were the best of the lot. None is cheap, but each can hold its own qualitatively with a first-class Burgundy—itself a wine that usually carries a quite steep price tag.

Unfortunately, top-notch, value-priced pinot noir is something of an oxymoron, no matter where the vineyard is located. This variety is simply too difficult to grow, and this sort of wine too difficult to make.

A final note: You'll see that one winery has four

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wines included in the following recommendations. That's because the Calera Wine Co., which back in the early 1980's was the first California producer to make pinots that could consistently compare favorably with premier cru and grand cru Burgundies, is still on top of its game.

The hip and happening can obscure the tried and true in the competitive world of California wine, so it can all too easy to overlook Calera. My experience indicates that doing so would be a definite mistake.

Wines

Reviewed

Calera Selleck Vineyard Mt Harlan 2002 (\$58). Initially tight (wines from this vineyard age very well), this wine opens with time in a glass or decanter to display a panoply of enthralling aromas and flavors, as well as a smooth, sumptuous texture. This is California pinot noir at its very finest. It is scheduled for an autumn release; savvy consumers take note.

Merry Edwards Olivet Lane Russian River Valley 2003 (\$54). Merry Edwards is sometimes called the "queen of California pinot noir," and with good reason, since she consistently produces very classy wines. This particular one, richly fruited but at the same time elegantly refined, is but another jewel in her crown.

Etude Heirloom Carneros 2003 (\$96). Smooth and supple, with plenty of fruit but many secondary flavors, as well, and a fantastically long, evolving finish. Expensive, though, even for the category.

Calera Jensen Vineyard Mt. Harlan 2002 (\$53). The most muscular of the Calera pinots, but the muscles are like a ballerina's, not a weight lifter's, so the wine is lithe and limber while at the same time powerful.

Talley Estate Arroyo Grande 2004 (\$36). Undervalued, at least on the East Coast, Talley Vineyards produces refined, graceful pinots and chardonnays, with a distinct mineral character beneath their sunny California fruit flavor. A name to remember.

Calera Reed Vineyard Mt. Harlan 2002 (\$48). Initially tight, then wonderfully aromatic with exposure to air. Echoes of spice and leather are intertwined with ripe but restrained fruit flavor.

Morgan Gary's Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands 2004 (\$45). California pinot typically needs a few years of bottle age to calm down and begin to exhibit more than just forward fruit flavor. This one is full of youthful exuberance now, but also displays plenty of exciting potential.

Patz and Hall Hyde Vineyard Carneros 2004 (\$60). From a winery that excels with Burgundy varieties (the Hyde Vineyard chardonnay is also excellent), this wine, if given time to shed its baby fat, promises to settle into a refined, gentle beauty.

Saintsbury Carneros 2003 (\$30). To my taste, always better than the oakier, heavier reserve or single vineyard offerings, Saintsbury's Carneros.

Au Bon Climat La Bauge Au-Dessus Santa Maria Valley 2004 (\$36). Au Bon Climat's pinots always need time to settle down. At present, this wine seems simplistic. Winemaker Jim Clendenen's track record suggests, though, that it will evolve into something far more nuanced and compelling.

Siduri Rosella's Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands 2003 (\$42). Rich fruit overlays but doesn't mask secondary subtlety in this smooth, beautifully textured pinot.

Calera Mills Vineyard Mt. Harlan 2002 (\$43). Spicy, mintlike notes introduce a wine of supple sophistication. Nothing weighty here, just elegance and grace.

Melville Santa Rita Hills 2004 (\$33). Somewhat monolithic at present, but with a spicy undertone that promises increased sophistication and subtlety with a few more years in bottle.

Byron Nielson Vineyard Santa Maria Valley 2003 (\$40). Appropriately lean but in no sense lacking in flavor, with spicy, herbal notes in addition to sweet cherry-scented fruit.