

# SNOOTH BUYER'S GUIDE: Pinot Noir Lovers Edition



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# SNOOTH BUYER'S GUIDE: Pinot Noir Lovers Edition

Welcome my fellow Pinot Noir lovers! I'm thrilled to have this opportunity to share some thoughts with you, all about Pinot Noir of course! What follows is information compiled from recent articles published on Snooth about Pinot Noir in several of its various guises.

While the bulk of the content here is about domestic Pinot Noir, I've sandwiched it between two other regions that are well known for their own production: Italy and Burgundy. In the coming months, I'll be adding an extensive article on the state of New Zealand's Pinot Noirs, with tasting notes of several hundred wines. In addition, you can find ongoing coverage of Pinot Noir on Snooth, as we taste your favorite wines throughout the year.

We hope you enjoy these articles, and will come to Snooth to share your opinions, tasting notes and of course favorite Pinot Noirs with like minded wine lovers!

# Pinot Nero

As you might have guessed, I love Italian wine. Pinot Nero might be tough to define as Italian wine, but it has a century long history in Italy and offers an alternative style to the myriad of other styles of Pinot produced around the world.

So what makes Pinot Nero Italian? The terroir of course. Almost all of the wines I tried during this tasting hailed from the Alto Adige, that northern-most province of Italy's center that is blessed with gorgeous mountain valleys fit for vines from floor to hilltop. Pinot expresses something unique in this region because of those hillside vineyards and the climate, which often calls for a sweater at 600 meters even in the heart of summer.

Though it can be cool at night, daytime temperatures in an Alto Adige summer are plenty warm. This shift in temperatures, known as a diurnal shift, allows for the full ripening of the fruit without the development of any jammy flavors. In fact, one of the issues many people have with Alto Adige Pinot Neros is that lack of fruit, which even I can see as a fault sometimes. When Pinot Nero lacks the requisite fruit flavors, the wines tend towards pronounced forest floor and earthy flavors, but when producers capture the fruit, there is a clarity and brilliance to it that very few other Pinot Noirs can compete with.



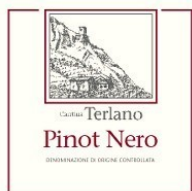
# Pinot Nero

Notes from a recent tasting:



## 2008 Castelfeder Glenner Pinot Noir 13% \$21

This is deep, intense and layered on the nose, with floral notes, gentle green herb elements and a really nicely done edge of wood spice. This is really beautiful in the mouth; rich, soft and supple, with clear, ripe red cherry fruit and edge of earth, integrated tannins. Totally seamless and wonderfully pure, this finishes with good length to the gentle spice, mineral and herb elements, ending with a touch of peppery tannins offset by notes of dried lime peel. **91pts**



## 2009 Terlan Pinot Nero 13.5% \$25

Nice intensity on the nose, with very attractive dried herb, wild cherry, spice and mineral aromas and a mineral top note. This really opens up on the palate with intense, juicy wild cherry/wild strawberry fruit framed with herbal, floral and chamomile notes. The texture is so supple yet firm, with nice mineral and leather tones emerging on the back end. Clear and unmistakably Pinot Noir. The finish is lean and elegant, with pure, slightly creamy strawberry flavors and a finale of strawberry seeds. **91pts**



## 2009 Caldero Saltner Pinot Noir 14% \$28

This is fruity and floral on the nose. Very meadow-after-a-rain scented with gorgeous citrussy grapefruit rind and bitter orange rind-edged wild cherry fruit, wrapped up in modest, warm oak spice. Big fruit on entry though with fine clarity. The wood tannins add some structure but are covered by the sweet, almost jammy wild cherry fruit and strawberry top notes. Spicy on the finish, with really fine clarity to the black cherry pit flavors that lead to a spice and mineral finale. **91pts**

# Pinot Nero

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2008 Zemmer Pinot Nero 13% \$18

Licorice and tree bark accent the black raspberry fruit with a deep note of Bergamot orange and a little camphor. Soft and sapid, with bright, juicy black raspberry/black cherry fruit. There's a nice stemmy, herbal note on the mid-palate, with very good fruit intensity through the transition to the moderately long finish, ending with a hint of iron. This really offers lovely complexity and richness. **89pts**

## 2009 Alta Luna Cavit Vigneti delle Pinot Noir Dolomiti 12.5% \$12

Minor smoke notes and firm minerality greet the nose, backed up with strawberry and cherry fruit and a suggestion of dry wood. Rather medium bodied, this offers up a nice blend of cranberry/strawberry/raspberry fruit in a modestly rich, bright style. Shows off a hint of wood spice on the palate, then gains a modestly richer impression of tobacco leaf and mocha on the moderately long raspberry/strawberry finish. Fairly reminiscent of village Burgundy. **87pts**

## 2007 Tenutae Lageder Krafuss 13% \$40

This smells woody on the nose with oyster shell, moss and oak notes sharing the stage with floral and dried cranberry fruit. Big and soft, fleshy even, in the mouth, with taut, minerally dried strawberry fruit that's accented with hints of Asian spice and even some super ripe tropical fruit notes. Rosehips on the back end lead to a light, bright, mineral-cut finish. A touch austere, this might be trying too hard. **88pts**

## 2009 Tiefenbrunner Turmhof Pinot Nero 13.5% \$25

The nose offers up some autumnal elements along with notes of chalk, antiseptic and cranberry fruit. Nicely balanced and rich, if austere and slightly on the tannic side. The fruit resembles the aromas of forest floor, with mineral tones and astringent red fruits that are backed up with hints of beefiness. The finish is rather round and luxurious, with nice sweet tea and creamy cherry fruit. **88pts**

# Pinot Nero

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2008 Schreckbichl Colterenzio St. Daniel Pinot Nero Riserva 13.2% \$25

This is very pale. Fairly oaky with vanilla and earth on the nose, with light cranberry fruit and a bit of a meaty/jerky top note. Supple on entry, this brightens quickly with a very focused, firm feeling. There's a gentle sweetness of ripeness to the wine, which has a fine gossamer texture but seems a bit dried out from its time in wood. The fruit turns a touch roasted on the finish, which ends up being rather firm and gravel driven, and bright with dry apply fruit on the finale. Accented with a hint of strawberry. **87pts**

## 2008 Weingut Gottardi Mazzon Pinot Nero 14% \$35

Stemmy and woody on the nose, with caramel and roasted herb notes aromas. Rather rich and well put together in the mouth. This is deep and rich, with wild cherry fruit in a rather taut framework. Has a touch of wood sweetness softening the somewhat stern edges. This has a great mouthfeel, and I like the structure and even herbal tones, but this has a dry finish. **87pts**

## 2010 Tramin Pinot Nero 13.5% \$20

Floral and quite fruity, with raspberry notes in a fragrant and effusive style that recalls Beaujolais. Sweetly red cherried on entry, with a soft, easy feel acidotic brightness and some very supple tannins. This has a lovely spice note on the palate accenting the clear, crisp fresh red fruits. Very easy to drink and like if simple. **86pts**

## 2009 Nals Margreid Pinot Nero 13% \$14

Earthy and a touched reduced on the nose, with smoky, dried pork and meaty undertones and lingonberry, floral and camphor notes. Pretty rich in the mouth, though this is very savory flavored with a nice edge of mature fruit sweetness, soft round tannins and some mineral notes that creep over the finish with drying tannins. **85pts**

# Looking for Value in Pinot Noir

For the definition of value, since we are talking about Pinot Noir, I've drawn the line at \$15 a bottle.

While that may seem generous to many, the truth is I just had to kiss a lot of frogs, nasty, dirty, devoid of fruit frogs to come up with a selection of value priced Pinots worth recommending. I was almost tempted to write off the entire category, but low and behold, you can find good Pinot Noir for not a lot of money. You have to be very particular.

There are many reasons for this but chief among them is the simple fact that there is not enough Pinot Noir to meet demand, though vineyards are coming online around the globe. Sadly, many new vineyards are planted in places that make for poor Pinot so I see plenty of thin, weedy Pinot in our future.



# Looking for Value in Pinot Noir

Notes from a recent tasting:



## 2009 Wyndham Estate Bin 333 Pinot Noir South Eastern Australia 13% **\$10**

This smells lovely with a jammy sort of astringent red fruit/ red currant note on the nose layered over vanilla, some light pickapepper marinade tamarindness, some preserved lime and a nice spice note but it's all fresh and lively. A touch soft on entry with tannins that are lightly peppery and just a hint of austere, though that adds some nice mouthgrab here. The fruit is bright and zesty with cedary top notes to the core of burnished cherry fruit. This is very clean and clear and refreshing with good length. It's fairly complex but at the same time rather subtle. Back up the Truck! **88pts**



## 2010 Woodbridge by Robert Mondavi Pinot Noir California 13% **\$8**

Stemmy and lightly smoky with cranberry and smoldering herbs on the nose. Bright yet a touch sweet on entry with simple yet clean red fruit flavors accented with the stemmy smoldering note of the nose. The finish is a touch sticky though the fruit gains a little more depth adding some nice plum and dried citrus peel/clementine notes. This is a bit clunky, the tannins a bit tough but it's well made and defect-free. Totally unremarkable yet this offers good value. **84pts**



## 2008 De Bortoli Vat 10 Pinot Noir South Eastern Australia 13.5% **\$15**

A bit beefy on the nose with cola, tea, tar and smoldering underbrush notes accenting sweet cranberry fruit. Rather round and lush on entry then turning nicely taut through the mid-palate with soft tannins supporting nicely round, though lightweight cherry and slightly peachy fruit flavors that roll onto a fairly long, somewhat rusty and lightly stemmy finish. This shows a nice level of complexity with an edge of maturity adding sweetness and softness to the palate. **89pts**



# Looking for Value in Pinot Noir

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2009 Red Rock Winery Pinot Noir Reserve California 13.5% **\$12**

Clean and fresh if simple on the nose with light cola, smoke and baked berry notes framed with light dried citrus peel and sweet oak notes. This is just a hint chunky in the mouth yet retains nice freshness. It's actually nicely light/medium weight with a core of slightly milk chocolaty oak sweetened red fruit that's a bit indistinct yet quite agreeable. The finish shows some raspberry and cherry pit tones with some wood tannin sticking out but nothing that a bit of food wouldn't take care of. I would like to see a little more acidity here to support the fresh flavors but this is fairly well done. **87pts**

## 2009 Cline Cool Climate Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 14.5% **\$14**

This is pretty frankly oaky on the nose with smoke and asphalt tones covering sweet graham cracker and herb tones. A bit fat on entry with a round, lush soft leading edge and extracted tannins. This is rather large scaled with indistinct yet sweet dark berry and plum fruit topped with some vanilla. The finish shows better clarity though still oaky the texture lightens considerably and the fruit reddens, lingering in the mouth with a fine cherry note. A bit sweet and simple but this offers a lot for the price and competes well with wines costing more. **87pts**

## 2009 Esser Pinot Noir Monterey Ca. 13.5% **\$15**

This has a rather fine blend of scrubby underbrush, Ranier cherry and smoky soil. Smells a bit mesquite-y in a floral kind of way. Bright and clear with simple yet fresh and ever so lightly astringent red berry fruit. More raspberry than strawberry this delivers a very nice slightly sweet mouthful of red fruit on a rather streamlined frame. The finish shows a pops of tannins that then receded leaving the mouth warm with some cinnamon like spice and some jelly donut filling. Very nice if you enjoy this style. **87pts**

# Looking for Value in Pinot Noir

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2009 Cono Sur Vision Colchagua Valley, Chile 14% **\$15**

Very floral and perfumed on the nose with nettles and pine needles adding layers of complexity. There's moist earth and sweet fruit here as well. This totally smells like walking in a meadow after a rainfall. Soft on entry with good acidity but enough richness to makes this feel a little flat. The mid-palate shows moderately rich dark berry fruit with some mineral accents but lacks the complexity and excitement of the nose. The acids pop out quickly on the finish which is short and thin. **87pts**

# \$20 Pinots

What do you get from \$20 Pinots? Sadly, not a lot more than \$15 Pinots. That is a blatant lie of course. What I should have said was that you don't get many better wines in a random assortment of a dozen Pinots. In fact, given the higher price point and thus the higher threshold for being recommended, you actually end up with fewer choices than at the lower \$15 price point. Ouch!

Having said that, let me just say that you really need to know what you want when it comes to Pinot Noir. If you're looking for more wine at \$20 than \$15, rest assured that you will be successful. In fact, one of the wines I've recommended is a veritable fruit bomb. Many of the other wines are simply bigger without necessarily being much better than the \$15 wines.

One of the reasons that I found it difficult to recommend many of these wines was that bigness, which was mostly represented by an excess of alcohol and an excess of extraction, robbed the wine of Pinot's natural delicacy and finesse. So again, you have to ask yourself if bigger is really better. If your answer is yes, then spending a few extra dollars may result in a better wine for your palate. If the answer is no, then shop very carefully my friends. Very carefully indeed.



# \$20 Pinots

Notes from a recent tasting:



## 2009 Plantagenet Omrah Pinot Noir Great Southern Australia 13.5% \$20

Fairly intense if smoky with stemmy and soil driven aromatics that add nice fresh spice tones to a lean yet focused core of raspberry fruit. This comes on strong on entry, lots of richness yet on a very lean frame. There's nicely framed light cherry/cranberry fruit here, a hint of astringency from the tannins that helps add some cut to the very ripe fruit and well integrated acids. This is elegant and has a nice sense of delicacy that can't be confused with weakness. The red fruit with a nice lifted blood orange character extends over the moderately long and nicely pure finish. **90pts**



## 2009 Francis Coppola Director's Cut Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 13.5% \$20

This is fresh and clean on the nose with a slight balsamic edge to the coffee toned black raspberry fruit that has sweet top notes of licorice and dried orange peel. This is round yet focused on entry with a wonderfully raspberry fruit tone framed with soft tannins and lightly toasted oak notes. The balance here is really quite fine and while this is a touch simple it delivers really nice, pure and intense raspberry fruit. This turns a bit more cherry on the back end and gains some light herbal/floral notes on the moderately long, slightly oaky finish. This is not fancy but it really is quite attractive and will appeal to a very broad spectrum of palates. **90pts**

# \$20 Pinots

Notes from a recent tasting:



**2010 Meiomi Pinot Noir Monterey County 57% Santa Barbara County 23% Sonoma County 20% 13.8%ABV \$20**

Lots of dark fruit on the nose with chocolaty oak and herbal notes adding some detail. With air the oak really pops here adding sweet, toasted spice notes and a cedary edge. This is very intense stuff with slightly thick, rich dark berry fruit drenched in chocolate and spicy oak. The texture is actually rather restrained in some ways but this is simply explosively fruity. The finish is a bit short and more about oak than that fruit but rather clean and fresh, perhaps showing a touch of heat. Totally not my style of wine but I can see people absolutely loving this. **89pts**

**2008 Amity Vineyards Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Or. 13% \$20**

Laid back earthy, floral, and slightly evergreen aromas grace the nose with a building core of cran/raspberry fruit. Rich and ripe on entry with acids that seem a touch soft at first. This delivers fairly intense orange cream framed red cherry and raspberry fruit in a clean, lightly aromatic style that fresh and unencumbered. Really lovely depth of flavor here and it comes with faint oak notes and a really nice soil base note. The fruit takes on a slight medicinal note towards the back which echoes with a licorice tones on the modest finish. Should gain some length with time. Very delicious. **89pts**

**2010 Opawa Pinot Noir Marlborough N.Z. 13.5% \$20**

A little light but very fresh on the nose with crushed raspberry fruit, cranberry juice, some clay soil, and some African violet spice notes. Very big on entry but not rich or fat, just mouth filling with a spicy leading edge of nettle tones followed by some slightly reduced raspberry fruit accented with bitter chocolate and a hint of gravelly mineral and some finely integrated wood notes on the backend that run through the finish. The finish is taut and tight with some very well defined mineral notes and a low but lovely and sweet rush of raspberries ending with a hint of rooibos tea on the finale. **88pts**



# \$20 Pinots

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2009 Brokenwood Beechworth Pinot Noir Australia 14% \$20

This is quite perfumey, all floral and cherry toned with a hint of something sweetly vegetal, damp tea leaves and lovely use of oak, light and low. This has a fine texture on entry and lovely weight but then some rather aggressive and out of place tannins make an appearance. The fruit here is gorgeous, pure round, clear and aromatic in the mouth with good spice notes but the tannins are just a little aggressive for this weight. The finish shows more of those rather outsized tannins and they bring a bitterness to the finale. Lighten up and let this fruit sing. Maybe this will improve with 2-3 years in the cellar but I bet the fruit fades first. **88pts**

## 2008 Wente Reliz Creek Pinot Noir Arroyo Seco Monterey California 14.5%

Smoky and cedary on the nose with spice dark cherry and strawberry fruit tones. There's a lot of coffee oak here with shadings of vanilla. Round and sweet red fruit lead this into the mouth. This has real richness and the fuzzy little tannins add even more volume in the mouth. The fruit is a bit candied, black raspberry and a little black currant adding some complexity. The oak treatment is not terribly heavy but it is obvious and lays under the black cherry fruit on the slightly hot finish. A fruity style of wine for sure but one that should have broad appeal. **88pts**

## 2009 Ten Sisters Pinot Noir Marlborough New Zealand 13.5%

The sweet wild cherry jam tones on the nose are accented by damp earth tones and a fine herbal spice edge. This is a touch simple on the nose but quite aromatic. This is elegant and soft on entry, with a nice clear core of slightly jammy, gentle toasted spice accented red fruit. The inner mouth perfumes build revealing more fruit tones, both a bit darker and some orchard fruit notes. The backend turns tissue soft and segues into a lightly vanilla and bay leaf toned, cinnamon spotted red cherry echo. **88pts**

# \$20 Pinots

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2009 Decoy Pinot Noir Anderson Valley 14.5% \$20

Nicely sweet on the nose yet not fruity with layers of earthy, medicinal, herbal, beet root, rhubarb and orange rind aromas. Sweet and a bit dense in the mouth with finely polished but tightly packed tannins contributing to the sensation of weight on the palate. There's a little heat here that detracts a bit but this delivers some broad and sweet carob tinged dark boysenberry, mulberry and black cherry flavors. The flavors on the backend are a little muddy, and while this is fairly rich it's a little hot and not that well balanced, particularly on the finish. **87pts**

## 2008 Joseph Faiveley Borgogne France 13% \$20

Very soil driven on the nose with flowers, a little hibiscus tea and sandy chalk over cranberry fruit. Very focused on entry with terrific purity to the cranberry/red cherry fruit that has a slight edge of sweetness. The tannins here are super fine yet slightly grippy and the acidity is refreshing yet integrated. Very light and fresh and easy to drink with more soil tones on the backend and a lovely little bit of lifted spice on the modest finish. **87pts**

## 2009 Talbott Kali Hart Pinot Noir Monterey Ca. 14.8% \$17

This is quite meaty on the nose with some seared berry fruit and nice floral spice and earth toned forest floor notes though it is a touch hot on the nose. Sweetly fruited on entry though this is pretty hot. That heat adds a pepperiness to the palate that distracts from the fresh, clean red fruit and adds a bitterness to the finish. Chunky and poorly balanced. **78pts**

## 2009 Stickybeak Pinot Noir Sonoma County 14.3% \$20

There's some cola and loam here backed up by nicely clear slightly sweet cranberry, strawberry and rhubarb aromas. Somewhat spicy and earthy on entry with a little sweetness from alcohol (?) and a touch of bitterness accenting the low berry fruit. This is a touch dry and astringent without sufficient fruit to buffer the oak and savory character here while finishing with some noticeable heat. **78pts**

# Moving up the Pinot Price Ladder

So we're moving up the ladder, one small step at a time. Let's look at Pinot Noirs priced right around \$25, a fair amount of money to spend on a bottle of wine. Does it make a difference?

Does spending the extra \$5 necessarily yield a better wine than a \$20 or \$15 bottle of Pinot? The answer is no, not really, but it certainly does increase your chances. Unlike the tastings I did of those lower price points, every wine in the lineup today was well made and enjoyable, some more than others.

For \$25, you can feel pretty comfortable that you'll be able to find a wine that suits your palate, whether it is New World, Old World, or somewhere in between.

That doesn't mean you will be blown away. Instead, you might just be slowly seduced by some of these wines. The best of all, the 2009 Thomas Fogarty, is clearly in a class by itself among these wines!



# Moving up the Pinot Price Ladder

Notes from a recent tasting:



## 2009 Thomas Fogarty Pinot Noir Santa Cruz Mtns. CA 14.1% \$25

A little dark and musky, with great liquory black cherry fruit, a hint of cola and some well-integrated wood spice are presented with surprising freshness on the nose. This is taut and sinewy, almost muscular in the mouth. The tension here is very attractive. While this is a big wine, its bright, clear black raspberry and cherry fruit is well restrained by the fine tannins and supporting acids. There's some wood spice on the back end that adds a really nice sweetening top note to the fruit, which takes a medicinal turn. That might be off putting to some, but the fruit comes back with excellent clarity and length on the long, slightly chewy yet fresh finish. This can stand some age. There is a little heat here, but there's so much going on, including some lovely developing inner mouth perfumes, that I can handle the heat. **92pts**



## 2009 Dobbs Grand Assemblage Pinot Noir Willamette Valley OR 13.5% \$24

Wintergreen, quinine and eucalyptus top the red fruit of the nose. This is rather broad in the mouth, though clear and bright, with a slightly flannelly feel to the fine, fresh fruit tones. There's something slightly exotic about the fruit here, a little papaya/guava action going on. Raspberry fruit adds depth, offering up a super sweet/mineral tension. This is still youthful, but is a very complete wine. The herbal notes of the nose come out on the back end, adding more depth and freshness to the earthy wild cherry finish. Damn this is good. **91pts**

# Moving up the Pinot Price Ladder

Notes from a recent tasting:



## 2009 Babcock Rita's Earth Pinot Noir Sta. Rita Hills CA 13.6% **\$23**

This smells lovely, with balanced, soft notes of sage, soil, sour cherry, dried grapefruit rind and floral aromas. Round on entry with a fine combination of brightness, from acid and flavor, and round suppleness. This is absolutely wonderful in the mouth. It is round and playful, yet silky and transparent, with precise flavors of small red berried fruit accented with clear mineral and pollen spice notes. There's even an edge of dried herb or grass that adds complexity to the moderately long, fruit and soil toned finish. **91pts**

## 2009 Duck Pond Pinot Noir Willamette Valley OR 13.5% **\$22**

This is earthy and a bit wild on the nose, with a musky animal spice note. Lots of floral and medicinal herb notes add complexity over an astringent base of lingonberry and raspberry fruit. Soft and seductive on entry with a seamless feel. There's plenty of red cherry fruit accented with a low streak of vanilla and some incipient wood and herb spice notes that try to bust out on the back end. The finish gains some nice mineral spice and has a warm cherry pie filling sweetness and spice that extends through the citrus/raspberry finale. Lovely wine. Almost seems simple, but has the potential to be a complete, if small scaled wine. **90pts**

## 2009 J. Lohr Fog's Reach Pinot Noir Arroyo Seco CA 14% **\$28**

This shows some toasted oak character on the nose, but there are nice carob, clay earth and eucalyptus tones accenting the sour raspberry fruit. This is very focused in the mouth. It is seamless with fine supporting acidity and superbly managed tannins lending volume without detracting from the mouthfeel. Smooth as silk with nice milk chocolate accented bitter cherry fruits on the palate. The flavors are a touch light, if nicely balanced and pure, with the oak and some medicinal cola notes popping on the moderately long finish. Does show some heat. **89pts**



# Moving up the Pinot Price Ladder

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2008 Davis Bynum Pinot Noir Russian River Valley CA 14.9% **\$25**

Full on spicy, with a rich, black cherry, black raspberry, cola and spicy oak nose. Richly sweet and smooth, this is why people love California Pinot. The fruit is pretty big and bold, but fresh and fruity with a spiced black cherry core. The acidity adds nice support and the tannins are rich if a little fuzzy, not breaking through the fruit but breaking up the smoothness of the fruit. Finishes with some cola and root beer notes. This is bold and rich, really doing a fine job of what California Pinot Noir is all about. It does lack some complexity and nuance. **89pts**

## 2009 Raptor Ridge Pinot Noir Willamette Valley OR 14.4% **\$25**

There's a fair amount of oak on the nose here, perhaps more than I'd like to see since it obscures what appears to be a nice base of forest floor, beet root and wild cherry fruit. The wood does integrate with time, but instead remains fairly dominant. In the mouth, there is a bit too much wood tannin running from front to back, distracting from the fruit. The fruit is much more pronounced here than on the nose. This has that sweetness of ripe fruit, yet is not sweet and shows excellent balance with finely integrated acids keeping the richness well focused. The wood does add some noticeable spice, particularly on the finish, but some may prefer this wine with the wood. The base wine is very attractive. **89pts**

## 2009 Esterhazy Pinot Noir Austria 13.5% **\$NA**

This is moderately intense, with notes of mineral-rich soil and steeped tea adding depth and complexity to a very fresh, almost herbal and ripe tomato scented core of light red fruits. Light and zesty on entry, with leading tannins that are a touch dry and add some licorice tones early on. The mid-palate shows traces of flesh with some significant acids taking center stage, driving the tea scented raspberry fruit through the medium length, mineral smeared finish. Ripe but lean, with a very refreshing character. Certainly not for everyone, or even most. **88pts**

# Moving up the Pinot Price Ladder

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2008 Faiveley Mercurey France 13% \$24

Light on the nose, with high floral notes and lower crunchy yet sweet cranberry tones. This fleshes out with a little wood and mineral filling in the middle. Nicely sapid on entry, but with decent covering material. The fruit here is super approachable, round and ripe, and nicely pure, with small red cherry and candied raspberry notes accented by a touch of vanilla. The finish is fairly long, with a wiry mineral twang and lovely resonance of raspberry fruit. There's nothing fancy here, just a wonderful introduction to the flavors, balance and texture of Burgundy. **88pts**

## 2009 Scott Family Estate Dijon Clone Pinot Noir Arroyo Seco CA 14.9% \$24

A fair amount of spice graces the nose here, imbuing the jammy raspberry fruit with hints of cinnamon and dried citrus rind notes. There's obvious sweet and toasty oak, but overall this has a rather holiday aroma. Big and a bit soft, there's plenty of alcohol here and some bitter wood tannins that add a dark spice note to the dark cherry and strawberry jam notes on the palate. This is big and, for my palate, a bit too ripe, but it maintains good balance. This flavor profile will appeal to some. **87pts**

## 2009 Willamette Valley Vineyards Pinot Noir OR 14.5% \$23

Very pale color, not that this is a bad thing. This is very tight on the nose, revealing very little other than some lightly minty herb notes. Delicate and super fresh in the mouth. This is a light, dusty mouthful of raspberries, with a seductive lightness of texture. Ultimately, this is a bit too simple for the price, but with some time it might develop more depth and intensity. If it does, it will be great because it already has delicious flavors and great inner harmony. **87pts**

# Moving up the Pinot Price Ladder

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2008 Giant Steps Sexton Vineyard Pinot Noir Yarra Valley Australia 14% \$25

Stemmy and oily on the nose with herbal base notes of basil and tarragon, sweetened nicely with some toasted oak. This grows fairly smoky on the nose, but the fruit, which is towards the rhubarb-beet root end of the spectrum, remains reticent. Very soft and rounded on entry, though this has decent acidity. The texture, slightly rich and slightly sweet, is easy to like. The oak notes, with a bit of spice and some Mexican chocolate, add appealing accents to the mid-palate, but this lacks some depth and richness of flavor. The finish shows a bit of uncovered wood tannin and shows sweetness brought out by the wood tones. Ends with a little heat. **87pts**

# Pinot Noir \$25 - \$35

We're continuing up our Pinot price ladder, and it is time we begin to broaden the range. After ticking off a pair of \$5 increments, opening up the selection to wines in the \$25 to \$35 range seemed to make sense. This jump was also necessary because there is a distinct paucity of Pinot in the \$25 to \$30 range. It seems as though marketers have identified the various price barriers awfully well, \$30 is not one of them!

Still, when you're at \$30, what's another three bucks? I'm guessing that's what those marketing folks are thinking too! Truth is, not much, but moving up from \$25 to \$35 does open a whole new world of wines.

Not surprisingly, this as a selection was the best yet. Some of the wines continue to suffer from the "more is better" syndrome and some alcohols were a bit excessive, but in general, the wines were delightful. Besides offering better depth, complexity and freshness of flavor, the textures of these wines showed much more elegance and finesse than the wines at lower price points.

That may seem to be a silly point to focus on, but one of the things that sets Pinot Noir apart from many other wines is that supple, elegant and seductive texture. It is easy to blend it away or cover it up with too much oak, extraction or residual sugar, so when a winemaker captures that essence of Pinot Noir, there is simply nothing else like it!

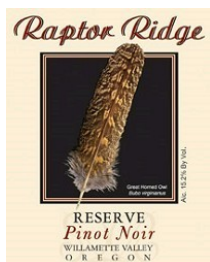
# Pinot Noir \$25 - \$35

Notes from a recent tasting:



## 2009 Frank Family Carneros Pinot Noir Napa Valley 14.5% **\$33**

This is dark and earthy on the nose with noticeable chocolate oak spice and vanilla. These are not overwhelming and allow the grapefruit, blueberry and blackberry fruit to emerge. Really very fine on entry with good weight, giving this a superb supply mouthfeel but very little baby fat. On the palate, there are mineral and gentle oak-inflected accents to the bright and stemmily aromatic black cherry and beetroot fruit flavors. The finish shows nice richness, and there is a sweetness that emerges to balance the mineral and acid notes. Really nicely done, a complete and very well balanced California Pinot Noir. A bit chunky but not thick, I really like this. **92pts**



## 2008 Raptor Ridge Reserve Pinot Noir Willamette Valley OR 13.8% **\$31**

This needs lots of air to clean up on the nose, though when it does, it reveals a musky, earthy core of bright parchment and boiled peanut tinged salted plum fruit. A touch soft on entry, this is rather tight with the tannins being a bit dominant early on. There's nice fruit here that remains fresh, it's just very wrapped up in itself at this point. With time, the fruit starts to open up. Like the nose, it's very much in the plummy end of the spectrum, with some pomegranate accents and spicy, red berry notes on the moderately long finish. A very serious wine. Tense, subtle, well structured and well balanced, with a lovely black fruit and spice finale. Very stylish. **92pts**



# Pinot Noir \$25 - \$35

Notes from a recent tasting:



## 2009 Dutton Goldfield Dutton Ranch Pinot Noir Russian River Valley CA 13.5% **\$33**

Surprisingly darkly colored. This is intensely perfumed and distinctly varietal, with wonderful sweet oak, briar, stem, herb and floral aromas accenting the core of black cherry fruit. Silky and broad in the mouth, this immediately reveals a supple core of bold cherry/black cherry/boysenberry fruit on entry. There are some dusty tannins that still show youth, but this is very well balanced and delightfully easy to drink. The back end and finish reveal a touch of minerality that is refreshing, along with some sweetened and spice from oak. This lacks a little bit of complexity and is a tiny bit chunky, but is deliciously drinkable. **91pts**

## 2008 Argyle Willamette Valley Pinot Noir Reserve OR 14% **\$35**

This is light and elegant on the nose with a bit of leather, some sage and sweet caramel-accented Rainier cherry fruit with hints of slate and old wood. Delicate, yet complex and appealing on the nose. This is very bright and a touch lifted on entry, with silky smooth tannins that are barely notable behind the frame of Rainier cherry, cranberry and rhubarb fruit. Really quite elegant and fresh, much like the nose with its sense of sneaky elegance. The fruit turns quite firmly raspberry flavored on the back end and gains hints of herb and mineral on the moderately long finish. So smooth. **90pts**

## 2009 Carlton Cellars Cape Lookout Pinot Noir OR 14.4% **\$28**

This is very fine on the nose, with perhaps a whisper of heat. It's covered by nice, mineral rich loamy soil notes, some sage and evergreen, fine wild raspberry and wild strawberry fruit, and a suggestion of cocoa. Richly fruited on entry, this shows a wonderfully fresh tension between slightly powdery tannins, sweet fruit, and vibrant acids. That sage note adds more freshness to the palate, which is really energetic and explosive. The fruit fades a touch on the mid-palate, but it retains a nice depth and a suggestion of sweetness. The finish is nicely savory, adding beetroot and some very well integrated baking spice notes to the red fruit.

**90pts**

# Pinot Noir \$25 - \$35

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2008 Alma Rosa Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir 14.1% \$30

Very pretty on the nose. Lean but fresh and ripe fruit is backed up with notes of dried herbs and flowers, underlain by some sweet, toasty oak and topped with aromatic smoke. Nicely rich on entry. A glassy feel and taut acids early on slowly get covered by some lovely slightly bitter cherry and dark raspberry extract flavors, with even a hint of black currant. There's some nice mineral and spice notes underpinning the sweet fruit here, which lightens considerably on the long and gently hot finish. Really nicely aromatic and bright. **90pts**

## 2009 Raptor Ridge Stony Mountain Vineyard Pinot Noir McMinnville OR 13.9% \$35

Carob, briar and dusty earth greet the nose with hints of peach and cranberry, all topped by a sage note. This is very lithe in the mouth. There's some nicely burnished red fruit here, with a fine, firm and almost austere base of tannins that lend this real finesse on the palate. The flavors of raspberry/black raspberry and rhubarb are laced with some graham cracker notes that pop on the back end. These yield to more pronounced cranberry and red cherry fruit on the finish, which shows those tannins peeking out just below. Exceptionally light and fresh, this is rather weightless in the mouth, but does have flavors that tend to be rather lean. Definitely more of a textural achievement, but still delicious. **90pts**

## 2009 William James Cellars Garey Ranch pinot Noir Santa Maria Valley 14.1% \$35

This shows a bit of heat on the nose, with nicely sweet herb and gentle toasty oak notes accenting lightly jammy lingonberry, black cherry and wild red cherry fruit. Bright and firm on entry, this shows a relatively muscular, sinewy structure. There's not a lot of intensity here, though there is fairly rich body. Some blood orange notes emerge, accenting a light Smith Brothers cough drop note on the back end that disappears quickly on the short, slightly tannic, earthy finish. Shows a nice cherry pit finale. **89pts**

# Pinot Noir \$25 - \$35

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2009 Kokomo Windsor Oaks Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 14.5% **\$32**

Lots of cola on the nose, with some tea accenting the wild raspberry fruit. Background notes of peach, bay leaf and vanilla add complexity. This is very high toned. Light but rich on entry, with burnished bitter cherry fruit and some sweetness. This is really very bright and rather intense on the palate, offering up richness and intensity without any fat. It's a bit hot on the finish, which does mar the whole impression, but it's very easy to drink and does show some surprisingly subtle complexity on the mid-palate. A lovely Rainier cherry note on the finish is supported by very well integrated wood spice notes.

**89pts**

## 2009 Bernardus Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands 14.7% **\$30**

Pretty flat and a bit heavy on the nose, with low intensity toasted oak and carob aromas. With air this does gain some sage and fruit notes, but it still lacks intensity. A bit sweet on entry and slightly disjointed, with weird acidity and chalky vitamin notes accenting nice if low intensity black cherry fruit. There's some nice tannic support for the fruit, but a slightly chemical note on the back end adds a brief and astringent medicinal character to the rather well fruited finish. Has some stickiness, but delivers lots of baked blackberry and cherry fruit. **87pts**

## 2009 Amity Crannell Pinot Noir Willamette Valley OR 13.5% **\$33**

Super intense nose of quinine, chalk and pine. The nose does calm down revealing some red fruit, but I would have a hard time getting past this nose. Rather lean and attenuated on entry, this rounds out somewhat, showing some nice ripe fruit. A touch of orange shows over spiced red cherries, but there is a rawness and astringency here that is accentuated by the chalky mintiness. The finish is dry and raw as well. This might just be going through a phase. The texture is rather appealing, if austere, but I am concerned by the inherent greenness and astringency I am finding here. Finish does develop a bit of sweetness, helping to buffer the astringency. **85pts**

# Oregon Pinot Noir \$35 - \$45

I'm continuing my move up the price scale and am finally getting into the bottom layer of the top wines. There's a lot of great wine available at around \$40 a bottle. Seeing as how this is about as much, and maybe even more, than a typical consumer might spend for a splurge bottle of wine, it's not surprising that it is also a very competitive and packed price point.

You have to produce mighty fine wine to be a value at \$40, and in Oregon that means finesse and complexity. It also means having a little something extra, which could be blazing aromatics or extra density adding weight to the palate and potential to improve. My top two picks from Oregon share that little bit of extra weight, but number three is closing in on them with a lean, focused style that I probably would prefer at the dinner table.



# Oregon Pinot Noir \$35 - \$45

Notes from a recent tasting:



## 2008 Methven Reserve Pinot Noir Willamette Valley OR 14.5% \$40

Tight on the nose with an apparent, but not covering, note of wood. There's a lot of spice here which slowly rises in the glass, but it is accompanied by plenty of minty, slightly medicinal black cherry fruit. This is seamless in the mouth, with tannins that remain youthful, bright acids and a fresh, supple framework supporting the clean black berry, black currant fruit that shows a phenomenal level of freshness and intensity. This is sleek and tense and that presence in the mouth extends over the long, layered finish. There's a fair amount of oak here sexing this up, but the underlying wine is very strong.

**93pts**



## 2009 Dobbes Family Skipper's Cuvee Pinot Noir Rogue Valley Oregon 14.5% \$42

Very fruity and ripe on the nose with sweet candy notes that join sweet tea, wild berry fruit, sage, a hint of vanilla, some cola and spice cake notes. Rich and almost dense on entry with great intensity of flavor. There's that spice cake and dried fruit early on the entry, then the acids kick in and freshen the fruit on the palate. The acid actually brings out the sweetness of the fruit, which is a touch exotic. A hint of pomegranate accents cherry fruit, leading to a really intense, richly flavored fruit and spice coated finish. Pretty big wine, lots of extract here, but it's not over-wrought, just intense. **92pts**



# Oregon Pinot Noir \$35 - \$45

Notes from a recent tasting:



## 2009 Willamette Valley Vnyds estate Pinot Noir Willamette Valley OR 14.5% **\$45**

Nice, clear cherry fruit accented by a bit of licorice, a base of baking spice, earth and a little hint of salumi cellar, and a big floral top note. There's really nice richness up front here, not sweet or heavy, just rich. Excellent depth of black cherry flavor quickly turns rather aromatic in the mouth. The tannins are a touch youthful in the mouth, adding some texture. The acid is well integrated, lending this further density that drives a succulent, sour berry fruit finish, which pushes a nice edge of wood spice ahead of it. **92pts**

## 2007 Amity Winemaker's Reserve Pinot Noir Willamette Valley OR 12.5% **\$38**

Another stinky wine. Give it time because it does clean up, revealing a lovely base of savory veld stock, herb and soil notes with some toasty oak and hints of hazelnut and green walnut. This is remarkable. It's bright and vibrant and fairly energetic in the mouth. Late arriving mineral notes, fine and gauzy cherry fruit, and layers of subtle, savory soil notes sit high in the mouth and pop on the back end before faltering on the somewhat short finish. Finale shows nice flashes of wild raspberry and amarena cherry fruit. Love the apparent simplicity of this wine. **91pts**

## 2008 Duck Pond Pinot Noir Willamette Valley OR 13.5% **\$38**

Musky and deep on the nose. Nice aromas of aromatic roots, dried flowers, wild red cherry fruit, a bit of wild grape gummy bear-like fruit on the bottom and a nice vein of sweet, caramel inflected baking spice. This is lovely and light yet round, fresh and taut, with a fine rounding edge of flesh. The fruit is a little watermelony light. A touch of astringency adds a bit of detail while bringing out more spice tones and a bit of stemminess. This turns a bit savory and just a bit dry on the finish, which is a touch short. **90pts**



# Oregon Pinot Noir \$35 - \$45

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2009 Ghost Hill Bayliss Bower Vnyd pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton OR 13.5% \$45

Very clear and light on the nose, though this does show some high-toned attributes and a hint of alcohol. With air, this begins to reveal floral aromas with some mineral and witch oil tones. Rather fresh on entry, with lovely acid/astringency tension helping to flesh out the mid-palate. The flavors here are rather subtle with a nice candied black raspberry/black cherry/boysenberry tone. Very light and elegant with good length and tangy finale. **89pts**

## 2009 Carlton Cellars Roads end Pinot Noir Oregon 14.5% \$42

Rather subdued on the nose with floral and green anise accents to the low, black cherry fruit. This is a bit chunky on entry, with noticeable sweetness to the fruit, which is tight and compact. The intensity and complexity is a bit lacking, but this might just be in a closed phase. There's something really lovely to the fruit that is here, and the tannins are present but superbly polished. Leads me to think that if this does pull itself together, it could be great. Today, it's just a little low and short. **88pts**

# California Pinot Noir \$35 - \$45

This is a packed field in California, and it could be argued that there is not a lot of value at this price point. In truth, I sometimes wonder how California Pinot producers have gotten away with charging so much for so many of their wines. With increased vineyard production coming online as well as serious pressures on pricing, it's nice to see how the quality level around \$40 has crept up over the past several years.

With flavors that have typically been darker than Oregon Pinots and textures more weighty, I was a little surprised to see how the best of California have learned from their fellow winemakers to the north. There seems to be a return to elegance and depth in place of power and fruitiness among many California producers. I'm not saying that's the only way to go, everyone should be able to find wines that suit their palate. I'm just saying that that is where my palate lies, and if I am paying a premium for wine, I would prefer that premium to be elegance and finesse. Power can come cheaply and easily, elegance is always elusive and a delight when found.



# California Pinot Noir \$35 - \$45

Notes from a recent tasting:



## 2009 Patz & Hall Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 14.5% \$38

Intense and clean on the nose, with wonderful, fresh mixed berry notes dusted with some middle eastern spices and topped with fine sage notes. Really deceptive in the mouth. This enters with almost no mass, but it's actually quite rich. The fruit is subdued but deep, with layers of dark berry fruit, a hint of plum skin and integrated oak notes driving toward the finish. This strikes me as just a bit young, but it has an inner intensity that makes this already appealing. Great persistence to the black berry and black cherry fruit on the long finish. The tannins threaten to become obvious, yet never rise above their fruit-driven cover. **93pts**



## 2008 Alysian Pinot Noir Russian river Valley 14.1% \$40

Nicely aromatic with rather lovely and layered flower, medicinal root, soil and peach notes accenting bitter cherry and wild raspberry fruit. Bright and juicy in the mouth with fine, fresh fruit flavors. Lots of raspberry going on here, with lovely nuanced spice notes, a little rose petal and some violet. The acidity lends a bit of blood orange to the palate with a very faint underlay of wood spice adding nice detail and helping to frame the fruit on the moderately long finish. Lovely purity and finesse. **93pts**



## 2009 Freeman Pinot Noir Russian river Valley CA 14.2% \$41

This just smells gorgeous, all classically Pinot-y fruit. A little musk, some lovely damp forest floor notes, fresh cherries and raspberries, some smoke, a hint of cola and a gentle lashing of softly ashy, charred wood. Rich and soft on entry, this has gentle tannins with excellent acidity that adds wonderful vibrancy to the pure, elegant dark cherry fruit. There's a touch of vanilla on the back end here, but it just adds another nuance to the lovely finish. Really has some strong cherry fruit on the finish with a touch of espresso foam.

**92pts**

# California Pinot Noir \$35 - \$45

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2009 Flowers Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast CA 13.7% \$40

Rather sweet on the nose with cedar spice tones enmeshed with rich mint and caramel framed black cherry fruit. Rich and rather powerful in the mouth, with liquory black cherry/boysenberry fruit that's quite aromatic. The tannins here are rather significant, but the richness of the wine does a good job covering them. Acids are nicely integrated with that same richness, lending an impression of softness that the acids don't bear out. Nice power of fruit and purity through the rather long if discrete and rather well faceted finish. This really offers a lovely combination of power and finesse. **92pts**

## 2009 Talbott Sleepy Hollow Vnyd Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands CA 14.6% \$36

Big cola and spice on the nose over fleshy black cherry fruit. This is very in your face. In the mouth, it's equally assertive, showing off very nice clay, herb and rhubarb-inflected black cherry fruit. A strong base of cola spice drifts onto the tight, somewhat rough and slightly bitter finish, which is a bit short once one looks past the tannins. A big, bold wine for sure, but one which lacks a touch of integration. **90pts**

## 2009 Easkoot Pinot Noir Marin County CA 14% \$37

Lovely and fragrant, with herb notes and an engaging Indian spice quality. Brilliant wild raspberry with rosehip edges and a wood smoke top note. Very light, this feels very natural and pure, with unfettered wild cherry fruit. There's some nice tannin here under the fruit, but this is really lacy and pretty in the mouth. The finish shows off some raspberry and red currant notes. Much more Oregon than California in style. I was surprised when I saw the label. **90pts**

# California Pinot Noir \$35 - \$45

Notes from a recent tasting:

**2007 Marimar estate Don Miguel Vyrd La Masia Pinot Noir Russian river Valley CA 14.1% \$36**

This is sweet on the nose with lots of cherry cola notes, but they're light and fresh on the nose, underlain by some spice and nutty caramel oak tones. A touch coarse on entry with sweet fruit and slightly rough tannins clashing in the mouth. The flavors are balanced between oak notes and ripe red cherry and raspberry fruit with a slight tea top note. The tannins surge on the finish and cut things a bit short. **89pts**



# Pinot Noir \$60 and up!!

I've been drinking my way up the Pinot ladder and have finally come to the top. The few bottles at \$60 plus that people are willing to submit as samples. There are several arguments as to why so few samples get submitted at this price point.

One goes that there is just too little wine and too much demand, so producers shouldn't even bother. I can see that, if it's true. Another argument goes that producers have already convinced people to pony up big time for these wines, so they shouldn't risk getting low scores and damaging their brand.

I'll let you decide which you prefer, but I'll go on record as saying that we aren't in Burgundy folks! Yes, stating the obvious is a great way to redirect the dialog here, but the truth of the matter is that while you have some reasonable expectation of the increase in satisfaction that a bottle of Burgundy can give you as you jump from \$40 to \$60, the same does not hold true for domestic Pinot Noir. That may be because \$40 Burgundy is crappy, or there may just be a bit of a limit as to how good domestic Pinot can be. Again, I'll leave it up to you, but here are some of the more impressive of these most expensive Pinots.





# Pinot Noir \$60 and up!!

Notes from a recent tasting:



## 2008 Alysian Floodgate Vineyard, Rock Hill Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 14.1% **\$60**

This is a lightly smoky, but with plenty of cola and soil. A gently leafy floral, almost eucalyptus character adds nice detail to the soft black currant fruit. Fairly rich in the mouth but not weighty, with great intensity supported by succulent acidity. The tannins here are round and ripe adding volume to the mouth. This is gorgeous, just packed with berry flavor, spiced nuance, cola that's not sweet, and lovely citrusy acid that lends this some cranberry notes. There's some oak spice and a hint of heat on the finish, which is long and redolent of ripe red fruits, dusted with coca and a hint of allspice. Has the power of the best with real finesse and freshness. **94pts**

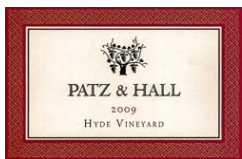


## 2008 Domaine Serene Jerusalem Hill 13.8% **\$80**

Almost sweet on the nose with subdued forest floor and raspberry notes, topped with some assertive, spicy oak. The spice is intense, but the wood aromas of vanilla and toast are rather modest. This is so well balanced on entry and then rounds out very nicely without gaining much weight on the palate. Nice, firm acid and sweet tannins underpin the core of smoky, soil touched red cherry and black raspberry fruit on the mid-palate. The oak begins to frame the fruit on the back end before taking a more assertive and equal footing on the long finish, which ends with notes of incense and black cherry. **93pts**

# Pinot Noir \$60 and up!!

Notes from a recent tasting:



## 2009 Patz & Hall Hyde Vineyard Pinot Noir Carneros 14.2% \$65

Quite fruity on the nose, with plenty of black cherry/blackberry fruit wrapped up with tar, star anise, espresso bean and a touch of alcohol. Rich and smooth on entry, with real tactile weight on the palate but no sweetness. This is still a bit tight, but shows wonderful balance already. There's deep, almost boysenberry spicy and black cherry fruit on the palate, which is really quite seamless. Cut with just a hint of mineral on the back end and hints of tea and Asian spices, this releases a big burst of plum and boysenberry fruit on the moderately long finish. Sees a nice, cedary and sweet spice finale, with just a touch of heat showing. **93pts**

## 2006 J Wilkes Bien Nacido Pinot Noir 14.2% \$55

Rather earthy and spicy on the nose with some alcohol showing. There's some caramel oak here over black cherry fruit, with some cola notes and a hint of dried meat. Really smooth on entry, this is polished and refined with a fairly complex attack of sassafras, mint, cola and earth accenting the small black fruited core. A bit spicy on the back end, but nicely balanced with a really light, delicate touch. This is a lovely wine for lovers of tender textured and perfumed wines. Don't look for power here. The finish is delicate but long, with spice, cola and black currant fruit. **91pts**

## 2009 Hop Kiln HK Bridge Selection Pinot Noir 13.9% \$70

Musky and floral on the nose with lots of earth and mineral base notes. This is a bit tight, but shows off flashes of huckleberry and wild strawberry fruit with over soft but obvious sweet and toasty oak notes. Rather light and elegant on entry, this almost floats across the palate with superb balance that is just thrown off by the slight raspy edge of youthful yet ripe tannins. The mid-palate has excellent clarity to the cherry and raspberry fruit, with the oak spice adding some detail on the back end. This finishes bright and dusty, with cranberry, wild cherry fruit and those youthful tannins. This has freshness and elegance with lovely edge of ripeness, eminently drinkable and pure. **91pts**

# Pinot Noir \$60 and up!!

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2009 Patz & Hall Pisoni Vineyard Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands 14.9% \$85

Intense on the nose and slightly exotic, with obvious oak undertones covered by slightly jammy, fig-accented aromas of Asian spices, espresso foam, black currant and black cherry fruit. This is soft and slightly dry, ink and blueberry/ blackberry fruited. Not very Pinot-like if rather attractive. There's some sweet tea accenting the mid-palate, along with some red currant fruit and a fairly heavy load of ripe tannins filling out the mouth. These lead to a mocha, cocoa back end which is followed by cinnamon toast with black cherry jam finish. This is rich and really fairly well polished, with dense, chewy fruit. It lacks what I want from Pinot Noir. Finishes with heat. **91pts**

## 2009 Robert Mondavi Reserve Pinot Noir Carneros, Napa Valley 15% \$60

A touch musky on the nose, but there's a lot of well used but obvious mocha, roasted nut, and toast notes here, topping the creamy cherry fruit at the moment. Rich and a little sweet on entry with intense, slightly herbal cactus pad, vegetal black cherry and black currant fruit. The oak is present on the palate, adding a base and lots of spice, but this is really about the fruit. Rich yet fairly taut in the mouth, this has a nice texture which is marred for the moment by the rather heavy load of wood tannin. Finishes with bold black cherry fruit and moderating oak notes. **90pts**

# Speaking of Burgundy

Burgundy is one of the most difficult wine-producing regions to wrap one's head around. It has been called a minefield for decades and continues to present real challenges to the aspiring wine connoisseur for multiple reasons.

Chief among them are the dual problems of terribly fragmented vineyards and wide-ranging stylistic differences amongst producers that run the gamut from delicate and ethereal to rich and powerful.

So, why are these problems and what can one do about them?

The problems are ones of consistency and access. Looking first at the issue of land ownership, this essentially turns into an issue of supply, which in Burgundy rarely satisfies demand. Due to the arcane rules of the Napoleonic Code, which states that upon the demise of a landowner, all children of that landowner must inherit equally (think "Liberté, égalité, fraternité"). Land ownership in Burgundy's vineyards can be dizzyingly complex with some people owning only a few rows of vines in any particular vineyard.

You can see the inherent problem here: with such small parcels, producers tend to make tiny quantities of wine. While this can make it frustratingly difficult to find certain wines, there are some benefits to the consumer that arise out of this scenario.

The first is that with so many winemakers producing wines from a single vineyard, it is very easy for the finest wines to gain the recognition they deserve. Whether through exceptional winemaking, or the fortune of the finest terroir, these wines that perform year in and year out quickly rise to the top of their respective heap. Of course, the limited supply of these wines, coupled with their growing demand, almost invariably leads to them being priced out of reach of many, if not most, consumers, so this may not be a benefit at all.

# Speaking of Burgundy

A second piece of the Burgundy puzzle that this sort of land ownership has almost forced into creation does something quite the opposite. With so few vines in many, if not multiple, appellations, many growers choose not to vinify their own wines, but opt instead to sell their grapes to négociants. As the name implies, négociants began as middlemen of a sort. Over the years, several firms grew large enough to take on winemaking responsibilities, and today several companies dominate much of the Burgundian landscape.

Négociants are able to create an economic situation that is not only beneficial to themselves, but that also works to reward the landowners who chose not to make their own wine. Because of the sheer scale of many of their wines they are able to deliver great Burgundy to consumers at attractive and fair prices. It's easy to criticize négociants in the abstract. They rarely make the best wine of any particular appellation and, due to the volume of wine they generally have to sell, tend to favor a safe, middle-of-the-road approach to winemaking. But again, what on its face can be seen as a negative is quickly turned into a positive for the consumer.

As I touched on earlier, Burgundian winemakers produce their wines in a broad range of styles. While this is part of what makes Burgundy exciting, it is not especially helpful to those wishing to learn more about the region's wines. If you are hoping to learn about the region by comparing a Volnay to a Gevrey-Chambertin, for example, it is crucial to try to find wines that share a winemaking philosophy so that the wines speak more about their respective terroirs than their winemaker's intentions. With the fragmentation of Burgundy's vineyards, it can be difficult to find many producers whose lines cover much, if not all of the region, except of course for the négociants!

We should return to the négociants' styles for a thought. As I mentioned, they tend towards the middle of the road, which in this case, with one trying to learn more about the region, is a distinct advantage. I'm not going to spend too much time here discussing producers' styles in Burgundy, but I will say I buy several négociants' wines on

# Speaking of Burgundy

a regular basis and do so because I enjoy their styles. Pinot Noir, and particularly Burgundian Pinot Noir, can produce a subtle wine. To my palate, a gentle hand in the cellar allows the grape to tell its story in a far more interesting way than one that strives to wring every last ounce of power out of the grapes and winemaking process.

The discussion of producers and their styles will have to wait for another day. One can argue whether producer or appellation should be more influential in determining where one's Burgundy bullseye lies, but generally the truth lies in a combination of the two. Discovering regions that appeal to your palate is a far easier proposition, particularly when you have access to the wines of a grand négociant.

Joseph Drouhin is one of the finest négociants not only in Burgundy, but in the world. The family produces wines in classic négociant fashion, as well as from properties that they own outright. I don't know exactly how to describe their style. "Middle of the road" can sound frankly derogatory at times, but to me it seems just about right.

When tasting through the wines of Drouhin, I can really get a sense of each wine's terroir, and each wine expresses not only the flavors and aromas of the vineyards, but more importantly to me, the texture as well. There is no over-arching winemaking style imposed on the wines other than a fine combination of elegance, balance and a refined sense of richness.

I recently tasted some of the Drouhin's current releases, a tease of 2009 as it were, and followed up with six half-bottles from the esteemed Maison Louis Jadot. What are these wines telling me about the vintage and more importantly, about the wines? Let's take a look and see.

The 2009 Burgundy vintage is just hitting the shelves and with much fanfare. This much-anticipated vintage has all the hallmarks of a great vintage, but may in fact have benefitted a bit too much from the weather, making the wines immediately appealing



# Speaking of Burgundy

but maybe a bit less profound with time.

The growing season began on the early side and things were generally uneventful through May and June. July saw some worrying rains, but the truth is that this early in the season a few strong rainfalls can easily be handled by both vineyard and vigneron alike! Of course humidity and warm temperatures can cause issues in the vineyard, but with today's vineyard management techniques, they remain worries rather than insurmountable obstacles.

August and the end of the growing season was luxuriously warm with sporadic rainfall that helped to refresh the vines when they did arrive. The harvest, like much of the season, was a bit on the early side, with many domaines reporting wonderfully ripe fruit.

It is very early on to be prognosticating about wines that I have little exposure to, so I won't – except to say that what I have tried has been very attractive, but with a certain immediacy that leads me to believe that these round, fresh, aromatic wines may mimic their growing season in one respect: early to arrive and early to end, which is not to say that these wines will not be age-worthy, but rather that the seductive nature of these wines will best be enjoyed in relative youth as the ripeness seems to have left many wines with noticeable alcohol, rather soft acidity and gentle tannins.

Coming as it did after several less exciting vintages (2006-2008), it seems many in the media were just waiting to crow about the next great vintage to come along. As usual, there is now some backpedaling going on after the tastings of the reportedly “even better” 2010 wines.

About 2010: Yields are down, but favored sources have almost uniformly told me that these are gorgeous, absolutely classic wines that you should buy early if you love delicate, perfumed Burgundy.

# Speaking of Burgundy

Now back to 2009. 2009 is indeed a very fine vintage. It's rich and ripe in most cases, but the wines tend to be a bit soft. One problem of the vintage, and one which recalls the minefield moniker, was uneven ripening. Grapes that looked great in 2009 were often not quite ripe, and some producers were fooled into picking early by appearance. While it's not a widespread problem, it is worth pointing out.

Following the less than exciting 2006-2007 vintages, and don't get me wrong there were excellent wines made in each, the media was rightfully cautious in their judgment of the vintages as a whole. There was a lot of pent up demand in the Burgundy world.

That demand came from producers wanting a pay day to match that of Bordeaux, to wine aficionados waiting to stuff their cellars with only the best, and it has had a profound impact on wine pricing. A quick look at many of my favorite producers shows pricing up from the previous vintages by anywhere from 10 to 40 percent, with some notable exceptions coming from Jadot, Pousse d'Or and Rene Leclerc. Conversely, the biggest jumps I've seen were with de Courcel and d'Angerville.

Of the producers I routinely purchase, only Bize was included in this blind tasting. Almost all the wines showed well, and some fabulously so, but they are in a rather accessible style. One does have to question why people would be willing to spend premium on wines that appear to have only mid-term cellaring potential.

Perhaps that is the point though. These are wines that you won't have to wait five to 15 years on, they are wines that are going to be delicious early and often. I can't begrudge anybody their preferences, but mine remain classically structured wines, wines that do tend to close down, unpredictably and often. This is the true Burgundy minefield, and we are only willing to endure its torture because of the treasures that lay at the other side.

# Speaking of Burgundy

Buy the 2009 wines if you're looking for near term enjoyment, they are delicious wines and carry an unusually bright and fragrant set of aromatics. But if you are like me, looking for subtlety, complexity and the possibility of future brilliance, you might want to keep at least some of your powder dry!

# Speaking of Burgundy

Notes from a recent tasting:



## 2009 Drouhin Clos de Vougeot Grand Cru, \$250

Fairly simple on the nose but intense with a strong violet note, chalky earth tones, and smoky, lightly tobacco-scented notes adding complexity to the dark fruit tones. There's also a lightly polleny floral top note here. Bright on the palate with rich, fleshy red fruits that enter with intensity then fold a bit on the mid-palate. The tannins here are well judged but angular at the moment, adding some nice energy in the mouth and adding a layer of spice to the wild cherry fruit. The finish is moderately long with integrated spice notes and a fine mineral edge. An intriguing wine, fairly complete but all the elements have yet to fully integrate. This does have exciting potential. **93pts**



## 2009 Simon Bize Les Fourneaux 1er cru Savigny-les-Beaune \$50

Dusty and closed on the nose with a little spice, a dark, serious, brooding sort of nose. On the palate this is quite tight, but the raw material is there. Black raspberries at times, then some watermelon peel and a flash of stemmy spice. All the components show up, but this needs time to knit together. It's an intellectual joy tonight with succulence, length, and near perfect balance, but there is a lot more to come. **92 pts**



## 2009 Drouhin Chambolle-Musigny Premier Cru, \$100

Tight and finely focused on the nose with deep, rocky red fruits framed with perfumed floral and herb tones. Silken in the mouth with ripe tannins that are a bit more abundant than the village wine, though just as finely polished, keeping this very elegant in the mouth. The acidity is well integrated, lending this a tight, transparent feel that extends through the medium-length finish, where the tannins lend a lightly dusty edge to the black cherry fruit. A bit more about potential today than immediate enjoyment, this seems to have all the elements to blossom with a bit of ageing. **92pts**

# Speaking of Burgundy

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2009 Domaine Faiveley La Combe aux Moines 1er Cru Gevrey Chambertin \$70

This is sweet and fruity on the nose, but there are intensely sappy underlying notes along with plenty of sweetening wood spice and a nice pretty floral note. Rich and dense with a weighty feel reinforced by the oak here, but plenty of fresh, clean fruit and a nice bit of limestone underpinning it all. The finish shows off nice cherry pit fruit in a big, powerful style but this remains sappy, long and fresh. **92 pts**

## 2009 Drouhin Gevrey-Chambertin, \$55

This is displaying gorgeous aromatics with stemmy, sappy floral and forest-floor tones supporting black raspberry and red current fruit. It's both intense and complex but has a certain purity to it. In the mouth this is a bit tight, with a fine austere feel. It's not quite fulfilling the promise of the nose but is very aromatic in the mouth. The cherry skin fruit does emerge with some time and gains subtle savory and spicy elements that fill out on the long, lithe finish. This is a lovely wine showing very well today but given a few years, it should be beautiful. **91pts**

## 2009 Drouhin Chambolle Musigny, \$75

Deep and soil-driven on the nose with lightly smoky, musky, spicy red fruits. Downright silky in the mouth with some finely ripened tannins adding richness without any sense of roughness. The flavors of dark red fruits are fairly intense and gain fine aromatic complexity in the mouth with soil and musk tones, but this wine is captivating more for its texture than admittedly lovely flavors. The follow-through here is gorgeous, with succulently ripe fruit delivering a gossamer-textured long finish with gentle strawberry notes on the finale. This can be enjoyed today and over the near term. **91pts**

# Speaking of Burgundy

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2009 Domaine Chandon des Briailles les Vergelesses 1er Cru Pernand Vergelesses

Tight and a bit hard at first, the nose here really opens up with air, revealing candied medicinal fruit, sweet tobacco tones and a touch of beefiness. On the palate, this super well balanced with ripe tannins and clean strawberry fruit. The finish is long with some tactile grape skin tannin and a subtle liquor finale. This comes off as simple today but I think it's just shut down as there are flashes of wonderfully rich and aromatic fruit on the palate.

**90 pts**

## 2009 Louis Jadot Beaune Theurons, 13.5%

Nice black cherry with gently smoky, stemmy notes and some minerality lurking underneath. Medium weight with fine, tense little stemmy tannins. Nice acids and a fine smoky, mineral note that drive through the long finish. Nice watermelon and zest rind note on the finish. A little blackberry seed top note. Youthful and almost grape. **89pts**

## 2009 Dom H Gouges Clos des Porrets St. Georges 1er cru Nuits St. Georges

Very fruity on the nose with sweet, toasty oak notes lending this a bit of a candied black cherry aroma. With air, this does tighten up, showing a bit more raw oak. To a certain extent this smells fairly commercial. The candied fruit of the nose does come across on the palate as well, but this is rich, chunky and well structured, boding well for the future. The long finish is also a sign of things to come, all mineral and black-fruited, but the bit of stickiness I felt left me with some reservations. Is this Gouges today? **89 pts**

## 2009 Domaine Fourrier Clos Solon Morey St. Denis **\$70**

Meaty and earthy on the nose with fine intensity to the perfumed black fruit, spiced notes and edges of vanillin and shoe leather. This is chiseled in the mouth, though that tension is very appealing. The mid-palate reveals excellent depth of fruit and fine mineral notes, though the tannins tighten up quickly on the finish. This needs time. **89 pts**



# Speaking of Burgundy

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2008 Drouhin Pommard, \$40

Rich and deep on the nose with a floral top note accenting the wild black cherry skin aromas that are framed with hints of leather and talc. Silky in the mouth with a lovely balsamic edge to the bright black cherry fruit. The tannins are fairly abundant here, lending an astringent undertone to the fruit, literally feels like something that is going to be rough in the mouth but yet isn't quite. **89pts**

## 2009 Bouchard Caillerets Ancienne Cuvee Carnot 1er Cru Volnay \$60

Shy and a bit spicy on the nose. Slow to emerge smoke, earth and rhubarb notes lend this a less ripe and slight chunky tone. Soft and bright in the mouth, this is rather lacy and pure with red berry fruit. It is a bit on the simple side, but as balanced and fresh as this is, it is attractive. **88 pts**

## 2009 JF Mugnier Clos de la Marechale 1er Cru Nuits – St. Georges \$70

Nicely aromatic with notes of orange, stem, musk and floral perfumes on the nose. At first this struck me as inelegant and flat in the mouth, but with air, this turned more elegant and refined, never losing a certain rusticity. There seem to be some excessive dry wood tannins here, but the wine shows potential even though it is a bit opaque on the palate today. **88 pts**

## 2009 Drouhin Volnay, \$50

Floral and lightly musky with wild, red forest fruits that have a lightly tropical top note. Nice ripeness in the mouth, though this retains a fine transparent feel in the mouth with lovely soil-driven flavors of light cherry fruit with spicy tannins adding some depth on the backend. Very attractive in many ways, if a touch simple. **88pts**

# Speaking of Burgundy

Notes from a recent tasting:

## 2009 Drouhin Savigny-les-Beaune Clos des Godeaux, \$50

Lovely and bright on the nose with perfumed notes of soil, spice, ivy and crisp raspberry fruit. In the mouth this offers up ripe fruit in a somewhat crunchy style. The acid-driven raspberry fruit is a bit simple though, with nice dusty, mineral edges that pop on the modest finish. Today this delivers more on the nose than on the palate. **87pts**

## 2007 Drouhin Chorey-les-Beaune, \$25

Very open on the nose with jammy yet astringent cranberry fruits and red currant jam. Light in the mouth with a similar jammy edge on the palate, though the fine, bright acids keep this refreshing and transparent. The finish displays some bristly tannin. Pleasant but lacks something. **87pts**

## 2009 Domaine Grivot Vosne-Romanee \$45

Mean and austere on the nose with some raw oak, mint and light meaty notes. On the palate, this was a touch soft and chewy with some mineral earth notes and herbal nuances. Not much is going on here, though the finish does show some lingering bitter tannins.

**85 pts**