

Fall in Fall With Pinot Noir



According to the U.S. Naval Observatory, fall's formal onset occurred at 10:29 pm on September 22nd. And if additional proof is required, just consult the leaves on all of the trees in my yard – they have already started their annual migration onto my lawn and into my gutters (queue Gutter Helmet commercial).

It also marks the occasion for my taste buds to migrate as well. With the weather heading towards the chillier side of the year, it's time to start thinking about trading in white wines for something just a tad darker – but not too dark. After all, there needs to be a gentle transition from white to red that won't shock the palate, a bit like slowing wading into a swimming pool, giving the body a chance to acclimate to the new environment. And pinot noir is just the grape for the job.

Not as dark and brooding as syrah or zinfandel and not as chewy or tannic as cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir is delicate yet versatile. It pairs well with salmon, duck, and most game. Traditionally, pinot noir made its home and won its fame in the Burgundy region of France, where it became so coveted, that a French proverb proclaimed, "Burgundy is for Kings, Champagne for Duchesses, and Bordeaux for Gentlemen." But perhaps my favorite quote regarding pinot noir was penned by famed wine writer, Harry Waugh, who declared, "The first duty of wine is to be red...the second is to be a Burgundy."

Unfortunately, the pinot noir grape can be a fickle mistress. Its thin skin and finicky requirements for proper cultivation prove to be an equally frustrating experience for both winemakers and consumers. Too much rain, and the grapes become swollen and diluted. Too much sun, and the delicate skins burn and blister. But when all goes well, the payoff can be vastly rewarding. Fragrant bouquets approaching perfume and plush, layered flavors provide a profoundly rewarding experience.

Today, wonderful expressions of pinot noir can be found in several countries around the world, including New Zealand and the US, particularly California (the Sonoma County and Carneros) and Oregon. Retail prices are approximate.

Let's start down south in New Zealand, where there are a number of excellent value-oriented cool-climate pinot noir wines to choose from. The **2010 Forrest Pinot Noir** hails from the Marlborough region on the South Island where cool nights and warm days contribute to the development of red fruit flavors and bright acidity. The wine displays aromas of violet flowers and wild strawberry. In the mouth, it delivers vibrant notes of cherry, fresh raspberry and juicy yellow plum. Touches of mineral mingle with notes of cinnamon on top of polished tannins to produce a profoundly elegant finish. **\$20**

Migrating to the Central Coast of California, the **2011 Wild Horse Pinot Noir Central Coast** is one of the best values in domestic pinot that I have tasted this year. It's hard to believe that the founders of this winery once made their first wine in a plastic tub, stirring it with a baseball bat, as their senior project at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. Fortunately, their techniques have dramatically improves and today, they produce a wine with a lavish bouquet of lavender with hints of wild strawberry and boysenberry. In the mouth, well-defined flavors of red berry fruit and cloves are buoyed by vibrant acidity – thanks to significant diurnal swings - that leads to a silky finish. **\$18**

Let's continue our journey to the north in the Willamette Valley of Oregon with the **2011 Shea Cellars Pinot Noir Shea Vineyard Estate**. Grapes from Dick Shea's property are so coveted that over 20 well-known wineries make "Shea" vineyard designated wines. Known as Shea-Shea, this offering sports a big beautiful bouquet of dark strawberries and fig. Flavors of black cherry, wild strawberries and cassis stands tall in the mouth while hints of vanilla and baking spices play out on the deep, long finish. **\$45**

Of course, I can't talk about pinot noir without including a classic example of French Burgundy. The **2011 Mongeard-Mugneret Fixin** is from one of the northern-most regions in Burgundy. The cooler climate lends itself to producing a wine with a fragrant nose of rose petals and strawberry. The soft, supple flavors of fresh dark berries, ripe raspberry and earthy notes coat the palate in waves. The well-balanced finish is polished and expansive, thanks to abundant acidity, with hints of baking spices sliding in at the end. **\$40**