

Feeling At Home With Oregon Pinot Noir



Last week, I was at a friend's house for a pinot noir tasting. He had put together an assortment of pinot noir wines from around the globe, including California, France and New Zealand. I was going through the lineup, tasting each wine and evaluating it based on place of origin, varietal characteristics and style when I got to one wine that simply stopped me in my tracks. I knew immediately what it was – like an old friend welcoming you home after a long journey, I was embraced by the familiar scents and flavors of an Oregon Pinot Noir.

Pinot Noir is probably one of the most fickle, capricious and challenging grape varieties there is to grow. Yet, with patience, skill and more than a little luck, the Pinot Noir grape can reward you with some of the most memorable experiences you can cram into a bottle. And while many appellations around the world are enjoying their fair share of fame as respected Pinot Noir growing regions, the consistency of great Pinot Noirs coming out of Oregon is definitely gaining popularity.

Oregon appears to have a plethora of talent and luck on its side when it comes to producing world-class Pinot Noir. The Willamette Valley, where virtually all of the Oregon's Pinot Noir vineyards are located, is blessed with fertile soil, gentle microclimates and natural boundaries.

With the Cascade Mountains to the east and the Oregon Coastal Range running up the western side, the V-shaped valley is an ideal place to grow Pinot Noir, Viognier and Pinot Gris grapes. The warm summer days are tempered at night by the cool air that blows in from the Pacific Ocean through three openings in the Coast Range, providing an ideal environment for the early-ripening Pinot Noir. This allows the grapes to develop concentrated flavors and perfect acidity.

All of this adds up to a region that consistently produces wines that possess finesse, charm, and – most importantly – familiarity. Pick up a bottle of Oregon pinot and feel at home.

For the price, the **2012 Willamette Valley Vineyards Pinot Noir Whole Cluster** packs in a lot of flavor. It has a lovely perfume nose of ripe red raspberries, red plums and earthy aromas. The palate reveals a very straightforward arsenal of fresh red fruits, toasty oak and black tea on the simple, soft finish. Not a bad choice to start off the evening with either a mild cheese or simple fruit plate. **\$19**

From their "single vineyard" series, the **2012 Kudos Pinot Noir Zena Crown Vineyard** located in the Eola-Amity Hills appellation is a showstopper. The bouquet of this wine is so big and earthy, you'd think you were actually digging in the garden. Scents of mint and truffles meld beautifully from the nose onto the palate where they intermingle with flavors of cherry, smoke and tobacco. The long, supple finish is well-balanced and silky smooth. I think I'd love to try this with a wild mushroom tart. **\$25**

The **2012 Adelsheim Pinot Noir** is proof that Pinot Noir can be a big wine. Scents of black cherries, Asian spicewood and ripe blackberries explode out of the glass as shot out of a fruit packed cannon. Cherries, black plums and truffles play out on the larger-than-Pinot finish with hints of cinnamon and vanilla on the very tail end. Duck, duck or goose. **\$25**

And the wine that stopped me in my tracks that night? It was the **2013 Ken Wright Guadalupe Vineyard Pinot Noir**, and it is a good example of how great Oregon Pinot can be. Ripe, lush black cherries, blackberries and blueberries jump out of this dark ruby red wine. In the mouth, layers upon layers of jammy blackberries are accented by notes of sweet plum and spice. Its structure is well focused and the smooth tannins lend themselves to a long, silky finish. I would try this with roast quail or pheasant. **\$60**

Note: As a general rule of thumb, I don't recommend decanting Pinot Noir wines. Usually, just a few minutes of air time in the glass will bring these wines up to their full potential.