

The Diversity of California Pinot Noir



Last week, I talked about the wonderful pinot noir wines from the Willamette Valley, located just an hour's drive southwest of Portland, Oregon. And while Oregon has certainly moved up on the proverbial inside rail of Pinot Noir production, California still holds a significant share of the domestic Pinot Noir marketplace.

California has one very significant advantage over Oregon – and most other wine-growing regions in the world – when it comes to growing wine grapes in general and Pinot Noir in particular; diversity. California's vast agricultural landscape offers winemakers a remarkable assortment of microclimates and soils from which to develop specific styles of Pinot Noir wine. From soft and subtle to big and earthy (and everything in between), the range is impressive. And while many winemakers will agree that the pinot noir grape is one of the most difficult varietals to grow and vinify, somehow, many of California's appellations seem to produce consistently good pinot noir, year after year.

Here is a brief look at a few of my favorite Pinot Noir wines from different wine regions, starting in the center of the Golden State and working our way up north.

Central Coast

Several years ago, in an article in Food and Wine magazine, the famed wine critic Robert M. Parker, Jr. said this about California's Central Coast, "No viticultural region in America has demonstrated as much progress in quality and potential for greatness... as the Santa Barbara region, where the Burgundian varietals Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are planted..." Winemaker Jim Clendenen has always looked to Burgundy for inspiration but the Central Coast for grapes. The **2012 Au Bon Climat Pinot Noir**, from Santa Barbara County, is an excellent example of his passion. Full of fresh crushed red berries, raspberry, red cherry and minerals on the front of the palate, this wine seems to jump out of the glass and onto the tongue. Notes of red plum file in on the soft, round finish. **\$22**

Napa Valley

While Napa Valley is better known for Cabernet Sauvignon, some pretty good Pinot Noir is grown on the cooler hillside parcels. The Charles Krug winery is owned and operated by Napa Valley royalty, The Mondavi family (Peter Mondavi) and their **2012 Charles Krug Pinot Noir** is a classic, straight-forward effort. Cherry jam characteristics dominate the front of the palate while softer flavors of blackberries and vanilla find their way to the back of the tongue. Just a hint of oak falls in on the medium finish. **\$30**

Carneros

The Carneros appellation is the only wine appellation in California to share two wine regions, Napa and Sonoma. The area literally saddles a gap in the range that separates the two counties and benefits from the cool air that is exchanged between the valleys in the morning, and again in the evening. The **2012 Acacia Pinot Noir** from Carneros offer up charming flavors of wild strawberries, ripe red cherries, and raspberries. Notes of dried spices and black tea join in on the smooth, balanced finish thanks to the soft, ripe tannins. **\$18**

Sonoma County

With a wide range of climate and soils reflected in its 13 American viticultural areas (AVAs), Sonoma County could almost be considered a whole wine country within itself. It is one of the largest wine regions in California and consistently produces high-quantity Pinot Noir wines, like the **2012 Gary Farrell Pinot Noir** from the Russian River AVA. Rich flavors of black cherry, blackberry and plum are framed by soft tannins and perfect acidity. Warm flavors of cherry cola and black truffles melt all the way through the elegant finish. **\$33**