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'08 Pinot Noir pretty but a bit pricey

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We get it on the high-dollar Pinot proposition. Really.

You want standout fruit from a vineyard you'd name on the bottle. Well, that designated fruit costs extra, mister. And all that new French oak hasn't exactly gone on discount. Ambitious winemaking costs money.

But for all of Pinot's hotness, it's still a tough prospect to put a \$50 bottle on the shelf. So as we moved into tasting the 2008s, plus a handful of late-released 2007s, from Russian River Valley, my price radar was set to high sensitivity.

Typically this is our most prominent Pinot tasting of the year, and the current temptation in Pinot World is to vineyard designate everything - the grape theoretically exists to telegraph a sense of place.

That certainly explains the ambitious pricing in more than 40 bottles we tasted. But afterward we weren't convinced these bonus rounds of ambition served the wines terribly well.

Helping me sort through was Jeff Anderson, wine director of Gary Danko; and Paul Einbund, beverage director of Frances in the Castro district. Both make a point of populating their lists with rare, engaging California Pinots.

Often we found more charm in less complex, less expensive bottles. They show off the quality of very good fruit without veering into the excesses of ripeness, extract and oak that appeared in too many designate bottles. This isn't a question of vintage or quality, but style. Those excesses have brought success in the past.

As for vintage, 2008 will be one of those complicated ones, not showing the opulence of 2007 - which actually seemed to push ripeness a bit - but dialing back to more clean, bright fruit. And Russian River is a solid bet; it escaped the fire-borne perils of its neighbors, many of whom are struggling with smoky flavors caused by massive wildfires in remote Sonoma and Mendocino.

When the 2008 fruit gets to show itself, the wines are beautiful, including in the designate bottles that made our list. I just wish we had more to recommend under \$40.

It might seem like I'm harping on prices, but it's a legitimate concern. The Pinot market has become crowded; costs are still high and interest in \$75 bottles is flat.

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Pinot isn't going to become cheap to farm - nor should it be - but by tasting's end, we did have some humble thoughts about how to make more of these wines user-friendly: Dump some of the new oak, let the grapes come in just a little less ripe ('08 continued the welcome trend of dialing back) and let the fruit come forward.

The restraint plea is hardly a new one, but there are better reasons than ever to reconsider the swagger style of Pinot. The grape's beauty is its ability to do its Audrey Hepburn thing without much makeup, especially in a Pinot haven like Russian River Valley.

If you can cut costs and let that fruit shine? Seems like a win-win for everyone but the coopers.

Thirst will return

2008 Castle Rock Reserve Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$17): Another fruit-sourcing score from this solid bargain brand. Solid, basic cherry and brown spice flavors, with a tart core of fruit that sits in counterpoint to the softer texture.

2007 Athair Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$36): Savory, with musk, burnt-orange and loam accents atop subtle, delicate berry fruit. A lot of bright mineral and fine tannin on the palate. It's not entirely open now, but the transparency and clarity of fruit sell it.

2008 C. Donatiello Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$38): A weighty style with clear oak overlay to the fruit, but also a bit of spicy kick, with roasted orange and cherry highlights and a mineral twang. Quite energetic for its rich style.

2008 DeLoach Russian River Valley Pinot Noir California (\$24): DeLoach finds a softer, more traditional expression at a price rarely seen in these parts. There's a subtle damp-forest note to the nose, plus soft, ripe strawberry and cranberry flavors. A narrower expression, but with pretty, earthy aromas.

2007 Lynmar Estate Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$40): Once this effort from the Sebastopol estate finally opened up, it offered clean, juicy raspberry-driven flavors. Higher notes of dried lemon and subtle, floral earth notes below. As it unwinds, you get scents of jasmine, white tea, strawberry blossom. A subtle take but a lovely one.

2007 Donum Estate Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$65): An ambitious effort from Anne Moller-Racke that delivers, though perhaps not quite as dramatically as its Carneros estate counterpart. If there's one to cellar this is it: It's sultry, oak-driven and packed with musk, mushroom and roasted spices. And yet the deep cherry and bright wild-strawberry flavors tie it all together with some savory wood accents. Big, layered and powerful, a heady take on Russian River fruit.

2008 Siduri Amber Ridge Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$42): Our standout in the lineup from the Lee family's popular Santa Rosa label. More musk amid the rich oak notes, deep and dark cherry, leather and loam. A darker profile but with some tension on the palate and fine, well-robed tannins. Nicely done for the style.

2008 Roessler Ceremonial Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$45): Roessler's Russian River

wines seemed a bit weighty in style for 2008, and this single-site bottling showed off stewed cherry and cola flavors and a rooty bite. Quite good for that rich dark-fruited approach; some alcohol showing but lots of density without getting heavy.

2007 Connor Brennan Bohemian Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$39): Matthew Reidy's tiny San Francisco-based label yielded an intriguingly savory expression from this Freestone vineyard owned by Tom and Sue Cleary. Savory burnt orange and damp soil aromas lead to ripe dark cherry fruit, but pretty citrus-peel highlights and forward, chalky tannins. A nuanced approach.

2008 Sequana Dutton Ranch Green Valley of Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$40): This label devised by the Hess Collection and made by Pinot talent James MacPhail delivers again from a familiar Russian River site. Dried flowers, edgy mineral and a leathery tone to the subtle cherry fruit. A bit of alcohol lingers but it's lifted by an energy and integrity to the flavors. Give it a year.

2008 Freeman Keefer Ranch Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$48): Ed Kurtzman brings no shortage of richness to the Freeman wines, and this bottling from the ever-popular Sebastopol site in Green Valley is no different. Yet there's loamy depth amid the big roasted cherry and candied strawberry fruit. Nicely retains its integrity of site amid that hefty fruit.

2008 Dutcher Crossing Maboroshi Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$42): Some intriguing high tones amid the big oak and ripe fruit: toasted nori, fenugreek, balsam. For the style, it actually brings some density and complexity to the table.

2007 J Vineyards & Winery Nicole's Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$50): The Nicole's bottling from J should be one of those classic dark-fruited Russian River expressions, and after some wobbly results the 2007 is in gorgeous form. There's masterful subtlety to the loam and brown-spice accents, with lots of black fruit coming forward but in a nuanced, juicy way.

2008 Suacci Carciere Suacci Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$48): Ryan Zepaltas crafts this for the Suacci family in a spicy, seductive style. Savory burnt orange, cardamom, cola, a darker leather hint and delicate berry fruit. It's supple but not soft, with great clear flavors and a quiet energy. Delicious, and best of the tasting.

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