

SHARON'S WINE LINE

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Passionate about Pinot: Winemakers on Pinot Noir, the Heartbreak Grape

It's no secret that Pinot Noir grapes are difficult to grow. The delicate, thin-skinned berries are often described as being temperamental, finicky, troublesome, demanding, high maintenance, fickle, fussy, capricious, headstrong, challenging and/or headache-inducing (sound like anyone you know?). That's partly because they're quite particular about growing conditions and prone to mildew and viruses. And the slightest weather change can have a dramatic impact on their well-being.

"Just whisper 'rain' to Pinot Noir, and it rots," George Bursick told me when he was winemaker at Sonoma's J Vineyards. Julia Vazquez, former winemaker at DeLoach Vineyards in Sonoma's Russian River Valley, put it a little differently: "You can do almost anything to Zin, and it's still Zin. You look at Pinot Noir wrong, and it can turn on you." According to Vazquez, the varietal demands "patience, wisdom and more patience."

More dramatic still is Michael Hill Smith, co-owner of Australia's Shaw & Smith winery: "You don't have to be clinically insane to make Pinot," he said at a seminar I attended, "but it's a distinct advantage."

While winemakers have to contend with many hurdles when crafting Pinot Noir, they're drawn to it because of its many wonderful qualities (more about them

later) and its captivating, alluring mystique. And because, as Matt Kramer writes in his book *New California Wine*, “a great Pinot Noir brings you as close to God as any wine can.”

Pinot Noir, you see, elicits extremely strong feelings, and Pinotphiles are always eager to talk about it. As Bouchaine winemaker Michael Richmond points out on its website, “Pinot Noir ... evokes passionate discussion among those under its spell.”

Among them is Burgundy-born wine impresario Jean-Charles Boisset, president of Boisset Family Estates, for whom Pinot Noir is simply a necessity, practically like air. “If a day goes by without it,” he once told me, “I don’t feel right. I feel a portion of my blood is Pinot.” Among the words he used to describe it are *refined, sophisticated, romantic, seductive, ethereal, almost mystical at times, charismatic, mysterious, elusive, sensual, whimsical, silky, lacy, sexy, racy, poetic* and *inspirational*. He’s obviously head-over-heels for the varietal.

Boisset was born into Pinot Noir, but Sonoma winemaker Greg La Follette of his eponymous winery never expected to work with it. “I always thought I would work with something much more sane,” he said. “But people kept sucking me in to Pinot,” starting in the late ’80s and then the early ’90s at Beaulieu Vineyards with the great influential winemaker André Tchelistcheff. “I kept getting dragged, usually kicking and screaming, into the world of Pinot winegrowing.” Eventually La Follette surrendered, saying to himself, Pinot, take me, I’m yours. “Having done so, I was a much happier person,” he added, “spending a lot less money on therapy and actually starting to enjoy the thrilling roller-coaster ride on which Pinot began to take me.”

While meeting with California winemakers Gary Sitton of Clos du Bois and Scott Kelley of Estancia recently, I asked them about the vagaries of making Pinot Noir. “It’s not hard to make, it’s hard to grow,” Sitton said, “hard to get right on the field. And it changes [more than other varietals] from site to site.” He added via email: “Among red wines, Pinot Noir has the least latitude for error. It shows flaws more readily ... and has to be handled more gently.” Kelley agreed. “It shows everything you do to it,” he said.

While it may be hard to produce good Pinot Noirs, the wines are exceedingly easy to drink. Pinot Noirs are loved for their velvety, voluptuous nature; satiny texture, aromatic complexity, depth and food friendliness. They can be charming, entrancing, elegant, ephemeral, smooth and/or subtle. Most Pinot Noirs are lower in tannins and lighter in body than many other reds, and therefore more versatile. And their medium-to-high acidity enhances their compatibility with food.

Recommended Wines

Although winemakers may not use it when explaining the difficulties of producing good Pinot Noir, the language of love is the language used to describe the wines. Here, then, are some California Pinot Noirs to beguile you. (You can supply some of your own loving adjectives.)

More than half are from the 2009 vintage, which was an excellent growing year. According to the *Wine Spectator*, it produced “wines of uncommon finesse, marked by purity and density of flavor, showing delicacy coupled with great structure.” They are simply wonderful.

Clos du Bois North Coast 2009 (SRP* \$14.99): Aromas and flavors of

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cherry, raspberry, blackberry, cranberry, vanilla and spice. Smooth tannins, silky texture, well balanced, delicious. Excellent value.

Estancia Monterey County Pinnacles Ranches 2009 (SRP \$15.99):

Aromas and flavors of blackberry and black cherry. Earthy. Excellent value.

Wild Horse Central Coast 2010 (SRP \$20): Aromas and flavors of cherry, pomegranate, cranberry and spicy red fruits.

DeLoach Russian River Valley 2010 (SRP \$24): Aromas and flavors of Bing and black cherry, strawberry and cranberry. Hand harvested, well balanced, elegant.

Estancia Reserve Santa Lucia Highlands 2008 (SRP \$25): Aromas and flavors of black cherry, raspberry, plum, blueberry and spice. Silky tannins, medium to full bodied, intense.

Robert Mondavi Carneros 2010 (SRP \$27): Aromas and flavors of blackberry and other black fruit, raspberry, red currant and other red fruit. Elegant.

La Follette Sangiacomo Vineyard Sonoma Coast 2009 (SRP \$39.99): The Sangiacomo family works closely with Greg La Follette to get consistently concentrated fruit. Aromas and flavors of raspberry and red cherry. Supple tannins. Has the refined balance and seductive texture La Follette strives for.

La Follette Van der Kamp Vineyard Sonoma Mountain 2009 (SRP \$39.99): Aromas and flavors of red fruit and spice. Intensely aromatic, structured, Old-World style; complex. Features eight different Pinot clones, which are individually handpicked as each vine matures. A beautiful wine.

DeLoach Russian River Valley O.F.S. 2009 (SRP \$40): Aromas and flavors of blackberry, black cherry, raspberry and rose petals. Silky, well balanced, medium bodied. A spectacular wine. Created completely by hand using ancient Burgundian techniques.

Robert Mondavi Carneros, Napa Valley Reserve 2009 (SRP \$65): Aromas and flavors of blueberry, black cherry and raspberry. Velvety tannins, balanced acidity, powerful yet subtle. Hand harvested and sorted.

Wild Horse Cheval Sauvage Santa Maria Valley 2008 (SRP \$65): Aromas and flavors of red and black fruit, including black cherry, pomegranate and cranberry. Concentrated and intense.

*Wines can usually be found for less—sometimes considerably less—than the SRP (suggested retail price). Check out wine-searcher.com to get an idea of actual prices.

Note: I received samples of these wines.

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Boisset Family Estates, Clos du Bois, DeLoach Vineyards, Estancia, Greg LaFollette, Pinot Noir, Robert Mondavi, Wild Horse

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