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Coppola's Wine Joins Low-Alcohol Vampire in Best Pinot Picks

By John Mariani - Apr 8, 2012 9:01 PM PT

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If I wanted to get drunk fast, I need not knock back jiggers of whiskey. A couple of glasses of high-alcohol [California](#) pinot noirs do the job quite nicely.

But that's no reason to share the enthusiasm of my fellow American wine writers for the high-octane pinots from some of Napa and Sonoma's cult wines packing more than 15 percent alcohol.

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Filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola is also a noted wine producer in California's Napa Valley, where his Diamond Series includes a Pinot Noir. Source: Francis Ford Coppola Presents via [Bloomberg](#)

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The tasting room at De Loach Vineyards, California, where visitors sample the winery's Pinot Noir. Source: De Loach Vineyards via [Bloomberg](#)

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They award these wines high ratings, using terms like "blockbuster," "fleshy," "muscular," and "hedonistic." While those great buzz words when you're talking about Hollywood Roman gladiator movies, they aren't qualities I seek in a good pinot noir.

Indeed, it would be rare to find any of the great pinot noir-based wine of Burgundy with alcohol levels anywhere near these brutes. Domaine de la Romanee-Conti, one of the richest (and most expensive) Burgundies, usually hovers around 13 percent.

Still, those monster California pinots (Oregon pinots tend not to be so massive) rack up accolades and awards. Finesse and balance are not their strongpoints. High [prices](#) are. Patz & Hall pinot noirs, with high alcohol levels, run \$55 to \$85. Paul Hobbs pinot noirs, which head north of 14.5 percent, [offer](#) wines through their mailing for about \$45-\$50 a bottle.

Careful Labeling

Luckily, the US Food and Drug Administration requires that alcohol levels be printed clearly on every bottle of wine. The body allows a plus or minus variance for wines of more than 14 percent, and there are tax penalties for underestimating

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A Vampire Pinot Noir label. Vampire Vineyards play with the "living dead" myths to market their wines, including Pinot Noir, on a label dripping with blood. Source: Vampire Vineyards via Bloomberg

those levels. So I advise paying close attention to those labels and reach for wines that stay within the 14 percent range.

I have always admired the outstanding pinot noirs of Williams Selyem, whose wines stay between 13.8 and 14.1 during most vintages. On the other hand, they've been known to make some whopping big chardonnays and zinfandels that crash through the 16 percent ceiling. But that's another story.

Here are some pinots I've enjoyed recently, all below 14 percent, and a heck of a lot less pricey than their brawnier cousins.

Forest Glen Pinot Noir 2010 (\$8)

This is very easy to drink, at 12.8 percent, with very soft tannins and tangy acids. It's actually made from 80 percent pinot noir grapes and 20 percent syrah to give it more berry flavors. The regional vineyards are not specified on the label so the grapes could come from anywhere in California. Not a great deal of depth here, but a good \$8 wine that goes equally well with a club sandwich or a grilled salmon.

Vampire 2009 (\$13)

The silly name tends to put off wine snobs, and its website reads "rumor has it that Vampire Vineyards are actually owned by a circle of vampires." While no one would call this pinot noir complex, it has a good strawberry nose and a hint of that "barnyard" taste pinot noir devotees love. With 12.5 percent alcohol, this lightweight that makes a fine pairing with veal or pork dishes, or even fresh tuna served rare.

DeLoach Heritage Reserve 2009 (\$13)

This wine from the Russian River Valley -- home to many of California's best pinot noirs -- begins on the palate with plenty of cherries. It's clean and fresh, and at 13.5 percent alcohol delivers a true pinot noir flavor that bigger wines obliterate. DeLoach prides itself on practicing the old Burgundian technique called "pigeage." This artisanal tradition involves punching down the grape skins during fermentation to enhance tannins and color. This wine doesn't have a long finish but is rich enough to go with roast lamb or any chicken dish.

MacMurray Ranch 2009 (\$18)

There are violets in the nose, typical of a fine pinot noir, and this Sonoma Valley bottling has both the body and spice characteristic of sunny California pinot noirs that distinguish them from cooler terroirs. I would happily drink it with smoky pork or a pasta dish with wild mushrooms.

Francis Coppola Silver Diamond Label Monterey 2009 (\$18)

The price is certainly right for this example from Monterey County's Santa Lucia Highlands. It is bold and complex, with a sweet undertone you rarely find in Burgundian wines. It's one of

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those rare pinot noirs that will go with tomato sauces, which I suspect winemaker and filmmaker [Francis Ford Coppola](#) had in mind all the time. The website also recommends it with take-out Chinese.

Ramspeck Napa Valley 2009 (\$17)

A wonderful bouquet that flourishes into a wine with some tight tannins, this will take on the char of a steak grilled outdoors as well as game dishes come this autumn.

[Angeline Reserve](#) 2010 (\$17)

This is an interesting blend of pinot noirs, 36 percent from Sonoma, 34 percent from Mendocino, and 30 percent from the cooler Santa Barbara region to produce an admirably balanced wine, where the acids underpin and refresh the tannic qualities. This bottle's plummy character will appeal to those who crave big fisted wines. It would go equally well with a generous serving of Parmigiano-Reggiano or cheddar as it would with the sweet flavors of Chinese food like Peking duck.

([John Mariani](#) writes about wine for Muse, the arts and culture section of Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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