

# Understanding Pinot Noir from the Ground Up

There's a reason F&W's readers love Pinot Noir so much: At its best, it's transcendent. F&W's Ray Isle sits down with California wine legend Burt Williams to explore Pinot's allure and offer tips on getting a terrific bottle.

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX NABAUM

**T**HE ONE WINE GRAPE that our readers love more than any other, as it turns out, is Pinot Noir. That's no surprise: Good Pinot Noir is deeply alluring, the kind of wine that lingers in your memory long after the bottle is gone. But in my part-time role as wine-relationship counselor, this fondness for Pinot also worries me, because this grape loves to betray people's trust. Just when you think you've got it figured out, it rewards your \$20 investment with thoroughly meh wine. I decided it might be worth delving into what, exactly, good Pinot Noir should be, and how people could most easily and reliably find it.

So I headed out to Sonoma County, the heartland of California Pinot Noir, and sat down for an afternoon to taste through a bunch of Pinots with Burt Williams. Williams was one of the founders of Williams Selyem, which, back in the late '80s and early '90s, was the first winery to make Americans go completely rabid for Pinot. At a time when cult Cabernets were all anyone talked about (and well before *Sideways* gave Pinot its unexpected mass-culture boost), Williams Selyem had more than

5,000 people waiting to get onto its mailing list. Williams and his partner, Ed Selyem, even found themselves sending back checks—more than \$50,000 worth—to people who were clamoring for their wines. He definitely knows his Pinots.

At 73, Williams isn't making wine anymore; instead, he concentrates on farming his Morning Dew Ranch Vineyard, in California's Anderson Valley (he did make '08 and '09 vintages, then decided it was more work than he wanted to take on). But he still appreciates Pinot Noir as passionately as when he was making it. As he says, "It's the most multifaceted wine there is. It has so many different expressions, depending on where it's from. It's always been the grape I find most interesting, most alluring. I love it!"

Nevertheless, I felt a bit nervous bringing bottles with me for Williams to try. I picked wines that I thought were very good, no matter the price; but it felt a little like trying to show off how well you make an omelet in front of someone like Daniel Boulud. And, in truth, Williams wasn't particularly impressed by the affordable wines I brought. A 2011 Chalone Monterey County Pinot, which costs \$15, didn't get much more than a skeptical look. "Hm," he said. "Smells like Monterey."

Hey, better Monterey than Newark, I thought. For my money, the Chalone's a good wine at the price: on the riper side, no question, but balanced and flavorful. Unfortunately, "good" can be tough to sell to a guy who's accustomed to "great."

And with Pinot, it's tricky even getting "good" and "affordable" into the same bottle. For one thing, Pinot simply requires more hands-on farming than most other wine grapes, which costs money; farmed industrially, especially in regions not suited to the variety, Pinot tends to produce thin, tart, bleak little wines (translation: It's far easier to find drinkable \$10 Malbec or Zinfandel than drinkable \$10 Pinot). Pinot is definitely lighter

than Cabernet or Syrah, but it shouldn't be anemic, and even affordable Pinot should show off the grape's basic virtues: enticing red fruit that usually suggests raspberries or cherries (or strawberries, in particularly warm climates); fine-grained tannins that are silky rather than aggressive; and a kind of crispness that suggests the way the skin of a berry breaks when you bite into it.

But great Pinot Noir goes beyond that. It expresses the place where it was grown to a degree that no other red wine variety can. As a result, great Pinot almost always comes from a specific vineyard or site (and one farmed with meticulous care). It's a deeply transparent grape: It reveals its origins. As Williams says, "In Burgundy, you see all these tiny little



appellations—why? Because the wines they produce are all very different wines. Pinot should connect to the area it's from. And if that character isn't there, then I wonder, what did the winemaker do to lose that?"

For that reason, it's hard to make truly distinctive Pinot Noir in large amounts. Hard, that is, but not impossible. Both Williams and I felt that another wine we tasted, the 2011 Copain Tous Ensemble Anderson Valley Pinot Noir, which runs about \$28, unquestionably tasted of where it was from—it had the graceful restraint that Anderson's cool climate provides, plus a distinctive note that Williams says he usually finds in that region's Pinots. "You get up here and get this floral thing. Wild lilac, maybe. Almost all of them have it."

And yet Copain's co-owner and winemaker, Wells Guthrie, makes 5,000 cases of the Tous Ensemble. That's radically fewer than the Chalone we tasted, but for good Pinot, it's a very impressive amount. And it makes an excellent point: Affordable Pinots from top winemakers (Guthrie is primarily known for his much more expensive single-vineyard wines)

are often great deals, especially if what you want is to get a sense of why people fall so hard for this persnickety grape.

That Anderson Valley floral character was also present in one of the wines that Williams liked best of the bottles I brought, a 2011 Kutch Savoy Vineyard (\$55). He wasn't familiar with the wine, or with Jamie Kutch, the winemaker, but his initial response—a thoughtful "That's pleasant"—evolved over time into more substantial praise (Kutch's Sonoma Coast bottling is also very good, and easier to find). We opened more bottles, but Williams kept returning to the Kutch, tasting it, thinking about it. Clearly, it intrigued him.

That's what Pinot Noir at its best really does. Good inexpensive Pinot can be appealing, but even the best bottles never quite get to what makes Pinot so alluring. Great Pinot Noir, though, tastes wonderful, and it also makes you think. It makes you wonder—savoring it can feel like hunting for an elusive word, or trying to remember a dream after you've woken up. As Jamie Kutch said to me a few days later, "It's like Pinot Noir has a secret, and you're always trying to find out what it is."

## California Super Values

*The best inexpensive Pinot Noirs may not have the nuanced aromas and terroir expression of higher-end bottlings, but they can still offer impressively bright fruit and an elegant texture. Under \$15, Pinot Noirs tend to be made with blends of grapes from throughout the state. That said, occasionally, it's possible to find great values from specific regions. Here are five affordable standouts.*



### BOTTLES TO TRY

**2012 BV Coastal Estates California Pinot Noir (\$11)**

**2012 Gnarly Head California Pinot Noir (\$12)**

**2011 Chalone Monterey County Pinot Noir (\$15)**

**2012 DeLoach California Pinot Noir (\$15)**

**2011 Toad Hollow Goldie's Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$19)**

## California Regional Stars

*To get a sense of why people fall in love with Pinot Noir, it's worth spending a little more money. The following wines, made by some of the top winemakers in the state, are all great examples of regional terroir—the distinctive character that comes from a specific soil type and climate. Plus, taken together, they essentially amount to a five-bottle master class in some of California's most significant Pinot Noir regions.*



### BOTTLES TO TRY

**2011 Cambria Julia's Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$25)**

**2011 Copain Tous Ensemble Anderson Valley Pinot Noir (\$28)**

**2011 Melville Estate Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$34)**

**2011 Kutch Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$39)**

**2010 Woodenhead Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$42)**

## California Classics

*These wines are California Pinot Noir at its most expressive and complex. Sourced from among the state's greatest Pinot vineyards—Morning Dew Ranch in Anderson Valley, Hirsch on the far Sonoma Coast, Hanzell's historic property on Sonoma Mountain and single sites within the Talley and Calera estates on the Central Coast—they're some of the grands crus of California Pinot.*



### BOTTLES TO TRY

**2011 Hirsch San Andreas Fault Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$60)**

**2011 Talley Rosemary's Vineyard Arroyo Grande Valley Pinot Noir (\$70)**

**2010 Calera Jensen Mt. Harlan Pinot Noir (\$75)**

**2011 Williams Selyem Morning Dew Ranch Pinot Noir (\$75)**

**2010 Hanzell Sonoma Valley Pinot Noir (\$95)**