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## Pinot noir sub-regions are not all created equal

### Even within one growing area, climate and soil can create dramatic differences in taste

BY BILL ZACHARKIW, GAZETTE WINE CRITIC SEPTEMBER 27, 2013

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Pinot noir, like these vines in New Zealand's Central Otago, will take on different fruit notes and acidity levels depending on the climate.

I recently had an interesting email exchange with a reader about pinot noir — specifically, pinot noir from California's Russian River Valley.

Sylvain wrote that it was in this Sonoma County appellation that he and his wife had discovered a style of pinot noir that they really liked. When I asked him what it was in particular that he liked about Russian River pinots, he mentioned the dark fruits, the power or "torque" in the wines, the touch of smokiness, and what he perceived as a more "balanced" acidity, especially when compared to the pinot noirs of Burgundy.

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As we dug deeper, I learned there were Burgundy wines that he did like, and that he recently experienced his first disappointment from Russian River. So he wanted me to decipher the quandary that is pinot noir, and talk a bit about Russian River Valley.

Hmmm.

I have been to both Russian River and Burgundy and have tasted my fair share of wines from each. Dare to compare?

I'm not trying to get out of doing the job, but the more I travel and taste, the more I realize that making generalizations can be a minefield. You think that you are starting to see certain common traits in wines of the same region, and then you taste one or two that make you think again.

So I asked a winemaker friend, Jon Priest from Étude Wines, to give me his impressions of a "typical" Russian River pinot noir. Jon knows the region intimately and makes pinot noir in Carneros, a region that crosses over the southern parts of the Sonoma and Napa valleys.

His response was that "there is a wide spectrum of quality and signature depending on where you are growing your pinot. Is it in the warmer side of eastern Russian River or the fog-shrouded hills of Green Valley to the west? Is it in well-drained hillsides or the river bottom? There is almost too much variation in Russian River to identify a single trait."

What Jon is saying is that even within a single region, there can be a dramatic difference in climate and soil types, which will make pinot noirs taste different. I had the same conundrum recently in another pinot noir hotbed: New Zealand's Central Otago. I was travelling through the northern, warmer part of the region, and the pinot noirs are dark-fruited and relatively powerful. But when I got to the cooler southern parts, the wines were delicate and fresh.

The Burgundian solution

Russian River and Central Otago have something else in common, other than just being known as pinot noir-producing regions. They are also both relatively young. They are just starting to figure themselves out. So while much of Russian River is in fact a cool climate, which pinot noir loves, Jon mentioned that much of the region is actually too warm for pinot noir.

The names of the regions — whether Russian River, Central Otago or Burgundy — are largely geographic. If you really want to get a better sense of what is in the bottle, you need to know more — you need to know the sub-region.

No place has done a better job of this than Burgundy. Over hundreds of years, the region has been divided and subdivided based on how the pinot noir grape responded to subtle changes in growing sites.

The end result is a myriad of Grand Crus, Premier Crus and Village appellations that are based on how pinot noir (and chardonnay) expresses itself.

The designations are so precise that two vineyards may be separated by only the width of a country road, and each will have its own name — and

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quite often, a different taste profile (although the difference can be subtle). If I were to delve into each Grand Cru, Premier Cru and Village appellation, let alone specific vineyard sites (lieu-dit) within each, the result could fill an entire book.

Both the Russian River Valley and Central Otago have just started this process. While nothing has been made into law, I saw very distinct differences between sub-regions in Central Otago. In the warmer sub-regions of Pisa and Bannockburn, the pinot noirs offer up a riper palate, darker fruits and silkier texture. But I found my preference in the coolest region of the Alexandra Valley, with a more Burgundian style of pinot — redder fruits, higher acidities, more minerality and lower alcohols.

For you Burgundy fans, the Russian River has “subdivided” with the “Green Valley of Russian River Valley” AVA (the American version of an appellation).

What’s so special about it? It is in the southwestern part of the Russian River Valley, and is considered one of the coolest spots, as it is right next to the Pacific Ocean. Cooler temperatures generally translate into wines that are lighter, with higher acidities and redder fruits. So if you are looking for more delicate pinot noirs, this might be the place within the Russian River.

Taste, trial and error

So, Sylvain, the best I can do is give extremely broad generalizations about growing regions. In the end, there is a good chance that you will find a pinot noir to your liking in every place — you just have to know where to look. As many of the New World regions start dialing down to sub-regions, that should become easier.

In the meantime, here is my take on pinot noirs from the three regions I have mentioned.

I find that Russian River wines will show a mix of red and black fruits, but definitely have richer textures than most pinots. This is because of lower acidities. They also tend to have lots of spice, as the oak is generally more pronounced.

In Central Otago, I find the fruit is dark, the aromatics are very expressive, and there tend to be higher alcohol levels, much like the wines from Russian River. In general, I find the oak is less pronounced than in Russian River.

Burgundy is ... Burgundy. The fruit tends to be redder, and the wine is fresher because of the higher acidities. Oak generally tends to stay in the background.

Some suggestions: Three pinot noirs, three regions

These are three very good wines I recently tasted, but really, you can do a similar tasting with any wines from Burgundy, Central Otago and Russian River. Pay attention to the aromas and flavours of the fruit, as well as the textures.

Givry 1er cru 2012, Les Bois Chevaux, Didier Erker, France red, \$26.25, SAQ # 880492. If you like your pinot with loads of fruit — especially that fresh field berry fruit — this is it. Delicate and straightforward pinot with

the accent on acidity and freshness. Delicious and easy. Serve at 16C.  
Drink now-2017. Food pairing idea: apéritif, grilled salmon, tuna.

Pinot Noir 2010, Roaring Meg, Central Otago, Mt. Difficulty, New Zealand red, \$28.30, SAQ # 10383762. One of the fresher and more mineral-driven pinot noirs I tasted from Central Otago. But the fruit veers toward darker notes, and there is an underlying richness that comes out as a creaminess on the finish. Oak adds a touch of spice. Serve at 16C. Drink now-2017. Food pairing idea: boeuf bourguignon.

Pinot Noir 2011, Russian River Valley, De Loach, California red, \$29.15, SAQ # 11380715. Redcurrants; strawberry; silky and very plush in the mouth. There are earthier notes, fresh mushroom, that will likely show more as this ages a bit. Strikes me as much fresher than the last vintage. Serve at 16C. Drink now-2016. Food pairing idea: pork roast, veal roast with mushrooms.

You can hear Bill Zacharkiw talk about wine on CHOM-FM (97.7) every Friday at 7:50 a.m.

gazettewine@gmail.com Twitter: BillZacharkiw Facebook: billzacharkiwwine

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