

2012
PINOTS

A YEAR OF PLENTY

California's 2012 vintage was almost too easy. Our West Coast editors weigh in on the best Pinot Noirs of the year.

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PHOTOS BY MARK LUND

In 2012, when it came to making great Pinot Noir, Mother Nature didn't stand in the way. With kind weather throughout the growing season, grapes were able to hang until wine-makers were ready to pick. The challenge was man's ability, or lack thereof, to rein in the abundance.

After a challenging 2011 vintage, when yields were down and cold, wet conditions provoked unwelcome mold, wine-makers and growers could exhale in 2012, a collective sigh of relief with quantity and quality both on the horizon.

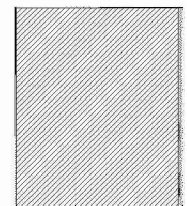
That doesn't mean that all the Pinots produced are works of art. Thinning in the vineyard and the development of concentration in the cellar were both required in many cases to coax great wines.

"For me, vintages are defined by the challenges they pose," says Carroll Kemp, winemaker for Red Car Wines, who sources most of his Pinot from Sonoma Coast vineyards. "There were no obvious challenges, so 2012 forced you to have to look deeper."

The result? Wines of flab and flash, pleasurable and easy to love. Within that lies a smaller selection of more carefully made wines of substance.

"It will make it an early-drinking vintage, pleasant but not ultimately as long lasting," Kemp says. "It's a year to buy producers you know and trust. Wines need conflict to be great."

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CENTRAL COAST: The Drink Now Generation

For such a warm, moderate and curveball-free growing season along California's Central Coast, the 2012 Pinot Noir harvest proved quite variable around the region.

Some vineyards in Monterey County, for instance, delivered three times the normal fruit. Other appellations, like the Edna Valley, weighed in a bit lighter than the ideal weather predicted.

That's led to a broad range of flavors in the vintage, from deep blackberry fruit, cardamom and tight graphite in dark wines to blistered tomato, olive elements and fragrant crushed clove in lighter ones.

But quality is strong: Of the nearly 180 Pinot Noirs from 2012 that I've tasted since March, only 60 have scored less than 90 points, and most of those were in the 88–89 range, meaning they are still very good wines.

There's a growing consensus among the region's winemakers that the 2012s are lower in acidity compared to the cool years of 2010 and 2011. Consequently, those ripe fruit and strong spice elements that are showing exquisitely now may not last far into the future.

Not all agree with that conclusion—especially those from the reliably high-acid-promoting Sta. Rita Hills. However, many advise holding onto those 2010s and 2011s while popping the tops off 2012s today, because they're delicious right now.

"These are younger, yummy, in-your-face wines, which is what a lot of Americans like," says Stephen Ross Dooley, a San Luis Obispo-based winemaking veteran who makes wines from around the region under his Stephen Ross label. "Maybe they're not the best agers, but that doesn't seem to be a big factor when most people are buying the wine and drinking it quickly."

A bit down the coast in the Santa Maria Valley, Bien Nacido Vineyards's Vineyard Manager Chris Hammell says that the vintage really comes down to farming strategies.

"If there is one knock on the vintage, it's that some winemakers, coming off a couple short years, may have gotten greedy, so you could have high crop loads," says Hammell. "That doesn't characterize the whole vintage, but I'm seeing variability. There are some really nice wines from people who did it right, thinned early and didn't overwater."

Up north, Bill Brosseau makes wines from the Santa Lucia Highlands and elsewhere for Testarossa Winery, and he also tends to his family's vineyard near Chalone on the other side of Monterey County.

"It was just a year when you could twiddle your thumbs, like a winemaker's paradise," says Brosseau, who was caught off guard by the varying yields.

On those vineyards where the berries were quite big and plentiful, he concentrated intensity by bleeding off 10–15% of the juice. He was still worried while bottling the wines due to lack of acid and tannin.

"But it's really been coming around the last year in the bottle," says Brosseau. "I'm really enjoying how the wines are evolving."

Most joyful about 2012 is Greg Brewer, who's been making Pinot Noir in Sta. Rita Hills for 23 years, both for his own Brewer-Clifton label and for Melville Winery. He sees it as one of two standout vintages, the other being 2007.

Of the nearly 180 Pinot Noirs from 2012 that I've tasted since March, only 60 have scored less than 90 points.

"Something about those years were just a gift," he says. "The fruit was ripe, but it came in at a very metered, predictable pace. The acids, I felt, were appropriate. The yields were economically viable, but not overly abundant."

Brewer equates the 2012s to a great day in life.

"It's not one of those days when you're going to the prom, with the white limo and corsage, not one of those build-up days," he says. "It's one of those days when you get up feeling good, the laundry is done, the coffee tastes good, there's gas in the car and you make all the green lights—just a good, solid day."

So what about the actual wines?

"They're very hygienic, correct and clean," he says. "They're generous, but not over-exuberant. I think they're gonna age for a super long time." —Matt Kettmann

TOP CENTRAL COAST PINOTS

94 Foxen 2012 Block 43 Bien Nacido Vineyard (Santa Maria Valley). Violet, root bark, sage and cherry blend for perhaps the best Foxen Pinot Noir of the vintage. There's bright acidity, but also plush juice from really ripe raspberry and black cherry, with amazing black pepper spice, as well.
 abv: 14.4% Price: \$58

93 Bargetto 2012 Regan Vineyards Reserve (Santa Cruz Mountains). Juicy strawberry and raspberry fruits form the base of an aromatic profile that also picks up some sagebrush and dried cake frosting from a winery whose pedigree goes back to 1933. Though lighter in body, the flavors emerge continually on the palate, from ripe berries and tomato stew to cola and mint.
 abv: 13.5% Price: \$40



93 Chamisal Vineyards 2012 Estate (Edna Valley). Wildly expressive aromas on this beauty include maple syrup-laced chamomile tea, root beer extract, wild raspberry and menthol. The palate continues the excellent array: red fruits with oregano, thyme, even basil, some sanguine flavors and coffee. It would be a perfect companion to roasted pork, turkey or anything that needs some extra spice.
abv: 13.8% **Price:** \$40

93 Tantara 2012 Tondre Grapefield (Santa Lucia Highlands). This delivers a fragrant, earthy nose of musky cologne without getting overly funky, like sniffing the damp floor of a pine forest with mushrooms growing nearby. The flavors are very savory—mushroom stew, black licorice, beets with sautéed onions—with just enough acidity and tannic grip. This is a wine to think about.
abv: 14.8% **Price:** \$55

93 Testarossa 2012 Fogstone Vineyard (Santa Lucia Highlands). A savory nose of seared

beef crust gets lift from violet and lavender florals. The wine then coats the palate very softly, with luscious flavors of stewed cherry, ripe cranberry and more herb-crusting roast. A licorice-aided acidity cleans the mouth on the finish.
abv: 14.1% **Price:** \$61

93 Tolosa 2012 1772 (Edna Valley). Fresh smoke from your grandpa's pipe swirls with aromas of cherry pie and cinnamon-vanilla cream on this lusciously made wine, named after the year that Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa was founded. Flavors range from Earl Grey tea to crushed violets and frothy blackberry sorbet.
abv: 14.1% **Price:** \$60

93 Windy Oaks 2012 Terra Narro (Santa Cruz Mountains). Slightly cloudy with a lighter, cranberry juice color, this multi-layered wine begins with a nose of strawberry, pomegranate and black cardamom. It's deliciously refreshing on the palate, with rounded tomato and smashed berries dancing

with eucalyptus and bay leaf, providing fruit-meets-spice excellence.
abv: 13.5% **Price:** \$29

92 Gainey 2012 Limited Selection (Sta. Rita Hills). There is distinct black pepper on the nose of this delicious Pinot Noir, with fresh raspberry and a minty strawberry sense. There is mild, but noticeable, tannic grip, tongue-dancing acidity and great flavors, ranging from plum pie to charred beets.
abv: 14.1% **Price:** \$55

92 LaMontagne 2012 John Sebastiano Vineyard (Sta. Rita Hills). Slightly sour orange-cranberry aromas meet with a touch of sagebrush on this wine from an increasingly popular vineyard at the eastern edge of the Sta. Rita Hills. The even-keeled, very drinkable flavors surround tongue-tantalizing spice, light red fruit and a little caramel on the finish.
abv: 14.9% **Price:** \$50

92 Siduri 2012 Soberanes Vineyard (Santa Lucia Highlands). Black earth, violet and crushed pepper spice form an intriguing and powerful nose on this Santa Lucia Highlands stand-out. Bright red fruits give way to seriously savory flavors of espresso and dark chocolate in the midpalate, followed by a finish of elderberry, sour cherry and coffee.
abv: 14.4% **Price:** \$48

91 Big Basin 2012 Coastview Vineyard (Monterey County). Coming from a vineyard on the eastern slope of the Salinas Valley near the Chalona appellation, this Santa Cruz-made, 20% whole-cluster wine smells of blackberry, unearthed tree roots and licorice. Core flavors of brown spice are surrounded by ripe raspberry and racy, potent acidity.
abv: 14% **Price:** \$44

91 Cambria 2012 Julia's Vineyard Estate Grown & Bottled (Santa Maria Valley). This single-vineyard selection from the Jackson Family's Santa Maria Valley winery kicks off with scents ranging from red, blistered tomato to pomegranate reduction and mole sauce. On the palate, flavors vary from sweeter berry to tart cherry, with a savory, roasted pork element rounding out the wine.
abv: 13.9% **Price:** \$25



NAPA AND SONOMA: Easy Yet Challenging

At the recent West of the West Wine Festival in Sebastopol, there was much excitement about the 2012 Pinot Noir vintage.

"It was an early harvest, consistent and abundant—a 'rocking-chair year,' as [Pinot pioneer] David Hirsch would say," says Andy Peay, of Peay Vineyards.

"It was a logistical challenge, given the abundance," Peay, who manages sales and marketing, says. "It was a cold year, but it didn't rain a lot. We could allow things to develop a little longer on the vine, we were able to make decisions on an ideal basis."

Paul Hobbs, of Paul Hobbs Wines in the Russian River Valley, agrees with Peay.

"It was an easy vintage," Hobbs says. "Relatively benign, idyllic and sensationally moderate with very ideal weather."

It was cool enough and drawn out enough to allow for ripe, robust, yet structured wines.

"They're intense wines, but at the same time, there's a great deal of brightness," Hobbs says. "Despite the longer hang time, there isn't any cooked fruit quality, and yet we were able to get the tannins ripe."

"The wines offer tremendous vibrancy, they're rich and silky, with a satiny quality to them, and at the same time, there's that freshness," he says. "It's an ideal mix."

Hobbs saw these conditions across appellations, from sites he sources throughout the Russian River Valley to the Hyde Vineyard in Carneros Napa Valley.

But crop yields were sizeable, requiring extensive and aggressive thinning.

"A lot of people didn't thin," he says. "People were not paying attention. After 2011 being a low crop and a difficult year, they needed the bounty. They were ecstatic with that, but consumers are going to have to be astute—the wines are not across-the-board fantastic."

The pursuit of quantity over quality led in some cases to diluted, "dumbed-down" wines, according to Hobbs, flabby and less likely to age.

"Quality producers thinned," he says. "Others didn't."

Justin Ennis, the winemaker for Joseph Phelps Freestone Vineyards, also experienced above-average yields after a great fruit set. Closer to the coast, however, he saw greater concentration.

"We had great extraction of tannin, flavor and color," he says. "Being coastal, I feel our clusters are on the smaller side, giving us a higher juice-to-skin ratio and better extraction from the skins."

Others had to work harder to find that concentration.

"It was both an easy and a challenging year," says Brian Maloney, the director of winemaking for De Loach Vineyards in Santa Rosa and Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma.

"It was overall healthy fruit, which after 2010 and '11, was nice to see, but there wasn't a lot of concentration," he says. "They're easy-to-fall-in-love-with Pinots, but if you're looking for more delineation between smaller appellations, 2011 and '13 definitely show that, where in 2012, you had such a big year across the board [that] there's more similarities vineyard to vineyard."

"The wines offer tremendous vibrancy, they're rich and silky, with a satiny quality to them, and at the same time, there's that freshness."

—Paul Hobbs

Maloney saignéed his Pinots to pull out a higher amount of juice and aged the wines longer in barrel, about 14 months. He left wines on the lees for longer, as well.

"With those bigger clusters, we didn't necessarily have the same phenolic maturity," he says. "Extended barrel aging helped some of those rougher tannins fall out over time."

Maloney says that even after thinning there was more crop than people expected.

"In Russian River proper, Carneros proper, we saw big plump berries, big plump clusters," he says. "Contrast with the 2013s, we have higher acids, smaller berries. It's the difference between a very intense year and a very voluptuous year."

"In 2012, these fat wines, for lack of a better word, offer richness." —Virginie Boone

TOP NAPA AND SONOMA PINOTS

96 Lynmar 2012 Freestone (Russian River Valley). From an intriguing and growing sub-region of the larger Russian River Valley, Freestone is cold and barely planted, but when it works, it works. This Pinot is caressed in floral aromas and juicy red cherry, the wine fresh and alive, a back layer of black tea, savory herb and exotic spice meshing in magical ways. The majority of the grapes came from the Sexton Vineyard, the rest from Umino and Jenkins. *Editors' Choice.*
abv: 14.3% **Price:** \$60

96 Paul Hobbs 2012 Hyde Vineyard (Carneros). Mouthwateringly juicy in bright tart-cherry fruit, this is a lush Pinot from a great vineyard, with delicate acidity and resolved tannins. It provides a masterful study in how to balance an exuberance of ripe California fruit while still offering finesse and restraint. *Editors' Choice.*
abv: 14.4% **Price:** \$75

94 Joseph Phelps 2012 Quarter Moon Vineyard (Sonoma Coast). This is a sophisticated, pretty Pinot Noir that's brilliant in exotic cherry, raspberry and earth, and is bright and soft on the palate. The tannins are firmly structured and nicely rendered with a twinge of sweet tobacco, its subtle power building on the finish. Enjoy now, or cellar through 2020–22. *Cellar Selection.*
abv: 13.8% **Price:** \$75

93 Buena Vista 2012 Ida's Selection (Sonoma Coast). This is an Old World-style Pinot Noir many a Francophile will love. It's adorned in spice, earth and herbs, and is light in color and texture, with a deft approach to oak. Dark cherry fruit abounds around a silky, sublime mouthfeel. This is a beautiful wine for the table. *Editors' Choice.*
abv: 13.5% **Price:** \$45

93 Red Car 2012 Heaven & Earth (Sonoma Coast). A mouthfilling, spicy, seamless Pinot from the cool outreaches of the Sonoma Coast, it offers a bouquet and taste of clove and rose petal as well as juicy layers of cherry fruit. Easy to enjoy on its own, it'll go well with a slab of fresh salmon.
abv: 13.1% **Price:** \$68

93 Reuling Vineyard 2012 Sonoma Coast. A sought-after vineyard by others, Reuling is doing great things with its own coveted fruit, as evidenced here, a coming-together of earthy fruit and lush texture. This vintage is dark ruby in color, classic in complex forest floor and wild strawberry layered over flowery perfume and a streak of spice. The imprint of oak and girth is still evolving, and the structure is there to cellar through 2021. *Cellar Selection.*
abv: 14% **Price:** \$70

93 Wait Cellars 2012 Devoto Garden Vineyard (Green Valley). Light in ruby-red, see-through red color, this small-production Pinot is spicy and alive, with a silky cherry pit aroma and undercurrent of herbal earthiness. The Devoto Garden grows both wine grapes and heirloom apples.
abv: 13.5% **Price:** \$32

92 Davis Family 2012 Starr Ridge Vineyard (Russian River Valley). Dark and spicy, this is a silky and supple Pinot Noir, richly restrained in fresh boysenberry and aromatics of forest floor. But it's the exotic cola spice that'll hook you in and keep you there, particularly piquant on the finish.
abv: 14.1% **Price:** \$50

92 Dutton Goldfield 2012 Dutton Ranch Emerald Ridge Vineyard (Green Valley). Dark in color, this wine is concentrated in ripe blueberry and blackberry fruit. A streak of tropical succulence and violets characterize the nose. Aged 11 months in French oak, the wood is present, but subtle. Restrained tannins are topped by a creamy, mouthfilling finesse.
abv: 13.5% **Price:** \$58

92 Emeritus 2012 William Wesley (Sonoma Coast). Fresh in tart strawberry, owner Brice Jones' Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir hails from a vineyard 950 feet above the town of Annapolis near the coast. Its profile reflects its provenance,

an earthy spiciness buoyed by tingling acidity and lengthy, leathery finish. *Editors' Choice.*
abv: 14.1% **Price:** \$68

92 Thralls 2012 Bucher Vineyard (Russian River Valley). Made in small quantities, this Pinot is light in color and gorgeously rendered in earthy, forested notes of Bing cherry and strawberry. Lean and buoyant in acidity, it was given 30% new oak in all the right ways. It provides subtle depth and complexity without masking the wine's balance of fruit and earth. *Editors' Choice.*
abv: 14% **Price:** \$45

91 Ram's Gate 2012 Glass House Vineyard (Sonoma Coast). This is a generous wine, big and full on the nose, with two-thirds new French oak making itself felt in texture and aroma. But it's well-managed, resulting in a balanced wine. Forest floor and earth tones burst on the palate, followed by brambly dark berry fruit. The texture is soft through the finish, which offers some grip.
abv: 14.5% **Price:** \$62



For dozens more Cali Pinot reviews, turn to the buying guide on page 105, or visit buyingguide.winemag.com

MENDOCINO: Opulent But Graceful

Mendocino County—particularly the Pacific-influenced Anderson Valley—enjoyed a virtually trouble-free vintage in 2012.

Warm and mellow summer weather encouraged a larger than average crop of Pinot Noir that produced numerous high-quality wines. The resulting enthusiasm among winemakers verged on hyperbole.

“[The year] 2012 will be universally lauded as one of the best vintages in recent history,” says Kristy Charles, president of the Anderson Valley Winegrowers Association and an owner of Foursight Wines.

Many of the top 2012s share a sense of opulence in their flavor concentration, without the heaviness of high alcohol or the bitterness of excessive tannin. Almost regardless of price point, Mendocino Pinots turned out flavorful, firm and graceful.

On the affordable end of the spectrum, Bonterra’s \$16 Mendocino County Pinot is tantalizing, fresh and intense. Near the high end, the FEL Spiritus, at \$90, shows depth and complexity without overripeness.

“Overall, we had good, even weather in Anderson Valley all season,” says Charles. “The winemakers could choose their pick dates, resulting in a wide array of styles and high-quality wines.”

Zac Robinson, owner of Husch Vineyards, says the average high temperature during 2012 in Boonville—a warmer spot than many of the Pinot Noir plantings—was just 82.5°F.

It wasn’t only how the grapes ripened, but when they ripened, says FEL Winemaker Ryan Hodgins.

“The summer was warm, but the cold, wet spring helped delay bud break, thereby ensuring harvest would not begin until late September, after the summer heat had broken,” says Hodgins.

“While our summers can be warm, our growing season is much later than other Pinot-producing regions in California, and as a result, our fruit rarely sees heat spikes in the last critical weeks of ripening.”

Hodgins was one of several winemakers who said they tamed the abundant nature of the vintage by thinning the crop before harvest. In FEL’s case, this meant yields of 2–3 tons per acre, he says. —Jim Gordon



TOP MENDOCINO PINOTS

95 Lazy Creek 2012 Anderson Valley. Full-bodied and generously flavorful, this is shaped and accented by oak influences, but still governed by rich, enticing flavors of ripe plum, dark cherry, blackberry and cinnamon. It features great depth of flavor, breadth in the silky texture and length on the finish. Best now through 2020. *Cellar Selection.*

abv: 14.3% Price: \$42

94 FEL 2012 Spiritus (Anderson Valley). Very delicious in a lavish, but controlled way. It has a deep color, toasty oak aromas, lots of depth and texture along with richness and complexity in fruit flavor. It’s a full-bodied wine, but carries it well due to ample acidity and refined, supportive tannins.

abv: 14.7% Price: \$90

93 Chanamé 2012 Angel Camp and Charles Vineyard (Anderson Valley). This Pinot Noir has a quiet confidence, subtle fruit flavors, lively texture and lingering finish. It’s quiet because it’s not overtly oaky, although it was aged in 50% new French oak. It’s confident because it tastes ripe, but not bold. It balances on the soft side, but has enough tannin and acidity for great structure.

abv: 14.2% Price: \$45

93 Masút 2012 Block 6 (Mendocino County).

Sometimes, a wine has such a distinct individual personality that it stands out from the crowd, and this brilliantly focused Pinot is one of those. There’s a light touch of really sophisticated, subtly spicy French oak, but a crystal-clear raspberry fruit character energizes the aromas and flavors. It’s medium-to-full bodied, but not at all heavy. It’s hard to imagine tiring of this. *Editors’ Choice.*

abv: 14.4% Price: \$60

93 Walt 2012 Blue Jay (Anderson Valley). This is

a full-bodied, well-polished and nicely oaky wine. Its texture is smooth and full, and flavors are ripe, fruity and laced with vanilla, maple and toasted bread nuances. It has vibrant acidity, paired with firm tannins to keep it mouthwatering on the finish.

abv: 14.9% Price: \$40

91 Bonterra 2012 Made With Organic Grapes (Mendocino County). Well made, complex

and complete, this offers a tantalizing whiff of lightly toasted oak that mingles with cinnamon and berry aromas, all carrying through to the palate. It’s nicely balanced between assertive flavors, fresh acidity and full body. Nuances of rosemary, plum and cherry linger on the finish. *Editors’ Choice.*

abv: 14.5% Price: \$16