CALIFORNIA WINE

Pinot Noir: chasing greatness

Around for more than a century, the grape is still challenging vintners to get it right. And now it has momentum on its side.

By Patrick Comiskey, Special to The Los Angeles Times
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Way out

Fringe region

Maritime effect

RAISE a glass of California Pinot Noir, and what are the aromas that greet you? There's fruit — wild strawberry, black cherry, plum — but a great Pinot Noir employs its fruit as a meeting point for other nuances: scents of dark loamy earth and coastal forest, lavender and rose, a spice cabinet of savory herbs. When you sip, you encounter haunting complexity of flavor, velvety textures and, most important, hints to where it was grown. After more than 100 years of growing the grape, California winemakers are still chasing that ideal.

Pinot's calling card, after all, is *terroir* expression, its uncanny ability to convey a distinct sense of place, just in its aromas and flavors. No other grape is as evocative; none has its powers of seduction.

Cabernet may still hold the pole position in California, but for the moment, Pinot has all the momentum. Through fits and starts, that momentum has been gathering.

Today, producers are scrambling to meet demand, and there's a swelling middle ground of new, somewhat generic Pinots: tasty, juicy wines with generous extracted fruit flavors, plush textures and soft tannins, often sweetened by generous oak. These wines may be yummy, but they're hardly distinctive.

For the most exciting California Pinots these days, you have to head out to the edge, exploring wines from producers who are experimenting with the frontier regions of grape growing.

Since Pinot's poignant, vulnerable star turn in the 2004 movie "Sideways," we've become a nation smitten with it.

According to industry analyst ACNielsen, sales of domestic Pinot Noir have doubled in the last two years.

Since 2000, acreage has more than doubled, with thousands of acres of new plantings each year; entire Chardonnay vineyards are being grafted over to Pinot Noir in Monterey County and even in the Central Valley. A glut that materialized in 2004 was obliterated by the post-"Sideways" uptick in demand, one that shows no signs of waning.

In the background

SUCH meteoric growth makes it hard to remember that before 2001, Pinot fans formed a subculture in the California wine world; it was beneath the notice of many lovers of Cabernet, Chardonnay and Merlot.

The Pinot Noir grape has been in the ground in California since the middle of the 19th century. Author John Winthrop Haeger ("North American Pinot Noir") notes that in 1858, Buena Vista winery founder Agoston Haraszthy included the variety among those for sale at his winery in Sonoma County.

Soon after, nursery catalogs referred to red varieties by their presumed Burgundian origin, like Chambertin and Pinot d'Epernay. Settlers preferred hardier varieties such as Zinfandel and Charbono, however, and almost as soon as it took root, Pinot fell into decline.

Nevertheless, it managed to survive both phylloxera and Prohibition, and as early as 1941, author Frank Schoonmaker believed Pinot Noir to be "the one serious rival to Cabernet Sauvignon in California." Pinot Noirs routinely won gold medals in state and county fair wine contests, and by the early 1960s, Napa Valley had as many acres planted to Pinot Noir as to Cabernet.

But in the early '70s, the grape's popularity declined dramatically behind its contemporaries, Cabernet and Chardonnay, each of which had been given a huge boost in public perception by the Judgment of Paris tasting in 1976. It didn't help that the grape fared poorly when subjected to aggressive, modern winemaking techniques.

Critics of the period complained of vegetal aromas, weedy flavors, thin textures and painful astringency.

But in the late '70s, things began to change. In California and Oregon, winemakers learned to employ the finesse that the grape required, and wineries such as Sanford, Calera, Au Bon Climat, Acacia and Saintsbury emerged as signature Pinot houses. These were joined by an astonishing core group of growers and winemakers from the Russian River Valley, including Merry Edwards, Gary Farrell, Tom Dehlinger, the Rochioli family, and Burt Williams and Ed Selyem. A similar flowering was occurring in Oregon.

The expansion of acreage devoted to Pinot was accelerated in the 1990s by the propagation of clones from Burgundy that were well-suited to the outer reaches of California's climate. Known collectively as Dijon clones, these ripened earlier than anything then in the ground; suddenly regions previously considered too marginal to support any grape production became viable sites.

Today, in search of that elusive sense of a great terroir for Pinot, California vintners are growing it in undreamed-of places, sometimes on the fringe of existing appellations and sometimes miles from any grape-growing area.

Consider the Pinot vineyard planted by identical twins Jim and Bob Varner, just south of Woodside on the San Francisco Peninsula. Set on an east-bearing slope facing the bay, it's probably the northernmost commercial vineyard on the peninsula — there's no other vineyard in sight. Technically their vineyard, called Spring Ridge, is in the Santa Cruz Mountains AVA (American Viticultural Area), but even for that sprawling appellation, it's out there.

Only one ridge separates the vines from the Pacific, so the site is oppressively cool, even for Pinot Noir; and yet just six miles south lies Ridge's Monte Bello Vineyard, arguably one of the world's greatest sites for Cabernet Sauvignon.

Fog, by rights, should roar over the vineyard like it does over the Golden Gate Bridge, but it doesn't; an inversion layer of air hovering over the bay prevents the fog line from advancing. So on a typical summer day the fog rushes in and grinds to a halt over the vineyard, where it's held in check. "It comes one-third of the way down the hill," winemaker Bob Varner says, "and just hangs there."

Wine made from grapes grown here carries with it an apt tension. With its gentle florals of violets and savory, wild cherry flavors, the 2004 Varner Pinot is cool, poised, unique.

Generally speaking, frontier vineyards have yielded a darker profile of fruit than in more traditional enclaves such as the Russian River Valley or Carneros.

A Pacific view

AUBAINE Vineyard is one such site. Located near the Central Coast town of Nipomo, just a few hundred yards west of the Arroyo Grande Valley, the vineyard lies on the western slope of the hills that form that appellation's western border. Two wineries, Stephen Ross and Sinor-La Vallee, draw fruit from there. At 800 feet of elevation, Aubaine overlooks a broad plain that slopes directly to the Pacific; in fact, it is one of the few vineyards in California where you can actually see the ocean, which fairly guarantees an intense maritime effect.

The yields here are painfully small, and both wineries produce an intense, vivid wine, with abundant but fine tannins and uncommonly blue fruit.

Santa Rita Hills in Santa Barbara County shares this reputation for fruit intensity. Thirty years ago the region was considered too cold, too marginal and too exotic for any but the most stubborn of winemakers — such as Richard Sanford, whose leafy, cool weather Pinots benefited from a fair amount of time in the bottle.

Sanford's lead encouraged others, including Bryan Babcock and Pierre Lafond, to put down vines, and many exciting wineries followed, including Melville, Loring, Sea Smoke and Foley.

"There's a strong commonality to the wines here," says Peter Cargasacchi, whose family-owned vineyard lies on the western end of this very cool appellation, and who recently started his own eponymous label.

Santa Rita Hills wines have a mesmerizing intensity to them, characterized by firm tannins and dark blue fruit flavors: blueberries, black raspberries, plum.

"Blue" wasn't a common fruit descriptor for Pinot Noir until fairly recently, ushered into use by the powerhouse wines of the Santa Lucia Highlands near Monterey, where noted grower and personality Gary Pisoni first planted his vineyard.

Pisoni Vineyard-designated Pinots burst into the market like a blueberry bombshell in the mid-'90s, and critics and consumers marveled at their brilliant, almost unnatural intensity.

For years it was unclear to me how such cool, marginal places could produce such dark, concentrated wines. What made the blue wines blue?

Part of the answer lies with the wind. Many of the landscapes in Pinot's frontier growing areas serve as gateways for maritime air as it's drawn to warmer inland valleys. That daily onslaught wreaks havoc on a grapevine's physiology.

"The wind just sucks on that vine," Cargasacchi says, "and slows its rate of evapo-transpiration [its ability to pull up water and nutrients]. Eventually it just shuts down."

That devigoration, explains Jeff Frey, Aubaine's vineyard manager, stunts the growth cycle. "The berries are definitely smaller," he says, "and the skins are tougher too." Greater fruit concentration and intensity are the result.

The sprawling Sonoma Coast appellation produces distinctive Pinots from a variety of regions ranging from its blustery outlying ridges — "the outer coast," as it's come to be known — to the Petaluma Gap, through which Pacific winds hurtle toward the Central Valley.

Fog is an indicator of the frontier edge of Pinot territory. It's a factor in the Anderson Valley and in the Russian River Valley, where its daily incursions are so regular in the summer that, as grower Ted Klopp told me, "You can set your watch to it."

In 2005 the Russian River Valley AVA expanded its southern and western borders by more than 30,000 acres to better reflect the geography and drainage patterns of the watershed. When the AVA boundary was originally set in 1983, not a single vineyard existed outside of its border and no one anticipated any. Now there are several.

Foggy terrain

IT'S where you find a portion of the Green Valley sub-AVA. This jumble of hills represents the coolest, most fog-bound section of the Russian River AVA, and its southern edge is home to vineyards for wineries such as Dutton-Goldfield, Orogeny, Tandem and Capiaux, which are making some of the more intensely expressive wines in the region.

East of the Green Valley, most of the vineyard plantings have occurred in the last 10 years. It's where Merry Edwards has established her own estate vineyard, and she draws from several others in the area, as do Patz & Hall, Freeman and De Loach.

Klopp, one of Edwards' sources, says there's little similarity between this new area and the more established vineyards on Westside Road, such as Rochioli. "We're only five miles from the ocean," he says, "so we're much cooler by day and much warmer by night."

Flavors in this area's wines are a bit more generous, with a bit more amplitude and breadth, but they still possess an impressive concentration, as if the Russian River texture has been lightly compressed.

Such nuances are what Pinot expresses better than any other grape variety, and that ability is why with each new boundary crossed, winemakers are looking to head over the next hill, and with each new bottle, wine lovers have more to explore too.

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