

Ethereal Elusive Seductiveness:

(Or, Why We Love Pinot)

If — perish the thought — Pinot Noir didn't exist, how could wine lovers hope to symbolize the joys and challenges of their chosen beverage? From Burgundy to Barbara (Santa, that is) enophiles love to talk and write about how “seductive” Pinot is, how “sensual,” how “capricious,” how “elusive,” how “ethereal,” how “exasperating!” It's all summed up in its famous characterization as the “heartbreak” grape, a tag implying that the wine is actually some sort of femme fatale.

We assume that most of the manly moaning can be attributed to what might be called Pinot Noir's changeability. Not only does it come in all types and styles of wine from rich and concentrated to elegant and delicate, but sometimes all of them seem to occur within the same bottling of the same vintage. The vine is notoriously difficult to grow, the fruit is maddeningly unpredictable to vinify, and the wines that result are so inconsistent that anybody with any sense would forswear Pinot forever.

Except ... except that when it hits the mark and becomes all that the Goddess intended, there's simply nothing sweeter, more beautiful, or more gratifying in the known universe. Fine Pinot Noir tastes the way a rose smells, or a sunset looks, or a valentine feels. Shy but fruitful, its oddly refined charm is like harp music emanating from underground, connecting heaven and earth in a way that no other grape quite manages. Many wines express different elements of animal, vegetable, and mineral, but great Pinot Noir captures them all in a single sensation. The best Pinots combine the attributes of age and youth, radiating

both wisdom and exuberance. Eschewing the swagger of more aggressive wines, they triumph through sensory ju-jitsu: the soft overcomes the hard and the weak the strong — that is the Way of the mysterious Pinot.

Few sentient beings are capable of resisting this allure. Pinot Noir speaks in a gentle voice that inspires you to abandon everything just for the chance to be with it. Compared with its potential finesse, all other wines seem blowsy and crass. That's why winemakers all over the world have stubbornly pursued the siren, striving despite their better judgment to grow and make great Pinot Noir. North Americans, in particular, have tormented themselves for a full half-century, searching for the perfect sites (and, just as importantly, the inner wisdom) that would enable this flighty grape to produce the epiphanies they knew were possible.

It gives us considerable pleasure to report that the persistence of Pinotphiles has paid off. Showing the results of long study and dedication, growers have gradually learned the needs of the grape while vintners have mastered the whims of the wine.

Perhaps most importantly, people have located the proper places to plant the vine, where each produces its own distinctive style of Pinot Noir — from Oregon's famous Willamette Valley to California's crisp Carneros region to the bright complexiy of the Santa Rita Hills to the lush rich Russian River. Amid all this, winemakers have succeeded in convincing Pinot Noir to perform with *consistency*. While vintages obviously vary and different soils and climates create unique characters, American vintners now produce sublime Pinot Noirs year in and year out to the delight of a dramatically growing audience of connoisseurs.

As always with wine, what's left is to enjoy, compare, and contrast, bearing in mind that — with Pinot Noir as with no other grape — variety is the spice (not to mention the fruit, earth, and ethereal elusive seductiveness) of life.

Beyond Burgundy:

Making New Music in America

More than any other varietal, the story of Pinot Noir is one of order arising from chaos. It's been literally a couple of millennia since the grape was refined from wild vines in eastern France; when the Romans arrived, they found Pinot already being propagated in Burgundy, the grape's geographical (and spiritual) home.

As everyone knows, however, history is hardly synonymous with stability. Pinot Noir is notable for its genetic variation, which has unleashed a thousand clones of the variety upon the world. For example, Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc are pale mutations of Pinot Noir, and obscurer names such as Pinot Droit, Pinot Fin, and Pinot Classique are included among its dark aberrations. Some of these clones are better than others at resisting rot and disease, to which Pinot is particularly susceptible. Some produce more fruit, but are less flavorful. As recently as the 1980s, ill-advised experimentation diluted the character of the wines worldwide, depressing Pinotphiles everywhere.

And yet, emanating outward from Burgundy, the vine has been transplanted to every winegrowing region on earth: In Champagne it lends body to sparkling wine; in Alsace and Germany it's known as Spätburgunder, in northern Italy as Pinot Nero, in eastern Europe as Nagaburgundi and in South America as Pinot Negro. When the grape landed in California in the late nineteenth century, it was called everything from Pinot Noiren to Black Burgundy to Petite Pinot to Chambertin.

Sadly, Pinot Noir by any other name isn't necessarily fit to drink. Americans initially planted it wherever vines would grow, which failed to take Pinot's preferences into account at all. Because it buds and ripens early, it's vulnerable to spring frosts; on the other hand, in warm regions its acidity gets baked away, resulting in dullish wines with flattish flavors.

Not until the end of the twentieth century did it become clear to West Coast winegrowers that Pinot Noir requires a cool climate to reveal its true character. Farmers and vintners slowly learned that Pinot wasn't Cabernet, nor was it its Burgundian sister, Chardonnay. Pinot's delicate, demanding nature required more attention than those easy, crowd-pleasing varieties. Careful cropping, educated clone selection, and constant vigilance in the winery were needed for it to prosper.

And this became evident, as well: When the vines were matched to the right location (as in Carneros, Russian River, Santa Rita Hills and the Willamette Valley), Pinot Noir was the grape most expressive of the unique characteristics of those regions. Pinot done right showed that "place" — long elusive in

American winemaking — was not simply possible, but could be unmistakable and riveting.

Now, in the twenty-first century, a critical consensus has been reached: America makes world-class Pinot Noir. Is it as good as Burgundy? The question reminds us of another one that pestered music critics until people finally admitted that there'd never be another Bob Dylan. Frankly, while we all appreciate the influence of the original and enjoy its ongoing incarnations, equally exciting music is now arising from other sources. To new (and not a few old) adherents, these offerings have the added appeal of being something of our own — something just as inimitable in their complexity, depth, and deliciousness. They may not be the same thing as Burgundy, but then Bruce Springsteen isn't Bob Dylan, is he?

Pinot at the Table:

A Wine For All Seasons

If you knew you were going to be stranded in a place (in this case, it probably doesn't make sense to imagine it as a desert island) that contained a copious selection of foods — fish, livestock, poultry, game, all manner of fruits and grains and vegetables — but no wine, and you could bring along a couple of cases of only one varietal to accompany your meals, which would you be best advised to pick?

Excellent choice! Pinot Noir is arguably the most versatile of all wines (and certainly the most flexible *red* wine) to pair with food — an attribute that has been a driving force in the tremendous growth of the American Pinot category, especially at the higher end. (The numbers are remarkable: Despite the challenging economy, sales of Pinot Noir priced over \$15 were up 19% in the year ending August 30, 2003, according to AC Nielsen.)

What is it, exactly, that makes Pinot so appealing to sommeliers, diners and virtually anyone else who respects the food-wine synergy? Part of the answer can be found in the axiom that, just as Chardonnay is called the “reddest” white wine, Pinot Noir is the “whitest” red. Tending toward transparency in color (more like jello than ink) and usually not very tannic (more silk or velvet than canvas), it's capable of complementing lighter meats like chicken and turkey as well as darker fish such as salmon and tuna. In the produce department, Pinot's temperate disposition is met with gratitude by well-prepared veggies and fruit-based sauces.

That said, however, beware of hasty judgments. Pinot Noirs from some regions (the Santa Rita Hills and Russian River Valley spring to mind) or warmer vintages routinely make liars of people who casually refer to this wine as “light.” Indeed, some Pinots are so rich and intense that they stand comfortably alongside lamb and steak, with venison a particularly successful partner.

This opens the potential Pandora's box of Pinot's variability (which isn't quite the same thing as *versatility*). Because the character of the grape alters in shape and substance according to which clone is being grown where (and vinified by which winemaker), different Pinot Noirs can sometimes seem like downright different varietals. This diversity is displayed in Pinot's array of associated fruits, ranging from cherry to plum to strawberry to raspberry to cranberry to marionberry (with earthy, spicy, floral, foresty notes providing support from below). The one characteristic all seem to share is a sensation of sweetness. Still, Pinot's customary cherries-and-truffles persona

pairs perfectly with certain foods: it's classically companionable with mushrooms, seems to suit salmon ideally, and creates a harmony with goat cheese that suggests celestial forces at work.

In the end, Pinot's mercurial nature brings us back to the bountiful-island question we started out with. Another way of making the same point is to ask professional sommeliers for advice about wine for a holiday dinner. Nine times out of ten, they're likely to recommend Pinot Noir because it's capable of complementing so many different tastes and textures. Let's face it: any wine that can make music with white meat, dark meat, gravy, cranberries, chestnuts (pureed or roasted), butternut squash, green beans with almonds, creamed onions and sweet potatoes deserves not only an award for food-matching but the Nobel Prize for peace.

It's also the reason why any good Pinot Noir is your best all-around bet for any given cuisine. Position it high in your order and, like a major-league MVP who can hit for both average and power, Pinot will never be far off the mark and is always a threat to send any pitch out of the park.