



Stunning diversity Pinot Noirs from California's cool Pacific regions

There are many red wines, but only a few make it into the “Great Wines” category. Pinot Noir is undoubtedly one of them. Moody, weather-prone and difficult to grow, Pinot Noir is one of the oldest grape varieties in the world. It requires the right soil as well as a cool climate, never too hot or too humid. After Burgundy, Pinot Noir has found the best growing conditions in California.

In 1861, Count Agoston Haraszthy, the Hungarian often referred to as the "Father of California Wine" and founder of the Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma, was the first to bring cuttings of Pinot Noir to California. Due to the finicky nature of the grape, nothing much came of varietal for the next 100 years. It was not until the 1970's that California started to produce premium, award-winning Pinot Noirs due to better clonal selections and winemaking techniques such as smaller yields, closer vines and gentle handling.

Then Martin Ray became one of California's first top-flight boutique wineries to plant Pinot Noir on Mount Eden and launch California's first 100% Pinot Noir. From then on, the varietal enjoyed growing popularity among wine lovers in California. After the release of the cultmovie "Sideways" in 2004, in which the main actor praised Pinot Noir in the highest tones, interest increased rapidly and also attracted international attention. Today, with 19,000 hectares, Pinot Noir is the third most important grape variety in the Golden State after Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay and accounts for 10 percent of California's total wine grapes planted.

"It's a grape capable of producing divinely scented, delightfully fruity expressions of the place".

Jancis Robinson MW

Pinot Noir is prone to genetic variation and has more clones than any other variety. The University of California, Davis, has some 100 registered Pinot Noir clones. In addition to these clonal variances, differences in vineyard altitude, soil type, exposure to the Pacific Ocean, influence of fog, daytime solar radiation and evening and night coolness, as well as different winemaker philosophies create an amazingly wide range of Pinot Noir styles. This has resulted in five AVAs (American Viticultural Areas) in the particularly cool regions of California that have really made a name for their Pinot Noir wines: Sonoma Coast, Russian River Valley, Carneros, Monterey and Santa Barbara.

Five main AVAs (American Viticultural Area) for Pinot Noir

Sonoma Coast

A new frontier with tremendous potential: Viticulture only began in the Sonoma Coast in the early 1990's. Historically the land had been used for cattle grazing, lumber and limited farming. Not far from the Pacific, the Sonoma Coast (including the newest AVA West Sonoma Coast) extends from San Pablo Bay, just North of San Francisco, to the border with Mendocino County. The appellation, with 2000 hectares of grapes, is known for its cool climate and high rainfall relative to other parts of Sonoma County, yet it is warm enough to ripen wine grapes because most vineyards are above the fog line.

Russian River Valley



One of the better known AVAs within Sonoma County is Russian River Valley. East of the Sonoma Coast almost exclusively Pinot Noir is planted here. The climate is sculpted by the regular intrusion of cooling fog from the Pacific Ocean, which arrives in the evening, often dropping the temperature 20C from its daytime high, and retreats to the ocean the following morning. This natural air-conditioning allows the grapes to develop full flavor maturity over an extended growing season. The region has mostly "Goldridge soils", yellow-colored, sandy loam soils that are particularly well suited for Pinot Noir.

Carneros

Los Carneros is a unique AVA as it is partly located in Napa Valley (40%) and partly in adjacent Sonoma County (60%). So close to the San Pablo Bay, the cool climate in combination with soils that are particularly rich in calcium, this appellation is known for its unassailable Chardonnays, elegant Pinot Noirs and spectacular sparkling wines. In general, Los Carneros Pinot Noir is a little spicier, earthier, and lighter than wines from other California regions, with notes of red berries and herbs, a little less opulent.

Monterey

In the heart of California's Central Coast, Monterey County AVA lies just inland from the deep "Blue Grand Canyon" – the largest submarine canyon along all of North America's shoreline. Each day, chilly Pacific wind and fog sweeps into the valley, funnelled between the Santa Lucia and Gabilan mountain ranges. These strong ocean winds combine abundant sunshine and scarce rainfall, lowering yields and increasing hang time to produce small, vibrant berries with vivid natural acidity. In addition, the steep slopes and rolling hills provide good drainage for the soils which vary from loam to clay and sand. The classic Monterey Pinot Noir has a profile that is characterized by bright red fruits, strawberry, raspberry, black cherry with a spicy, velvet tannin finish.

Santa Barbara

Made famous by the movie "Sideways", this area, with seven subAVAs, has a real difference; the coastal mountain ranges, which run north-south from Alaska to Cape Horn take an abrupt turn here, running 80 kilometers east to west. This unique topography allows fog and very cool Pacific Ocean breezes to form distinct microclimates. It makes the region, with 6000 hectares of wine grapes, one of California's coolest wine regions and a bastion of complex Pinot Noir. This is where crisp styles are created with finesse and subtlety.

Press contact

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