

THE WINE GUY

Winemakers get a grip on the finicky pinot noir grape

After the 2004 movie "Sideways," it seemed every wine-industry publication had a story about a dramatic increase in pinot noir sales. Apparently, consumers took a cue from the film and flocked to stores looking for the wine that so captivated the film's main character.

As a result of what was called the "Sideways effect," pinot noir shipments "expected a dramatic 70 percent jump in food stores (in 2005), compared to the previous year, though from a small base of two percent share by volume," according to The Wine Institute.

Actually, interest in pinot noir had been growing steadily throughout the 1990s. "Sideways" just helped boost the wine from a cult favorite to mass-market sensation. From 1990 to 2004, pinot-noir production jumped 219 percent.

It was a long, tough road for the grape, which has been grown in California since the



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late 1800s. Despite limited success, winemakers — drawn to the challenge of making good wine from such a difficult, yet uniquely expressive grape — continued to experiment.

Eventually, they figured out that pinot noir grapes have similar needs to other wine grapes, but more so. The pinot noir vine must be planted in the right places — cooler climates with longer growing seasons that enable the grapes to ripen while retaining good acidity. Better-quality clones must be matched to the particular site and cultivated with extra care. And finally, the wine must be vinified gently.

California pinot noir typical

ly is darker, fruitier, more concentrated and larger scaled than burgundy, the reference point for pinot noir. The best still should deliver elegance, finesse and complexity, with a perfumed bouquet and mouth-filling flavors that evoke cherry (also strawberry, raspberry, plum), brown spices (cinnamon, nutmeg) and a pleasant earthiness wrapped in a seductive silky/satiny texture.

Several such cooler areas in Northern California and the central coast have emerged in recent years as prime pinot noir sources. The following wines are representative of California's major pinot noir growing regions and should provide ample drinking pleasure.

The Anderson Valley in Mendocino County is best known for riesling and gewürztraminer, also cool-climate grapes, but pinot noir is coming on strong.

Try the 2003 Handley (\$25) and 2003 Goldeneye (\$52) to

see what I mean.

Carneros straddles the southern end of Napa and Sonoma and has become a popular source of chardonnay and pinot noir, thanks to the moderating influence of the San Pablo Bay. In fact, it yielded the most recommended wines in my tastings.

- 2004 Buena Vista (\$23)
- 2004 Clos du Val (\$24)
- 2003 Beringer Stanley Ranch (\$30)
- 2004 ZD (\$32)
- 2004 Buena Vista Ramal Vineyard (\$37)
- 2004 Buena Vista Dijon Clones Ramal Vineyard (\$37)
- 2004 Buena Vista Swan Section Ramal Vineyard (\$37)
- 2002 Talisman Truchard Vineyard (\$38)
- 2003 Beauville Vineyard Reserve (\$39)

County (\$20) is a good value, as are the 2004 Foppiano (\$28) and 2004 Kenwood Reserve (\$25), both from the Russian River Valley.

The central coast has been the object of much of the recent buzz about the grape, and several regions deserve attention. The 2005 Meridian (\$10), which carries a generic central-coast designation, is a good value.

Monterey is home to the pioneer pinot producers Chalone (1969) and Calera (1975). I found two good values here: 2005 Kendall-Jackson Vintners Reserve (\$14) and 2005 Gino da Pinot (\$16).

Farther south, in San Luis Obispo County, the Arroyo Grande Valley and the Edna Valley often are overlooked, but they produce some fine pinot noir, such as the 2003 Baileyana Edna Valley Grand Firepeak Cuvee (\$38).

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fect more than any other region — not surprising that the movie was set there. But the Santa Ynez the Santa Maria Valley, had become popular, had become for some of the pinot noirs long movie. From the Valley, look for the (\$25) and 2004 By Vineyard (\$40).

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