



October 21, 2013, Wine Enthusiast

## America's Best Pinot Noirs

We name the top addresses for the variety, region by region.

By Wine Enthusiast Editors

<http://www.winemag.com/Web-2013/Americas-Best-Pinot-Noirs/>

It's been written so often that it's become a cliché: Pinot Noir is a fickle grape that needs just the right conditions to thrive. Yet, Pinot's popularity is such that we're confronted by dozens of bottles from countless regions every time we enter a wine shop or open a wine list.

Here's a way to cut through the clutter. Zero in on these six American Viticultural Areas (AVAs), hand-selected by our team of West Coast editors.

Willamette Valley, Oregon

If Pinot Noir is the Peter Parker of grapes, the Willamette Valley is the irradiated spider. Here, soil and climate give the wines muscle, depth and—at times—super powers.

The landing page of the Willamette Valley Wineries Web site recently bore the banner headline, "We Are Pinot Noir."

'Nuff said.

Well before it was recognized as an AVA in 1983, pioneering vintners like David Lett (The Eyrie Vineyards), David Adelsheim, Dick Ponzi, Dick Erath and Myron Redford (Amity) had already wagered on the region as America's best chance at making world-class Pinot Noir.

Oregon's best efforts meld the elegance, higher acidity and longevity of Burgundy with the bright fruit flavors of California. The region has been extensively soil-mapped, adding six sub-AVAs (Chehalem Mountains, Dundee Hills, Eola-Amity Hills, McMinnville, Ribbon Ridge, Yamhill-Carlton District).

Significant new investments from Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, Precept Wine, Jackson Family Wines and Burgundy's Maison Louis Jadot bolster the impression that the region remains the epicenter for exceptional Pinots.

Three-quarters of Oregon's wine grape acreage is located in this lush and hilly valley. It ranges 100 miles north to south and 60 miles west to east, with a maritime climate. The area is shielded from Pacific storms by the Coast Range, and from desert heat by the Cascades.

The best vineyards are planted on sloping hillsides above the valley floor, which provides frost protection and less vigorous growth. This is cool-climate viticulture, subject to vagaries of weather, especially during harvest.

Among current releases, the 2009s are full-bodied, while 2010 was a cooler year. The 2011 vintage was even cooler, making for light, elegant, low-alcohol Pinots. The promising 2012s are just coming onto the market. —Paul Gregutt

Vital Statistics

Date established: January 1984

Size: 16,800 acres

Soil types: Marine sedimentary, volcanic, loess

Number of wineries: 316

Best Value Producers: Acrobat, David Hill, Kings Ridge, Rainstorm, Underwood Cellars, Willamette Valley Vineyards, Wine by Joe

Elite Producers: Adelsheim, Archery Summit, Bergström, Chehalem, Cristom, Domaine Drouhin Oregon, Domaine Serene, Erath, Evening Land, The Eyrie Vineyards, Ken Wright, King Estate, Lachini, Le Cadeau, Lemelson, Patton Valley, Ponzi, Raptor Ridge, Rex Hill, Scott Paul, Sineann, Sokol Blosser, Soléna, Trisaetum

Top-Scoring Wines

94 Ponzi 2010 Aurora, \$100

94 Sineann 2012 Yates Conwill Vineyard (Yamhill-Carlton), \$42

93 Chehalem 2010 Ridgecrest Vineyards Reserve (Ribbon Ridge), \$60

Anderson Valley, California

Truly gorgeous inside and out, Anderson Valley, a coastal Mendocino appellation due north of Sonoma County, is among California's most chosen spots for cool-climate Pinot Noir, and a viticultural playground for producers from around the state.

Anderson Valley winds its way 15 miles between the roadside town of Boonville (where the locals speak their own language to ward off strangers), continuing northwest along remote stretches of vineyard and homesteads to the tiny town of Philo. It then continues for another 15 miles through Redwood forest toward the Pacific Ocean.

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It's among the coolest places to grow grapes in the state—the annual average temperature hovers around 55°F—with ocean fog drifting along the Navarro River, cramming into the valley's hillsides and ridges.

Here, grapes hang long and low, retaining their natural acidity. Sunlight arrives late and leaves early.

Temperatures vary by about 10 degrees from the valley's northwestern end, nicknamed the Deep End, known for its prolonged seasons of cold nights and temperate days, to its warmer south.

Thus, Pinots carry different characteristics in different pockets. Those grown closest to the ocean exhibit perfumed black cherry and raspberry, while those from the warmer ridges impart richer swirls of spice and darker fruit.

They also impart hints of lavender and violet, in addition to an herbaceous characteristic sometimes traced to the valley's proliferation of pennyroyal, a species of mint.

With pretty red fruit, earth and spice on top of enviable structure, Anderson Valley Pinots pair well with meals. They have an ethereal quality, but also depth and richness, a proper alignment between acidity and weight.

Anderson Valley's finest are made by estate properties, as well as many respected producers from outside of the area. —Virginie Boone  
Vital Statistics

Date Established: September 1983

Size: 2,244 acres

Soil Type: Sandy, gravelly alluvial loam soils with plenty of clay at low elevations, acidic gravelly loam and clay on decomposing sandstone on the hillsides.

Number of Wineries: 35

Best Value Producers: Handley, Husch, Lazy Creek, Navarro

Elite Producers: Baxter, Black Kite Cellars, Breggo, Carpe Diem, Copain, Drew, Foursight, Goldeneye, Littorai, Toulouse, Williams  
Selyem

Top-Scoring Wines

97 Williams Selyem 2010 30th Anniversary Cuvée Burt Williams' Morning Dew Ranch, \$125

95 Black Kite 2010 River Turn, \$55

95 Sean Thackrey 2010 Cassiopeia Wentzel Vineyard Clone 667, \$45

Sonoma Coast, California

Insiders know there are two Sonoma Coasts: The official appellation, which is huge and largely meaningless, and the "True" Sonoma Coast—home to classic Pinot Noirs. The latter hugs the mountains closest to the sea.

In the 1980s, certain grape-growing interests spearheaded a drive for an official Sonoma Coast appellation. Those most closely involved wanted the eastern boundary extended to the Napa County border, so their vineyards would be included.

Outrage spread among vintners whose own vineyards were influenced by, and often within view of, the Pacific Ocean, with its winds, fogs and cooling effects.

The rush to plant grapes on the remote slopes of the California Coast Ranges, in the extreme western part of Sonoma County, began in the 1990s, and accelerated in the 21st century.

These modern pioneers—Daniel Schoenfeld (Wild Hog), David Hirsch (Hirsch) and others—were not the first to cultivate grapes on the far coast. That was the Russians, who arrived in the early 19th century.

Those early settlers soon found the weather along the beaches so inhospitable for crops that they moved inland, where the sun actually shined.

Today, getting grapes to ripen has been solved by planting on the mountaintops, above the fogline, generally starting at 800 feet in elevation.

Pinot Noir is the undisputed heavyweight champion, producing wines of incredible density and weight, yet irresistible lightness and grace.

In 2011, the government approved the Fort Ross-Seaview appellation, the first AVA to be carved out of the larger Sonoma Coast. Others are sure to follow. —Steve Heimoff

Vital Statistics

Date established: July 1987

Size: 2,000 vineyard acres



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Soil Type: Varies. The Gold Ridge series, a fine, sandy loam, is said to be best for grapes.

Number of Wineries: Dozens. The number can only be estimated because the formal Sonoma Coast appellation boundary overlaps so many others: Russian River Valley, Green Valley, Carneros, Sonoma Valley, Knights Valley and Chalk Hill.

Best Value Producers: Fort Ross, Joseph Carr, La Crema, Scherrer

Elite Producers: Failla, Flowers, Joseph Phelps, Martinelli, Williams Selyem, W.H. Smith

Top-Scoring Wines

96 W.H. Smith 2010 Hellenenthal Vineyard, \$48

95 Marimar Estate 2009 Mas Cavalls Doña Margarita Vineyard Unfiltered, \$44

94 Guarachi Family 2011 Gap's Crown Vineyard, \$75

Russian River Valley, California

This scenic valley, 60 miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge, sprawls across dales and meadows. It's named after Russian explorers who settled in the region 200 years ago, but likely never imagined it as Pinot Noir paradise.

The valley's first commercial vineyards were planted in the mid-1800s, after the Gold Rush petered out and discouraged miners sought new ways to make a living.

Viticulture took off immediately, with railroad lines bringing the newly minted wines to Oakland and San Francisco, but most were hearty blends of thick-skinned grapes, like Zinfandel and Petite Sirah.

By contrast, Pinot Noir was slow in coming.

There were scattered plantings in the 1930s of something called Pinot Noir, but what it actually was can no longer be determined.

It wasn't until the late 1960s and early '70s, at the dawn of the boutique winery movement, that pioneers like Joseph Swan and Joe Rochioli Jr. began the first serious efforts.

Today, their names stand as iconic inspirations to producers of California's most prestigious Pinot Noirs.

Acreage extends across a spectrum of terroirs of this broad, fairly large appellation, from warm areas adjacent to Dry Creek Valley southwest to the chilly, breezy Green Valley, where maritime winds from the west and south temper summertime highs.

Consequently, the valley's Pinots vary in style, from soft, accessible bottlings to others firm in tannins and crisp in acidity.

Well-made Russian River Valley Pinot Noirs can age: some 20-year-old examples are still drinking beautifully.

With the proliferation of wineries over the past decade, consumers should soon have access to greater quantities of aged wines. —S.H.

Vital Statistics

Date established: November 1983

Size: 15,000 vineyard acres

Soil Type: Extremely variable.

Number of Wineries: 110

Best Value Producers: Bearboat, Cameron Hughes, Castle Rock, Kenwood

Elite Producers: Failla, Joseph Swan, Lynmar, Marimar Estate, Merry Edwards, Rochioli, Williams Selyem

Top-Scoring Wines

97 Williams Selyem 2010 30th Anniversary Cuvée Estate Vineyard, \$125

96 J. Rochioli 2011 West Block, \$100

96 Paul Hobbs 2011 Katherine Lindsay Estate, \$85

Santa Lucia Highlands, California

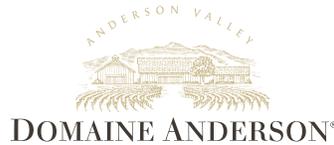
Part of the mountain range that runs from San Francisco southward, this region—like all of California's great Pinot Noir addresses—relies on the cooling influence of the Pacific Ocean to create a haven for this delicate grape.

The region's earliest grape-growing efforts were by Franciscan missionaries, in the 1700s. But it wasn't until the 1970s that modern pioneers like the Smith family (Paraiso) increased the quality of Monterey County wine by employing superior viticultural techniques in planting, as well as estate bottling in small quantities.

During the 1980s and '90s, the area built a reputation for a wide variety of wines, especially Pinot Noir, from pioneers that include the Wagners (Mer Soleil), Robb Talbott and Dan Lee (Morgan).

Every wine region needs its "character," however. And in the case of Highlands Pinot Noir, that would be Gary Pisoni.

His forebears were row-crop farmers in the Salinas Valley. Pisoni, envisioning greater things, shocked his father by planting wine



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grapes at a high elevation in the southern part of the Highlands.

Pisoni's plan was to sell the grapes to others, with the proviso they vineyard-designate the wines to establish the vineyard's reputation.

It succeeded wildly. Pisoni Vineyard Pinot grapes number among the most coveted in California. The Pisoni brand itself launched in 1998.

Highlands Pinot Noirs vary, from taut, tightly wound versions from the northwest to broader expressions from the south. These are big wines, but possess superb balance and a degree of elegance. Top vintages coax out black cherry, mushroom and spice flavors, and the best wines will age for decades. —S.H.

### Vital Statistics

Date established: June 1992

Size: 6,100 vineyard acres

Soil Type: Well-drained sandy loams, sometimes studded with pebbles.

Number of Wineries: About 20 wineries produce within the appellation, but dozens of outside wineries buy its grapes.

Best Value Producers: Gallo Signature Series, Pessagno, Siduri

Elite Producers: Morgan, Pisoni, Testarossa, Roar

### Top-Scoring Wines

94 Tantara 2011 Tondre H Block, \$65

94 Testarossa 2011 Pisoni Vineyard, \$67

93 Roar 2011 Garys' Vineyard, \$52

Santa Rita Hills, California

The 12-year-old Sta. Rita Hills AVA occupies that portion of the Santa Ynez Valley west of Highway 101. Home to some of Santa Barbara's best Pinot Noir vineyards, this AVA extends nearly to the Pacific Ocean, at Lompoc.

West of the freeway, the east-to-west orientation of the valley allows cool ocean air to funnel inland, creating an ideal temperature band for Pinot Noir. But by the Happy Canyon area, this influence is nearly gone. Temps can rise by nearly one degree per mile heading eastward.

The region is a cool one, by California standards, resulting in wines of great structural integrity. Wind can be a problem on hilltops.

The wines, when well made, are remarkably rich, given the ultra-long growing season of this southerly region. Rainfall is scarce, and the first showers of the season often don't come until late November, by which time the grapes have been harvested.

Pioneers like Richard Sanford first planted Pinot Noir here in the 1970s, but it took another 20 years for the action to really pick up. The 2004 movie, *Sideways*, made the region (and Pinot Noir) famous.

Nowadays, the Santa Rita Hills is a hotbed of winemaking activity. Winemakers tinker with Chardonnay, Syrah and a few other varieties, but Pinot Noir remains the superstar.

For all its quality, the prices of Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noirs have not approached those of Napa-Sonoma, yet. While a few producers have been able to charge upwards of \$70 per bottle, most are content (or are compelled) to keep prices between \$30 and \$50.

In almost every case, the best wines come from specific vineyards or even blocks within vineyards, but there are few "value" wines. —S.H.

### Vital Statistics

Date established: July 2001

Size: 2,800 acres

Soil Type: Varies. Limestone, which is relatively rare in California, undergirds large swathes of the appellation.

Number of Wineries: 41

Best Value Producers: Dolina, Foley, Melville

Elite Producers: Bonaccorsi, Brewer-Clifton, Foxen, Longoria, Ojai, Sanford, Sea Smoke

### Top-Scoring Wines

95 Bonaccorsi 2010 Fiddlestix Vineyard, \$45

95 Tantara 2010 Gwendolyn, \$70

94 Foxen 2011 Fe Ciega Vineyard, \$65

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