

BY AMALIA MCGIBBON

The Great (Pinot) Debate

Aficionados are up in arms over an Old-World vs. New-World question.

You may not have picked up on it while strolling the aisles at K&L Wine Merchants, or winding your way through the idyllic hills of Sonoma, but there's turbulence in the California wine world. Pinot noir—yes, food-friendly, dependable pinot noir—has sent the viticulture community into a philosophical maelstrom. The divisive question at hand? Should a California pinot noir be big and jammy, or light and earthy?

I know—it sounds innocuous enough, but the debate boils down to “Old World versus New World,” and that always gets us winos riled up. To understand the root of the argument, you have to understand the history of the root. While its exact origins are up for debate, we know pinot noir found its footing in Burgundy in the 14th century. France would maintain a monopoly on the so-called “heartbreak grape” until the 1980s when, after a failed attempt to plant in Napa Valley, California vintners found success in the cooler climates of coastal appellations (think Russian River Valley, Anderson Valley, Los Carneros).

Differences quickly emerged between French and Californian pinot noirs: the former tended towards earth and spice and hovered around 12-13% alcohol, while the latter featured red fruit and vanilla, and could surpass 15% alcohol. This was a function of contrasting terroirs, but also the different cultural conceptions around wine. Noir Lounge Sommelier Christopher Parks explains: “In France, wine is ‘part of the table,’ a supporting player, and the Burgundy’s delicate, herbaceous quality reflects this. In the United States, on the other hand, wine is often designed as a stand-alone pleasure—to be drunk, not paired—and this is demonstrated in the California pinot noir’s riper, full-bodied style.”

These differences are all fine and dandy, but in the last few decades, California winemakers have found themselves at a fork in the road—embrace and cultivate the California style, or work to echo the French blueprint? Which is the evolution, and which the deviation? At the heart of this disagreement is the ultimate query: What is pinot noir’s greatest potential, and how do you realize it?

The overall debate can be broken down into a hundred smaller ones: When to pick? What to add? Can it be blended? Can it be boosted? How much alcohol is too much? (Rajat Parr, wine director at San Francisco’s RN74, once said he would not serve pinot noirs that were above 14% alcohol.) There are conflicting authorities: Robert Parker (of points fame) prefers his pinot noir dark and opulent, while the *San Francisco Chronicle’s* wine editor, Jon Bonné, has taken up the banner for transparent and ethereal.

But truly, despite the opinions of talking heads, it’s a matter of personal preference—to each his own glass. Decide how, when, and why you drink wine, and then find the pinot noir that’s up to the task. France has about 75,000 acres of the grape, and the U.S. has 73,000; in other words, they both know what they’re doing. Refer to the list above for our favorite pinot noirs, both old school and new school, to help you cut through the clutter. So? Which side are you on? Sip, spit, and take a stand! ♦

Pinot Recommendations:

2010 Inman Family Olivet Grange Vineyard (OGV) Pinot Noir, \$68

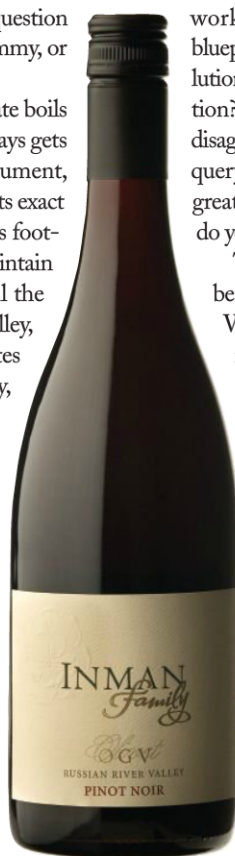
2011 Porter Creek “Old Vine” Sonoma County Zinfandel, \$32

2012 Au Bon Climat/K&L Wine Merchants “Bien Nacido Vineyard” Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir, \$25

2009 Peter Michael “Clos du Ciel” Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, \$180

2011 Three Sticks Silver Eagle Vineyard Pinot Noir, \$60

2012 Pfendler Vineyards Pinot Noir, \$45



Take your Mother's Day celebration to the next level with the NAPA VALLEY WINE TRAIN. Ever heard of it? It's all of Northern California's best qualities rolled into one: exquisite wine, gourmet cooking, and an ambling tour through the scenic countryside. You're welcomed at the station with vino and hors d'oeuvres before you board the train for a three-and-a-half hour twilight dinner. It's the least you can do for her, after all. Find out more at winetrain.com.