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Pinot Chic

Despite cranky reputation, pinot noir finds welcome home in California

Pinot noir is not the most popular red wine in the United States — even merlot outsells it almost 2-to-1, according to The Nielsen Co. But pinot noir is arguably the most chic grape in the vineyard, which may explain why the variety has proved so troublesome.

Pinot noir vines are slow-growing, generally produce low grape yields, can be rather fussy about soils and demand cool weather conditions. Pinot is also prone to mutation — not something one necessarily wants in a vineyard — and pinot has more clones than any other variety, according to the Wine Institute, a California trade group. All of this may explain why so many winemakers, from Michigan to Mendocino, Mendoza to Marlborough, want to grow pinot noir. It's a challenge, but when done right, the resulting wine can be extraordinary.

2007 Pinot Noir, Keefer Ranch



Although there are touches of cherry and berry flavor, this is not a fruity wine. Look instead for an elegant pour redolent of earth, tobacco, wood and mushrooms. Classically balanced; nose of cedar and spice. \$45

This French-born grape is indeed grown around the world, but "The New Wine Lover's Companion" is right in declaring "few areas outside Burgundy make really great pinot noir wines."

Is California one of these areas? Golden State vintners certainly hope so. Pinot noir is the No.1 red wine grape in Sonoma County, according to the Sonoma County Wine Grape Commission. Sonoma's Russian River Valley and Sonoma Coast regions particularly meet pinot's stiff climatic demands. Pinot has also pumped up the wine business along California's Central Coast, from Monterey in the north to the various wine regions of Santa Barbara in the south.

Frankly, pinot noir can be challenging to the consumer too. Folks are drinking more of it — 11.9 percent more in the past year, Nielsen reports. That's the biggest volume increase for any grape variety over that time.

Yet, as "The New Wine Lover's Companion" notes, there's a big, bad gap between high and low quality pinots. That means you're probably going to have to pay, and pay a lot, to ensure you get the best pinot for your money.

What to do? Take advantage of free tastings at your local wine shop or liquor store, for one. There's likely to be a bottle of pinot out on the tasting table most weekends. Ask your store owner or clerk for recommendations; don't necessarily follow scores or rankings unless you find you tend to be in sync with those reviewers and publications doling out the numbers.

Bill Daley, July 7, 2010

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