

Noir thrillers

By Jancis Robinson
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After its starring role in the movie *Sideways*, the [Pinot Noir](#) grape seemed to become almost boringly mainstream. The world's best sommelier – French-born, UK-based Gérard Basset, winner of this year's Association de la Sommellerie Internationale championships in Chile earlier this year – told me last week that he now hesitates to recommend the red burgundy grape, once the safe choice for a party with a wide range of main courses, as it has become “too predictable”.

But once that vixen of a vine gets its claws into the heart of a wine lover, it very rarely lets go. Three members of London's army of wine publicists and wine educators – Jen MacDonald, Angela Reddin and Kate Sweet – found themselves so smitten by Pinot Noir and its increasingly impressive performance outside Europe that they decided to hold a blind comparative tasting of 65 New World Pinots last week. This presented us tasters with a snapshot of Pinots in Australia, California, Chile, New Zealand and Oregon. We were told the wines were in five flights, by country, but not which flight was which. And very fascinating it was, too.

Pinot Noir is an early ripening vine variety, so it can flourish only in fairly cool corners of the globe, where the growing season is long enough for flavour to develop. In Australia it tends to thrive in the most poleward viticultural regions, such as Tasmania and the cooler reaches of Victoria. Californian Pinot Noir growers have to stick to those areas most frequently shrouded by Pacific fogs, which generally means heading for the coast. Their counterparts in Chile have been doing this for exactly the same reason, although one of the southernmost wine regions in Chile, Bío Bío, has also proved fertile ground for those in search of the perfect Pinot. New Zealand and Oregon can experience very hot summers, but they are on roughly the right latitude for the red burgundy grape – indeed, in both cases this gives them a rare edge over their respective, dominant neighbours. But, when tasted blind, did the New Zealand Pinots outshine the Australian ones, and the Oregon examples seem so much finer than the California ones?

For me, the first flight was the most impressive. And I did think as I tasted it that it was probably the Oregon one, since the wines were subtle, gentle, fresh but not too emphatically tart, sweet or alcoholic. There were also two absolutely outstanding wines, which turned out to be the regular 2007 bottling from Domaine Drouhin, the American outpost of Beaune négociant Joseph Drouhin, and the relatively rich 2008 from Amity's Bass Hill vineyard. Many of these Oregonian Pinots had the same sort of autumnal mulch aromas as a mature burgundy, and certainly the same sort of delicate balance.

The second flight was the most varied. Colours ranged from a watery pink to deep crimson (there is no need for a Pinot Noir to be particularly dense). In the middle, there was a run of well-balanced, eloquent examples which turned out to be from Mornington Peninsula, Australia's little bit of Burgundy that is cooled by Melbourne's Port Phillip Bay and the Bass Strait. Several examples came from even further south, in Tasmania, and were a little burlier than those Pinots grown in the higher reaches of the Yarra Valley north of Melbourne, where some grapes seemed to have struggled to ripen at all. Overall, this was an interesting collection of Pinots and – partly because they were all obviously in screwcaps – I decided, correctly, that they were Australian.



New World rhapsody

Oregon
£30.10
13.74%

16.4/20

Australia
£35.10
13.76%

15.9/20

Chile
£19.77
14.17%

15.8/20

NZ
£25.67
13.86%

15.8/20

California
£25.04
14.00%

15.8/20

Average price, alcohol and Jancis's scores

I decided, wrongly, that the next flight was from California, describing the wines viciously in my notes as “brutally alcoholic and sweet, and only rarely with real interest and attractive wholeness”. In fact, they turned out to be from 6,000 miles to the south – also Pacific-cooled, but from Chile.

That said, this flight included the two best buys of the entire exercise, both from the notably cool Casablanca Valley, inland from the port of Valparaiso: Cono Sur Reserva 2008 (£7.99, yourfavouritewines.com) and Anakena, Ona 2009 (£10.99, Oddbins). Both were clearly from a very cool region and seemed much more graceful and refreshing than most other Chilean examples.

For logistical reasons I tackled the fifth flight next and, having misidentified the Chileans as Californians, did the opposite here, although my summary – “colours very uniform, very fruity, flavours far less varied than in the other flights; overall a bit sweet and amazingly homogeneous” – should really have led me straight to the Golden State. Of course, any selection of wines is open to criticism from locals who feel that the wrong representatives have

been selected. There are now hundreds of producers of Californian Pinot Noir and we certainly didn't have exclusively the best, but we did have examples from Au Bon Climat, Cambria (Julia's Vineyard), Flowers and Marimar Torres and this, unsurprisingly, was the most expensive flight in terms of average price per bottle.

The last flight I tasted was very obviously from New Zealand. "Direct, very youthful and urgent. No smudginess. Bright crimson colours and sharp fruit," was my summary. New Zealand has earned itself a fine reputation for the consistency of its Pinot Noir, but I was a little disappointed by this (extensive, 18-strong) flight overall. Bright and breezy, the wines were rarely subtle, even though there were representatives from the Kiwi Pinot aristocracy, such as Ata Rangi, Dog Point, Fromm and Felton Road. Prices were fair, though, and alcohol levels not as high as the American Pinots, even if they were higher on average than our (relatively expensive) Australian Pinots, which, thanks to a few outstanding wines, notched up a higher average score from me than their Kiwi counterparts.

I'd love to do this again in a year or two, perhaps including Canada, South Africa, possibly New York state – and why not Austria, Germany, Switzerland and Burgundy?

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My favourite new world pinots

Domaine Drouhin 2007

Willamette Valley, Oregon, £22.85, Slurp.co.uk; Four Walls Wine (01243 535353)

Amity, Bass Hill Vineyard 2008

Willamette Valley, Oregon, no UK supplier, wine-searcher.com

Lemelson, Six Vineyards 2006

Willamette Valley, Oregon, £18, The Wine Society (01438 741177)

Dexter 2008

Mornington Peninsula, Australia, £19.99 (a bargain), Cheers of Swansea, 01792 403895

Yabby Lake 2008

Mornington Peninsula, Australia, £22.99, Noel Young (01223 566744); Swig.co.uk

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