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The Quest for Reasonably Priced Domestic Pinot Noir

Since 2004's 'Sideways' made a star of domestic Pinot Noir, the U.S. has planted nearly twice the acreage of the finicky grape. But can a good bottle be had for under \$40? Lettie Teague finds several



ILLUSTRATION: VINCENT MAHE

By LETTIE TEAGUE

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WHEN A WINE is extremely rare and sought after, oenophiles often refer to it as a unicorn. It may be from a very old vintage, a very small vineyard or a place in the world few wine drinkers can find on a map. I recently spent a few weeks tracking down a unicorn of a different sort: first-rate, varietally correct and reasonably priced domestic Pinot Noirs.

With hundreds of Pinot Noirs produced in this country each year, and acreage devoted to the grape ever increasing, this may not sound like a true unicorn quest, but as Daniel Posner, proprietor of Grapes The Wine Company, in White Plains, N.Y., can attest, wines with these qualities can be very rare. In fact, Mr. Posner said he has to taste at least 100 domestic Pinot Noirs to find five that he deems worthy to put on his store shelves.

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“It’s not like shooting fish in a barrel,” Mr. Posner said of finding high-quality domestic Pinot Noir under \$40. A good bottle can easily cost twice as much. That’s because Pinot Noir, a native of Burgundy, France, is a hard grape to get right. Regularly described by even its biggest fans as finicky, thin-skinned and temperamental, Pinot Noir is the globally acknowledged diva of grapes. As Dave Keatley, winemaker at the Sonoma-based **Flowers Vineyards & Winery**, a notable Pinot producer, said, “Pinot Noir is a grape you can’t cut corners with.”

Mr. Keatley produces some of the top Pinots in Sonoma, including a reasonably priced (\$38) Sonoma Coast bottling whose fruit is sourced from almost 20 vineyards in the region. A good Pinot isn't just a matter of finding great fruit, according to Mr. Keatley, but fruit from diverse sites. A variety of vineyard sites can contribute different aromas, textures and structures, he said, whereas Pinot Noirs made from large appellations can seem one-dimensional.

Unlike hardier, more flexible varieties, such as Cabernet and Syrah, fragile Pinot Noir requires the exact right circumstances to thrive. A long, cool growing season (but not too long or too cool) is necessary for the grape to develop its trademark acidity and aromatically beguiling, even ethereal, profile and its delicate yet vibrant fruit. Pinot requires constant adjustment and attention in the vineyard (just the right amount of shade and sun) and careful handling in the winery as well—with many winemaking decisions made along the way (e.g., destemming and cold soaking pre-fermentation). A difficult wine to make to scale, Pinot has to be made artisanally even in large quantity, said Mr. Keatley.

Some of the places the grape grows best also happen to be places “rich people like to build homes,” said Joshua Klapper, which adds to the scarcity of prime Pinot acreage. Mr. Klapper crafts Pinot Noir in the Santa Maria Valley, under the La Fenêtre Wines label. “It’s coastal, it’s on a slope, it’s on a hillside,” he said, referencing the kinds of places great Pinot is planted.

Mr. Klapper makes a range of the wine, including the affordably priced À Côté, made from fruit sourced partly from Santa Barbara County but mostly from Monterey County, where it is much more affordable. In either place, it’s tough to find vineyards that will produce compelling wines in the \$20 to \$25 range, said Mr. Klapper, who has done his fair share of searching.

While not all of California’s Pinot Noir vineyards may produce memorable wine, the category is certainly hot. As of 2014, nearly 49,000 acres in California were planted to Pinot compared with 24,442 acres in 2005, the year after “Sideways,” that famously pro-Pinot movie, made its debut. (Yes, winemakers still reference that movie.)

In Oregon, Pinot Noir accounts for over 60% of the state’s wine production. Acreage planted to Pinot more than doubled in 10 years there, too: 17,146 acres in 2014 versus 7,637 in 2004. Even more will be planted in 2015, according to Michelle Kaufmann of the Oregon Wine Board.

The consumer appetite for Pinot Noir is so strong that Constellation Brands recently paid an astonishingly high \$315 million for **Meiomi**, one of the leading brands of affordable Pinot Noir. The brand didn’t exist 10 years ago, and what is particularly remarkable is that the purchase price doesn’t include even an acre of vineyard land. The grapes are purchased from Pinot vineyards around California.

The **Meiomi Pinot Noir** was among the 24 bottles I purchased for my tasting. I focused on Pinot Noirs ranging from \$15 to \$40 a bottle. I deliberately didn't go below \$15 because I've found it next to impossible to find an interesting domestic Pinot at that price. A pleasant red wine, perhaps, but not a wine with true Pinot character.

'Well-produced, reasonably priced domestic Pinot Noirs may not be mythical, but it takes some sleuthing to uncover them.'

I bought wines from all over California (Sonoma Coast, Russian River, Santa Barbara) as well as Oregon. The latter can be a particularly good source for inexpensive Pinot Noir in an outstanding vintage, according to Ian Dorin, wine director of Wine Library in Springfield, N.J., who thinks Oregon delivers the "best bang for the buck" in reasonably priced Pinot Noir.

I did have a few terrific Oregon Pinot Noirs in both excellent (2012) and good (2013) vintages. **The 2012 Rex Hill Willamette Valley was smoky and rich with a savory edge and at \$24 is a very good deal.** A lighter, more feminine wine, the 2012 Illahe Percheron Willamette Valley (\$38), was pleasant if slightly thin. The 2013 Walter Scott La Combe Verte Willamette Valley (\$29) was well-balanced, with terrific acidity, and the **2013 Domaine Drouhin Dundee Hills (\$32) was also quite good—crisp and savory with notes of bright red and dark fruit.**

Among the California Pinots, the opposite was true vintage-wise: 2013 was a stellar Pinot Noir year while 2012 was good. I found some excellent bottles from both years, however. Many of the California Pinots, particularly those \$20 and under, tasted confectioned or overly ripe—more like soft, sweetish red wines than true Pinot Noirs—and a few had powerful alcohol levels, more commonly associated with Cabernet. **Michael Davies, executive winemaker of Rex Hill, called this last style of Pinot Noir "untethered, like a big hot-air balloon," a description I thought colorful and quite apt.**

A handful of Pinot Noirs truly stood out: the elegant 2013 Flowers Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$38), a strikingly lush and deeply flavored 2012 La Fenêtre À Côté Central Coast Pinot Noir (\$22) and the 2012 Willowbrook Russian River Valley (\$32), which was quite polished and suave. I also found a lively, red-fruit inflected 2012 Hartley Ostini Hitching Post Cork Dancer Pinot Noir Santa Barbara County (\$28) and a juicy 2013 Hahn SLH Pinot Noir (\$24), from the reliable Monterey-based estate.

With nine of the 24 Pinot Noirs I purchased showing quite well, I had greater proportional luck than Mr. Posner. On the other hand, I benefited from Mr. Posner's selection, as several of my top picks came from his store. Maybe reasonably priced, well-produced, domestic Pinots with true varietal character aren't mythical, but they still require a fair amount of sleuthing to uncover—and on the part of their winemakers, a great deal of work.

Oenophile // Five First-Rate, American Pinot Noirs for Less Than \$40



From left: 2012 Rex Hill Willamette Valley Pinot Noir, 2013 Flowers Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, 2012 La Fenêtre À Côté Central Coast Pinot Noir, 2012 Willowbrook Russian River Pinot Noir, 2013 Walter Scott Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir. PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

2012 Rex Hill Willamette Valley Pinot Noir \$24

The 2012 vintage was a great success story for Oregon vintners, and this basic bottling from Rex Hill is an excellent example of the concentration and lushness emblematic of the year. Full-bodied and rich, it is marked by notes of dark fruit, earth and even a bit of a tobacco.

2013 Flowers Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir \$38

Winemaker Dave Keatley was one of many Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir producers pleased with the outstanding quality of the wines from the 2013 vintage. This wine is a vibrant example of the year—elegant and supple with bright red fruit aromas and a fine mineral thread.

2012 La Fenêtre À Côté Central Coast Pinot Noir \$22

Winemaker Joshua Klapper turns out pricier Pinots under the La Fenêtre Wines label, but his À Côté Central Coast bottling is no less of a win. In fact, this impressively weighty but beautifully polished Pinot is a terrific bargain at this price.

2012 Willowbrook Russian River Valley Pinot Noir \$32

Marked by bright red berry fruit and a lively acidity, this medium-bodied Pinot from the heart of the Russian River Valley, made by a producer specializing in Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, is a terrific wine to accompany food.

2013 Walter Scott La Combe Verte Willamette Valley Pinot Noir \$29

“La Combe Verte” (the green valley) is a tribute to Oregon producer Patricia Green’s team. Oregon’s 2013 vintage was more difficult than the stellar 2012, but producers like Walter Scott turned out Pinots like this brisk, pleasant wine.

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