

## Pinot Noir

10 Nov 2014 by JB  
A significant proportion of those who choose to devote much of their lives to wine were inspired to do so by a single wine and in my experience that wine is most likely to have been a red burgundy, the apogee of the Pinot Noir grape. My 25-year career writing about wine was inspired by a glass of Chambolle Musigny Les Amoureuses 1959 and the sheer glory of it compared to the sort of plonk I had usually drunk as an impoverished student, and I have since met many another wine fanatic whose inspirational glass contained red burgundy.

Of all the most famous grape varieties, Pinot Noir has been the most reluctant traveller. It ripens relatively early so in warmer climates is able to produce only jam. It has quite thin skins so in damp climates it is prone to rot. It is genetically extremely variable - as witness the way it has so easily mutated into green-skinned Pinot Blanc and pink-skinned Pinot Gris, and the fact that recent DNA analysis has shown that it is the parent of such varied grape varieties as Chardonnay, Gamay and Melon, the Muscadet grape. Another effect of this variability is that wine produced by different clones of it tend to be much more fundamentally different than those produced by different clones of Cabernet Sauvignon, for example. The character of Pinot Noir produced in newer wine regions can change enormously as newer, finer clones are planted. Much Pinot Noir produced in its homeland of Burgundy was disappointingly thin in the 1970s because the fashion then was to plant clones for quantity and reliability rather than wine quality.

The positive side of all this is that Pinot Noir is a very transparent grape. It really can communicate the difference in *terroir*, or grape-growing environment, between adjacent plots of vineyard. The heady wines grown in Les Amoureuses vineyard in the village of Chambolle, for example, really do taste distinctly different from the majestic produce of Le Musigny vineyard next door which is almost invariably fuller, denser and longer-living.

The greatest Pinot Noir is the greatest red burgundy, without any shadow of a doubt. In fact the *Grands Crus* of the Côte d'Or, the heartland of Burgundy, tower in my opinion much further above their counterparts outside France than Bordeaux's top wines do above the best Cabernet Sauvignons of, say, northern California. Other *grands crus* are on the most favoured, south-east-facing mid-slopes above the villages of Gevrey-Chambertin, Morey St Denis, Vougeot, Vosne-Romanée and on the famous tree-topped hill of Corton above Aloxe-Corton. The greatest concentration of vinous greatness is around Vosne-Romanée, with the world-famous likes of Romanée-Conti, La Tache and, sometimes just as good, Richebourg. The first two in particular are produced in such small quantity that their prices have always been stratospheric.

Pinot, as I have said, can vary enormously but its essential characteristic is charm. It tends to be fruity, perfumed and haunting. It dances on the palate rather than overpowering it. Heavy tannins and deep colour are not essential elements in a fine Pinot Noir - not even in a young Pinot Noir. In fact some of my favourite burgundies are not grand, long-living monsters but lively, sprightly essences of place, sometimes just a general village wine - not one labelled with the name of a *grand cru* or even a *premier cru* but one carrying simply the name of a village.

Pinot Noir does not tend to live as long as Cabernet Sauvignon and great Merlot. Many simpler examples reach a peak at just four years. *Premiers crus* can be delicious at six to eight. I have had some fine red burgundies from the 1940s and even 1920s but they are much less common than great relics from Bordeaux (admittedly this is partly because they are made in much smaller quantity).

Countrified, slightly coarser Pinot Noir is made to the south of Côte d'Or in the Côte Chalonnaise. Indeed this is the dominant good-quality red wine grape in most of the north-east corner of France, including such varied locales as Sancerre, Jura, parts of Savoie and of course Champagne where, untinted by contact with the skins, it is a vital ingredient in most champagnes with its blending partners Chardonnay and a cousin called Pinot Meunier.

Across France's eastern border Pinot Noir, as Spätburgunder, is the most highly regarded red wine grape in Germany (where plantings have been increasing at a phenomenal rate), Switzerland and to a lesser extent in Austria. Here the wine tends to be paler and sweeter, although increasing skill with growing techniques and oak ageing is resulting in deeper and more concentrated wines.

Wine producers the world over tend to be so smitten by the quality of the greatest red burgundies that they cannot resist trying to make Pinot Noir where at all possible. There are accordingly small plantings all over Europe and beyond.

But very few regions can claim to have a real proven affinity with the grape. The Pacific north-west state of Oregon was the first New World wine region to claim Pinot Noir as its own, but its variability of climate (and, it must be said, some less than perfect clones) has made quality extremely irregular. When Oregon succeeds, it makes a particularly fruity style of Pinot.

Next to claim the crown were fog-cooled pockets of California such as the Russian River Valley (big juicy Pinots), Carneros (lighter and more fragrant) and the Central Coast between Monterey and Santa Barbara where certain sites have shown over a decade that they can reliably ripen Pinot, just, and make truly appetising examples. Such finesse can come as a surprise to those who know California for its Cabernets and Chardonnays.

Much of Australia is too hot for Pinot Noir, although Tasmania and some of the maritime-influenced sites in Victoria such as Geelong, the Mornington Peninsula and parts of the Yarra Valley have shown great potential.

New Zealand is setting its cap at Pinot Noir and certain examples from Martinborough/Wairarapa just north-east of Wellington in the south of the North Island and Central Otago towards the south of the South Island suggest that they may well have a real claim to be the next great Pinot region.