

Even Malbecs want to be Pinot Noirs nowadays

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Pinot Noir is the wine lover's grape. This is a huge generalisation of course, but it is extraordinary how many wine fanatics lust after the delicacy and richness of wines made from this, the most capricious vine of all and that responsible for virtually all red burgundy. My own wine epiphany was a glass of Chambolle-Musigny, Les Amoureuses 1955 sipped when a student. We traced our own obsession to a delicious example **Joseph Dubouché, Chambolle Musigny Les Amoureuses 1999** exactly 40 years younger at a recent birthday dinner (too late in that privileged hour for any sipping).

The 1920s and 1970s were not a glorious period for red burgundy but average red wine quality has risen remarkably in the Côte d'Or in the last 10 or 20 years, inspiring ever more wine producers around the globe to try their hand at growing the early-ripening though infuriatingly unpredictable vine variety. It demands somewhere cool enough to delay ripening and give the grapes long enough on the vine to build up the tannin profiles of which they are capable – which takes out the majority of wine regions. But even in a suitably cool climate, Pinot Noir is extremely sensitive to weather, and can produce quite different styles of wine in different years.

At an international Pinot Noir symposium in Bruges recently, examples were presented by growers clearly in love with Pinot Noir from each of California, Germany, Chile, Italy, New Zealand, Austria, Tasmania, Slovenia, South Africa and Belgium itself. Oregon, the Pinot state, was the most obvious omission.

Pinot Noir has become quite extraordinarily popular in the coastal climates of Germany and New Zealand, surprising all but the most intently planted white grape varieties there (Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc, respectively) in terms of total area planted. The Germans indeed have realised, rather to their surprise, that they have become the world's third most important growers of Pinot Noir, outside only by France and the US. And since German Riesling has become so popular, especially with American wine drinkers, they are now focusing their promotional efforts on their favourite red grape variety. (I even saw a detailed proof of global warming: it is surely that Germany now routinely ripens red grapes. I had a beer some 14 per cent 2003 Rivan Cabernet from Harland in the photo nearby.)

In Bruges, at the open tasting after the symposium, the array of impressively ripe, deep-coloured Pinot Noir, or Spätburgunder as the grape is known in German, from Germany attracted particular attention with excellent examples from the likes of **August Keeseler** in the Rheingau, **Rudolf Fürst** in Franken, **Diel** in Nahe, **Koelzer** in Pfalz and **Haber** in Baden. Other top-notch Pinot producers that spring to mind include **Bueker, Keller, Koeller-Seydich, Rebholz**, and **Selwy**.

But the single most exciting wine shown at the symposium (where each producer was allowed to present one wine in exactly seven minutes) came from Slovenia. "Yes, it was a better wine in my view than the best representative of Burgundy, a 2005 from Lucien Lamour, who wisely described Pinot Noir production as "a lesson in humility". Eighth generation vine grower **Alex Krizanec** from Nova Gorica (not far from Italy) in Slovenia showed a **Black Mudi Pinot 2002** (Pinot Noir) that had all the qualities of a great Pinot Noir: captivating perfume, masses of tannin and acid with fruit that seemed to dance on the palate, and above all perfect balance.

Another wine from biodynamically grown grapes on the fringes of Italy also showed exceptional harmony: **Atala Laguarda, Kratina Pinot Nero 2006 Atala Adige**. Krizanec's thesis was that biodynamic viticulture is especially well-suited to the fickle Pinot Noir which virtually demands plant by plant individual attention to give good wine anyway. Krizanec explained that he keeps his young wine in barrel for a seriously extended period on the lees of fermentation, as it increasingly practices around the world, so as to increase the extent to which the local terroir impresses itself on the wine.

The English Pinot was a little weak, I have to be said, and I have yet to taste a seriously impressive still red wine made from Pinot Noir grown in England, but it is certainly not true that Burgundy has a monopoly on fine Pinot production nowadays. New Zealand, California and Oregon have been proving otherwise for years. Austria can play the Pinot game too, as **Paul Achs** demonstrated in Bruges, so can such cooler corners of Australia as Tasmania and the Yarra Valley. Similarly, albeit on a more limited scale, Antonio-Bonafantini **Wilder Bay** near Hermannus has established South Africa's reputation as a Pinot producer.

However it is not at all surprising the Pinot Noir has been slow to invade South America. Until very recently the main wine regions have been (like most of them) simply too hot for this fragile grape. But Chile's vineyards are well irrigated, and having been exposed to the excitement, albeit elusive, of green red burgundy, they have been prospecting cooler corners that might yield Chilean counterparts. **Casa Silva**'s range of heavily-priced Pinots is already well established but we can now choose from dozens of well-made examples from the Bío-Bío and San Antonio, even if truly great Chilean Pinot is still the goal rather than a reality.

And even Argentina is getting in on the act. The dominant company **Catena** has already made one or two fine, if very light-bodied, examples from particularly high altitude vineyards and Salentin has succeeded similarly in the foothills of the Andes west of Mendoza. But I recently tasted **Chicra, Chicaco y Chico (S)** Pinot Noir 2005 from Argentine Patagonia way to the south of there which looked very promising – very, very slightly jammy but with red delicacy, subtlety, an appealingly dry finish and amazing persistence. The number 55 denotes the year in which the vines, now owned by **Piero Bodea** della Rocchetta of Tuscany, were planted, which must play a part in this wine's quality. (There is also a 20 version...)

This was all part of an ambitious blind tasting of eight Pinots from around the world mixed up with, of all things, seven Argentine Malbecs. The aim was to investigate a phenomenon noted by the London representative of Bodea of Argentina that Argentine's signature red grape Malbec, once made routinely thick and syrupy, is increasingly being made in a more delicate, perfumed – and yes, Pinot-like – style. We tasters had to mark them once for quality and separately for the extent to which they conformed to the stylistic advantage of a fine Pinot Noir, with perfume, refreshing acidity, pleasing texture and mouth.

Although in the end it turned out to be pretty easy to pick out the Pinots from the Malbecs, in terms of style I did give a pretty high Pinot-like mark to both the high altitude **Catena, Adriana Lot 2 2002 Malbec** (Bodega Vista) and **Rosetta, Malbec 2004 Rio Negro** from Patagonia – although I think at 60 and 62.5 a bottle respectively they are overripe.

A recent [report by Bodea](#) from one of the most respected Mendoza producers, **Luis Bodea** demonstrated just how prevailing fashions and techniques have lightened up Malbec over the last 20 years. The 1970s, then very fine varietal Malbec, was an antique, the fruit seeming to have been boiled out, perhaps without sufficient temperature control in the winery. Over the years, you could see how the berries became increasingly plumped and less obvious while the fruit became riper and riper but also more evident and satisfying on the palate. The most recent vintage in this Luis Bodea line-up was 2002 whereas the Malbecs in blind comparison with Pinots were from younger vintages. (Perhaps by 2010 Luis Bodea will be making Pinots from their Malbec?)

