Who makes the best Pinot Noir?

2 Oct 2010 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is much longer

See full tasting notes and scores for all these wines.

After its starring role in the movie *Sideways*, the Pinot Noir grape is now almost boringly mainstream, apparently. The world's best sommelier – French-born, UK-based Gérard Basset, winner of this year's 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, to present us tasters with a snapshot of Pinot's current performance in Australia, California, Chile, New Zealand and Oregon. We were told that the wines were in five flights by country but not which flight was which. And very fascinating it was too.

Pinot Noir is a naturally 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. Indeed the warmer summers experienced recently in its homeland Burgundy (2003 most notably) have presented vignerons there with real challenges.

In Australia it tends to thrive only 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 - just as their counterparts in Chile have been doing for exactly the same reason, although the deep southern Chilean wine region Bío Bío has also proved fertile ground for those in search of the holy grail 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. And both of them have made almost a fetish out of their Pinot prowess. 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 of all 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, and there were a few that seemed to have the rather simple, slightly jammy fruit of the clone of Pinot Noir that predominated here before an invasion of snazzier clones from Burgundy. 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 varied from a watery pink to deep crimson. (There is no need for a Pinot Noir to be particularly dense.) In the middle of the flight was a run of most impressive, 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, whose Pinots overall were a little burlier than those 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 thought they were Australian. In fact, I was convinced that the most Burgundian of the lot had to be from the idiosyncratic Victorian Pinot Noir producer Bass Phillip. It turned out to have been grown on his own personal estate on the Mornington Peninsula by talented winemaker Tod Dexter, who, after extensive researches in Burgundy and experience in the US, has demonstrated much skill at Stonier, Yabby Lake and (with Shiraz) at Heathcote Estate.

I decided, wrongly, that the next flight was from California, describing them viciously 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 obviously 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,eventually did the opposite here, although I flirted with New Zealand for a while. 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 the wrong representatives have been selected - especially since the organisers of this tasting restricted themselves to wines available in the UK. There are now hundreds of producers of California 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.

The last flight I tasted was in retrospect 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 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?

HOW THE REGIONS FARED

These figures are all averages – of my score out of 20, recommended retail price and alcohol level.

Flight 1: Oregon
16.4
£30.10
13.74%

Flight 2: Australia
15.9
£35.10
13.76%

Flight 3: Chile
15.8
£19.77
14.17%

Flight 4: NZ
15.8
£25.67
13.86%

Flight 5: California
15.8
£25.04
14.00%

MY FAVOURITES

Domaine Drouhin 2007 Willamette Valley, Oregon
£22.85 Slurp.co.uk, Four Walls Wine

Amity, Bass Hill Vineyard 2008 Willamette Valley, Oregon
£35 Whirly Wine.co.uk

Lemelson, Six Vineyards 2006 Willamette Valley, Oregon
£18 The Wine Society

Dexter 2008 Mornington Peninsula, Australia
£19.99 Cheers of Swansea (a bargain)

Yabby Lake 2008 Mornington Peninsula, Australia
£22.99 Noel Young, Swig.co.uk