

## Stirling Wines: Pinot Noir - The Prima Donna Of Noble Red Grapes

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### Introduction

Pinot Noir is arguably the most famous member of the Pinot family of grapes, which is prone to mutation and stretches from Pinot Blanc (or Bianco), through Pinot Gris (or Grigio), via Pinot Meunier (one of the three main grapes of champagne) to Pinot Noir. The spiritual home of Pinot Noir is undoubtedly Burgundy in North-East France, where it is the principal red grape. However, it has now spread to virtually all the cooler-climate wine regions of the world.

### What makes Pinot Noir special and capricious?

Good Pinot Noir is notoriously tricky to produce. Pinot is very thin-skinned compared to Cabernet Sauvignon, which makes it typically much less tannic and much more subtle in its charms. Perhaps because of the thin-skin/low concentration, good Pinot requires much lower yields than other more robust noble red grapes. Pinot is also very temperature sensitive. It thrives in cooler climate, more marginal regions. But in hot climates (and vintages) it can all too easily produce very undistinguished, jammy wines. Pinot also tends to bud early, making it susceptible to spring frost, and the thin skin makes it susceptible to fungal diseases. All these factors combine to make Pinot much more capricious than other varieties. It also means that good Pinot Noir nearly always comes at a price. It is rare to find good, cheap Pinot; but there are plenty of delicious wines in the £15/\$25-£25/\$40 range.

### What does it taste like?

Pinot noir normally smells of soft red fruit, varying from strawberries, to cherries, through to plums, dependent on the region where it is grown. [n.b. Aromas derived from the fruit character of the grape are known in the oenological world as primary aromas].

A well-made Pinot will also typically have some (subtle) oak influence. The wine will most likely have been fermented in stainless steel tanks and then aged in oak barrels or may even have been fermented in large wooden vats. Over the course of the ageing, the wine interacts with the wood, which tempers the tannins and gives subtle aromas of cedar and sandalwood.

However, the wine-maker has to be careful in his choice of barrels, and in general he or she will use a mixture of new and old barrels because 100% new oak would completely overwhelm most Pinots. [Aromas that are created through fermentation and ageing in barrel pre-bottling are known as secondary aromas].

As Pinot ages, it takes on what the French politely call *sous-bois* (forest floor). In a more earthy description, one famous English wine critic famously declared that good Burgundy smells of shit! Now that doesn't sound very appealing; but, a little like smelly French cheese, it is very addictive once you have gained a taste for it. In good Pinot, these earthy aromas add a wonderful complexity to the wine. [Aromas that come from bottle-ageing are known as tertiary aromas].

In summary, Pinot has a broad range of styles. As the English wine writer Oz Clarke puts it, it can vary from: "sweet and wistful..... [to] sensual and heady..... [or] muscular, glowering,...yet...invaded with an insidious exotic scent".

### Burgundy

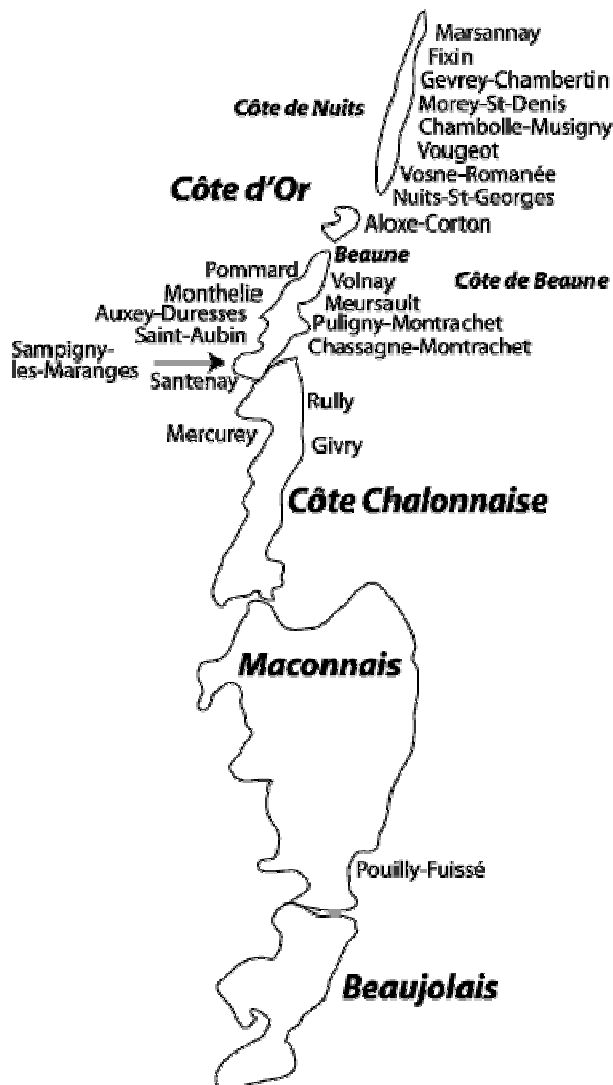
Pinot Noir almost certainly originated in Burgundy and has certainly been grown there for many centuries. In Burgundy, it is almost always made as a mono-varietal but is occasionally blended with Gamay to make Bourgogne Passetoutgrains.

The classic area for Pinot Noir in Burgundy is the Côte d'Or. This is an easterly facing escarpment which stretches 50km south from Dijon. Within the Côte d'Or, there are a bewildering number of individual appellations.

The lowest rung of the ladder is basic Bourgogne Rouge. Typically, this is a quaffing wine; but sometimes there can be fantastic bargains because one of the major growers has had to, or chosen to, de-classify some of his better wine and sell it under the regional appellation.

Next come the village wines, such as Nuits St Georges, Volnay, and Santenay. These villages have often hyphenated themselves with the name of the most famous vineyard in the village area such as:

Gevrey-Chambertin, Vosne-Romanée, Chambolle-Musigny and Chassagne-Montrachet.



Then come the premier crus. Typically these consist of a village name attached to the name of the vineyard e.g. Chambolle-Musigny Les Charmes, Gevrey-Chambertin Clos Saint-Jacques and Volnay Les Caillerets.

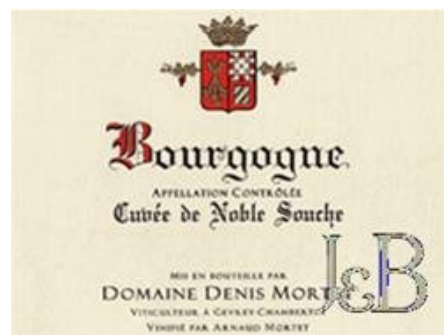
The best wines are called grands crus, with famous names such as La Tâche, La Romanée, Le Chambertin, Musigny, etc.

A further layer of complexity comes from the fragmented ownership of the vineyards. For example, the largest of the grands cru is Clos du Vougeot. It consist of 50ha of vines enclosed within an old cloister wall, hence the name. However, the ownership is split between over 80 different growers, some of whom only own a row or two of vines, but most of whom vinify and commercialize their wine separately.

The net result of this is potentially bewildering confusion for the neophyte and a massive playground

for the obsessive Burgundy nuts. So where do you start? Well here are a few thoughts.

As I mentioned above, there are great bargains to be had in basic Bourgogne Rouge. Ask your local wine merchant for a wine such as Denis Mortet's Cuvée De Noble Souches or a basic wine from a high quality négociant such as Drouhin, Faiveley or Jadot. [Négociants are large firms which typically buy grapes from smaller growers and consolidate, vinify and commercialize the wine at greater scale].



The Côte d'Or is divided in two. The more northerly Côte de Nuits stretched from Dijon south to Beaune. The Côte de Beaune lies south of the town of Beaune. As a vast generalization, I prefer the wines of the Côte de Nuits which tend to be more full-bodied e.g. Gevrey-Chambertin. However, in ripe years, there are also bargains to be had in the south of the Côte de Beaune, in less fashionable villages such as Savigny-lès-Beaune or Santenay.

For my first experiment in more expensive wines, I would start off with a premier cru from one of the top notch growers such as Chevillon, Dujac, Mortet, Roumier, or Rousseau.



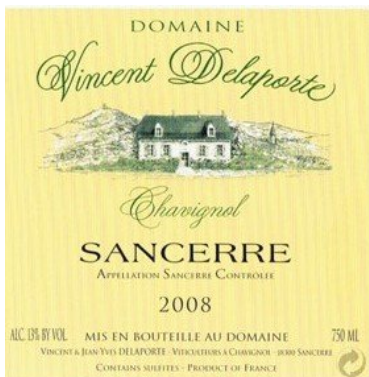
If you like premier cru, and you're feeling flush, arguably the best wines of Burgundy (and certainly the most expensive) are produced by Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, typically known as DRC. But a DRC from a good vintage that is ready for drinking will typically set you back a minimum of £400 for their cheaper wines and over £5,000 for a top cru.



South of the Côte d'Or is an area called the Côte Chalonnaise, which is also widely planted with Pinot Noir, including appellations such as Mercury, which produces reasonably priced but typically rather uninteresting wines.

Pinot Noir is also one of the principle grapes of Champagne, along with its cousin Pinot Meunier. [For a longer explanation of how red grapes are turned into one of the world's most famous white (sparkling) wines see my earlier [Stirling Wines: Champagne and Sparkling Wine](#) from 17<sup>th</sup> Dec, 08]

Pinot Noir is planted in the easterly, up-stream vineyards of the Loire, most notably in **Sancerre**. The red Pinots of Sancerre can be very good; but in my opinion, it takes a hot year to get full ripeness. Pinot is also used to make rosé Sancerre which is normally consistently very good. These are rosé wines the way I like them, bone dry, full-bodied, great food wines as well a invigorating aperitif.



Pinot is also grown in Alsace, where it is the only red grape. However, for me, Alsace is just too cold for the grape. Good wines are made in hot years but I have tasted too many insipid Alsatian Pinots to be an enthusiast.

## Rest of Europe

Pinot is also gaining traction as a high quality grape across the Rhine in **Germany**. There is long tradition of Pinot in Germany where it is called Spätburgunder (the late Burgundian). When I first tasted these wines twenty five years ago, they tended to be thin and uninspiring. However, the combination of global warming, lower yields and much better production techniques is yielding some truly delicious wine. Sadly, these are hard to find outside Germany; perhaps if more of them were labelled as Pinot Noir rather than Spätburgunder they would have much great impact on the export markets. The best wines tend to come from warmer South West Germany in the Pfalz and Baden rather than the cooler, lower reaches of the Rhine.



Pinot Noir is also to be found in Eastern Europe, but rarely produces quality wine. **Romania** has probably the largest plantings but it tends to be bargain basement wine. There are some good Pinots from **Switzerland**, where it's known as Blauburgunder in the German-speaking East (but rarely seen outside the country). In French Switzerland, it is blended with Gamay to make the ubiquitous Dôle.

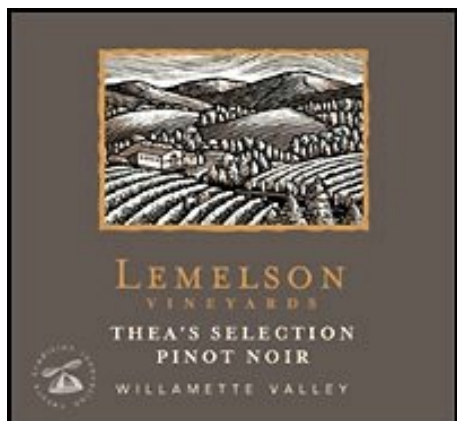
**Northern Italy** is the source of some of my favourite, somewhat obscure but very toothsome Pinots. The grape is grown in Lombardia, where it is primarily used for sparkling wine production. But it is in Alto Adige (known as Süd Tyrol to the German-speaking locals), where the influence of the nearby Alps creates the cool climate where the Pinot Nero flourishes. Some of my favourites come from Hofstätter, try his very approachable Mazon....



....or his top cuvée Barthenau.

## North America

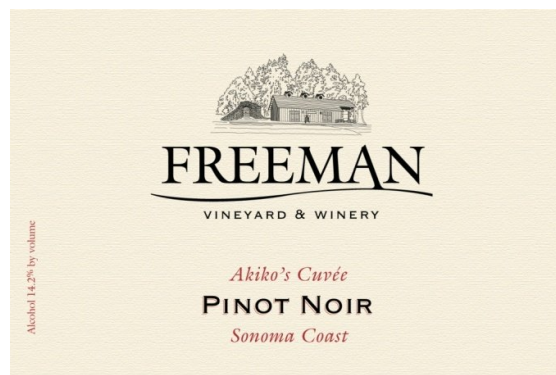
**Oregon's** coolish, wet climate also provides a great hunting ground for fine Pinots. Although the wines are not cheap, the region relative obscurity keeps them reasonable value. The most famous area for Pinot is the Willamette valley. Two of my favourite producers are Lemelson.....



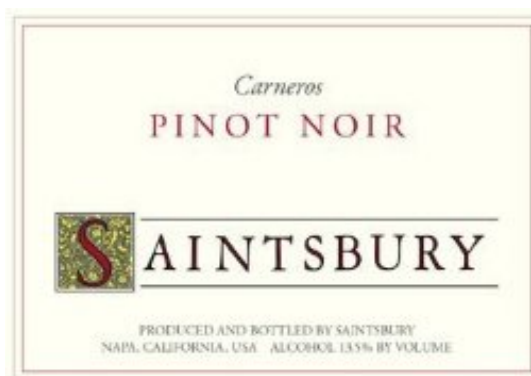
....and an outpost of the French Burgundy négociant Drouhin which was set up in 1988 (esp the Cuvée Laurène).



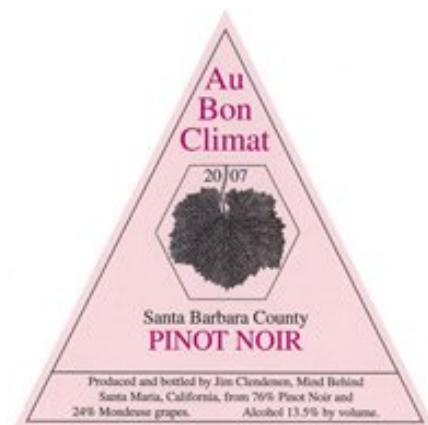
Pinot Noir is now fairly widely produced in the cooler climate areas of **California**. My favourites tend to come from north of San Francisco and just inland from the Pacific Coast, where the early morning fogs help protect the Pinot grapes from the intense sunshine. The Alexander and Russian river valleys are renowned for their Pinot, as well as the Sonoma Coast which is even closer to the Pacific. I was lucky enough to spend a weekend tasting there in the Fall of 2010 and I can testify that the wines are awesome. Personal favourites include Freeman and Radio Couteau.



Pinot is also grown in the Carneros region, at the bottom of the Napa Valley, on the north shore of San Francisco Bay, where it is used to make both red and sparkling wine. One of the top wines here is Saintsbury.



Pinot is also grown in the Central Coast districts between San Francisco and Los Angeles, including Monterey, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara. The latter area was the setting for the movie **Sideways**. Released in 2004, the distaste of the lead character for Merlot and his love of Pinot Noir had a significant impact on relative purchases of the two grapes in the USA. Following the film's release, Merlot sales dropped 2% while Pinot noir sales increased 16% in the Western United States. One of the most prominent wines of this region is Au Bon Climat, owned by the larger-than-life Jim Clendenen.



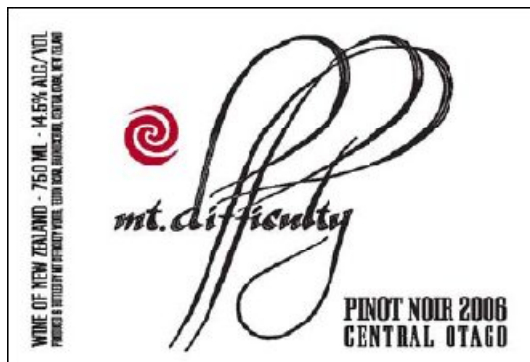
There are pockets of Pinot Noir in **Canada**, with increasingly successful wines from both Ontario and British Columbia.

### New Zealand & Australia

If Sauvignon Blanc is **New Zealand's** classic white grape, Pinot Noir has become the signature red grape. The biggest volume of plantings is in Martinborough at the bottom end of the North Island and Marlborough at the top of the South Island. In general, I find these wines a little too 'fruit-forward' and mono-dimensional for my taste – in the same way that I find many NZ sauvignon blancs a bit too pungent for my palette. However, there are a number of producers making more 'Burgundian' style wines, such as Ata Rangi.



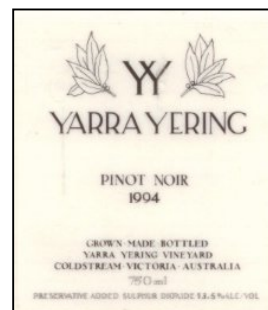
For my money, you need to head south to the cooler climate area of Central Otago for NZ's greatest concentration of fine Pinots, which succeed in balancing fruit, power and complexity. Notable producers include Mount Difficulty.....



.....and Felton Road.



Fine Pinot is harder to find in **Australia**, because in general the climate is too hot. However, in the cooler climate areas of Victoria, in and around the city of Melbourne, there are clusters of excellent Pinot. These areas include the Yarra Valley, try Yarra Yering

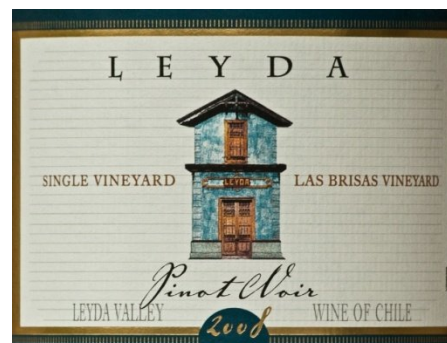


and the Mornington Peninsula. Tasmania also has the right climate to make good Pinot, in both still and sparkling versions.

### South America

Argentina is simply too hot in general for quality Pinot. In theory, the climate in high altitude areas such as Tupungato should be suitable; but the wine-makers appear not yet to have turned their attention to Pinot Negro, as it is known in Argentina.

Chile is increasingly important as a source of what are probably the best value-for-money Pinots available right now. Most of these are relatively young vines, planted in cooler areas such as Casablanca and San Antonio. However, despite their youth, the wines are not as mono-dimensional as equivalent priced NZ wines, definitely more 'Burgundian' in approach, although with a greater weight of fresh fruit. Personal favourites include wine from the Leyda valley, such as Viña Leyda's single vineyard Las Brisas.



Concha y Toro produces an exceptionally good value-for-money Pinot under the Winemaker's Lot sub-label

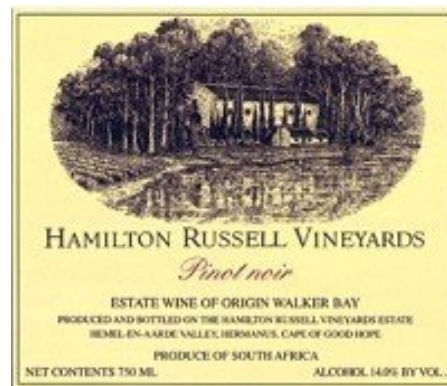


The best and certainly most expensive Chilean Pinot comes from another winery in the Concha y Toro family, Cono Sur's Ocio.



### South Africa

South Africa is also an up-and-coming producer of Pinot, albeit as yet in much smaller quantities than Chile. The doyen of South African Pinot producers is undoubtedly Anthony Hamilton-Russell who produces truly Burgundian style wines near Hermanus.



But he has an increasing number of rivals, such as Galpin Peak (esp the Tête de Cuvée) from his near-neighbour Bouchard Finlayson, Paul Cluver's Seven Flags from the cool-climate Elgin region and Meerlust's Pinot Noir from Stellenbosch.



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