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CALIFORNIA PINOTS TO BEAT BLOCKBUSTERS

By JOHN MARIANI November 11, 2013



Kathleen Inman, Inman Family Wines

I'm often on the edge of despairing over California's pinot noir producers' refusal to back down on making massive blockbuster wines with none of finesse they always promise on their labels and websites.

Then I come across California pinots that raise my hopes that there are good producers who have succeeded in making wines of refinement and complexity, without the high alcohol levels that mar so many of their competitors' in Napa and Sonoma.

Certainly the argument can -- and should -- be made that pinot noirs from any region outside of France need not mimic the benchmark style of Burgundy.

Soils and climates differ radically from the sun-deprived vineyards of the Cote d'Or to the overheated floor of Napa Valley and other pinot noir-producing areas in South America and Australia. (Frankly, I don't know what Italian wineries are aiming for in their mostly insipid pinot noirs.)

Some Californians, like Pat Rooney of Windsor Sonoma Winery north of Santa Rosa, try very hard to achieve a Burgundy style, focusing on the grapes themselves and,

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usually, not filtering the wines.

I don't ask for parity between Burgundy and the other regions. I am dismayed at how often California pinots don't even taste like pinot, a notoriously fickle grape to grow.

I admire the sunny fruit that brightens California pinot noirs. I don't like being hit in the mouth with a rush of grape preserves and enough oak to start a bonfire with. When pinot noirs go beyond 14.5 percent alcohol, sometimes a lot higher, I stop drinking after one glass.

FAITH RESTORED

And then a California pinot noir comes across my dinner table that both amazes me for its quality and restores my faith in what the varietal can be when made with care.

I have always enjoyed Twomey Cellars merlots: I think I'm even more impressed by its pinot noirs -- four of them, from different regions, including Anderson Valley, Russian River Valley, Healdsburg and the Sonoma Coast.

Twomey was established in 1999 by the Duncan Family, who also own the esteemed Silver Oak Cellars. Twomey is named after owner Ray Duncan's mother.

None of Twomey's pinot noirs top 13.6 percent in alcohol; and one, its 2011 Twomey Bien Nacido Vineyard Pinot Noir, only hits 12.9 percent.

Its 2009 Russian River Valley Pinot noir took first place in the American

Wine Society's National Tasting Project in 2012.

RIPE PRUNES

"Wine grapes and zucchini are a lot alike," Daniel Baron, 64, director of winemaking at Twomey, said in a telephone interview. "Years ago, I had a garden planted with zucchini and they grew to be three feet long. I didn't know what to do with them. They were impossible to cook with. So, too, wine grapes that get too ripe start to taste like prunes.

"The trick with pinot noir is to choose plots carefully then go out every day to make sure the grapes are not getting too ripe. I learned from the Institut Francais de la Vigne et du Vin to chew on the skins and squeeze the pulp on the roof of my mouth to taste how the grapes are developing. If you pick pinot noir too ripe, you won't be able to tell pinot noir from merlot or syrah."

Twomey's pinot noirs are definitely in the Burgundian style, layered and complex, and assured of aging beautifully, which cannot easily be said of blockbuster pinots.

I've also been very happy with several other California pinot noir makers, including Failla Hirsch Vineyard, Freeman, Williams Selyem, and Morlet Family, all producing fine examples of what the varietal should be -- a medium bodied, velvety wine with flower and bright fruit flavors.

INMAN PINOT

Those markers for pinot noir are very evident in the bottle of 2010 Inman Family Wines from its Olivet Grange vineyards in Russian River Valley. Owner Kathleen Inman likes to say, "I operate as a one woman show since I manage the vineyard, make the wines and answer the phones."

The 2010 was light on the palate at first, then revealed its young fruitiness, not the cloying jamminess of other California examples.

"I call myself a groper," said Inman. "I touch and taste in the vineyard and don't go by numbers. Pinot noir is the most feminine of wines, and I want that delicacy, perfume and elegance in my wine."

The 2010 reminded me of an Alox-Corton, one of my favorite middle-range Burgundies, though at \$68 the Inman raised a few eyebrows. With just 12.5 percent alcohol and 23 months on French oak, this wine proves that elegance and aromatics are better achieved with restraint than by pushing the grapes.

(John Mariani writes about wine for Muse, the arts and culture section of Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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