

# Bloomberg Businessweek

## Burgundy-Style Pinot Noirs Come of Age in Sonoma

An increasing number of small vineyards in Sonoma County's Russian River Valley are producing Pinot Noirs with the elegance of Burgundy

I'm not sure what stood out more: the exceptionally complex, refined flavor of the wine, or that it came from a California pinot noir with an alcohol level of 14.5 percent. The wine tasted more Burgundian than Californian.

Still more puzzling was that I'd never even heard of the winery — Windsor Sonoma — and riffling through recent books on California and pinot noir wines turned up nothing at all.

Windsor Sonoma's website revealed that the winery is owned by Pat Roney, a longtime marketer and executive at California wineries and one-time chief executive officer of the Dean & DeLuca gourmet grocery chain. He bought the property for the winery in 2007, and he buys grapes from other vineyards as well.

"We try hard to achieve a Burgundy style, using 100 percent pinot noir," said Roney, 54, in a phone interview. "We use a lot of skin contact and extended maceration."

Winemaker Anthony Austin, who's been making pinot for 32 years, focuses on the quality of the fruit, doesn't typically filter the wines, Roney said. Often called finicky, fickle, and capricious, pinot noir needs a cool climate and specific soil composition and is prone to mildew and rot. The greatest pinot noirs are made in Burgundy, where grand crus can sell for \$2,000 and more. Even there, lesser examples may need chaptalization, a process of adding sugar to boost the alcohol to 13 percent.

### Freeman Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 2007 (\$44)

As in Burgundy, Freeman's wines are blends from various vineyards. In the case of the 2007, four are from the Sebastopol Hills and Petaluma Gap, with 1,804 cases made. I find it the closest to the Burgundy style of all Sonoma pinots I've tasted, with a velvety richness very close to wines from the Cote d'Or. If you'd never tasted a pinot noir in your life, this is what it's supposed to taste like. It's a steal at \$44.



Napa Valley pinots have lacked consistency, with many so high in alcohol as to make them unrecognizable as pinots. But for a decade now, Sonoma County's Russian River Valley, with its cooling fog rolling in from the Pacific, has shown enviable promise for making consistently fine pinots. A few, like the well-balanced examples from William Selyem costing between \$49 and \$90, are sold only by subscription.

I tasted a few other modern Sonoma County pinots from recent vintages and various price spreads, and found a wide range of flavors, body weight, fruit, acids, and alcohol.

John Marioni, January 18, 2011

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