

The Return of Refined Oregon Pinot Noir

BY PAUL GREGUTT



Mt. Hood high above Oregon's vineyards/Getty

Back in the '90s, the race was on to make the biggest, ripest, oakiest wines possible, often chasing high scores from a particularly influential reviewer at the time. Every trick in the book was done to concentrate flavors and pile on the new oak. This worked better in California Cabernet country than in Oregon, where Pinot Noir was the hero grape.

Oregon's stalwart grape is celebrated for its elegance, grace and transparency, but too many Pinots resembled Syrah, in both color and potency, with alcohol levels at 15% or even higher. A winery such as The Eyrie Vineyards, stubbornly dedicated to light, elegant, ageworthy wines, was completely out of step with the times, and founder David Lett rightfully railed at the influx of Willamette Valley Pinots that tasted like vanilla and Coke.

Times have changed. Advances in vineyard practices and winemaking adjustments have tempered and tamed those massive Pinots. Complexity rather than raw power is the goal. Today's consumers value balanced, aromatic, ageworthy wines that put an emphasis on subtle details. The top-scoring Oregon Pinot from the past year—Ken Wright's 2016 Shea Vineyard cuvée—is just under 13% alcohol by volume (abv).

The Pinots of the past favored ripeness to extreme levels, which led vintners to drastically minimize crop levels. This approach proved to be problematic in hot vintages.

“A small crop in a hot year ripens too quickly,” says Winemaker Ken Wright, “and more often than not the resulting wine is a bludgeoning, alcoholic, brutal wine without a hint of finesse.”

It's more favorable to extend the growing season by leaving as much fruit as possible.

“It's about hang time and balance,” Wright says, “which leads to lower alcohol levels that are supportive rather than dominant.”

Can you still find Pinots that are 15% abv? Of course, and some are quite good. But if you value elegant wines, some producers to consider, along with Ken Wright, are Alexana, Domaine Divio, Evesham Wood, Lavinea, The Eyrie Vineyards and Winderlea.

Ken Wright 2016 Shea Vineyard Pinot Noir (Yamhill-Carlton); \$63, 97 points. The Shea hits a home run in 2016, with superb concentration and palate power. Sweet spices adorn a wine with ripe fruit flavors that cascade from blackberry and cherry into apple-raisin pie. There's even a touch of candied citrus. It's not a sweet wine, but the tremendous fruit ripeness conveys that impression. ***Editors' Choice.***

Lavinea 2017 Tualatin Estate Vineyard Pinot Noir (Willamette Valley); \$65, 94 points. The clarity and depth of fruit from these 45-year-old vines is beautifully showcased here. It's an elegant, focused and captivating mix of rose water, raspberry and cherry, with highlights of orange peel and bergamot tea. Everything is in perfect harmony and really captures the delicate power of the grape. ***Editors' Choice.***

Winderlea 2017 Shea Vineyard Pinot Noir (Yamhill-Carlton); \$60, 94 points. Many producers lust after Shea fruit, but few bring out the elegance behind the power as well as this lovely example from Winderlea does. It offers a mix of red, blue and purple berry fruits highlighted by accents of sandalwood, cola and cocoa powder. Only 13% of the barrels were new, which seems just right for this delightfully expressive wine. ***Editors' Choice.***

Alexana 2017 East Blocks Volcanic Soils Pinot Noir (Dundee Hills); \$65, 93 points. The winery does both East and West block selections, based on soil types. Here, black cherry fruit is adorned with a delightful array of Asian spices, curry and cinnamon. The firm, supple fruit is anchored in these sexy spices, with plenty of supporting acidity. Drink now–2025.

Purple Hands 2017 Holstein Vineyard Pinot Noir (Dundee Hills); \$50, 93 points. Firm, tart and downright juicy, this offers a unique fruit mix, with well-blended pomegranate, cherry, sweet pineapple and orange peel. There's a toasty note that seems a bit like almost-burnt pie crust, adding some crunch to the finish. **Editors' Choice.**

St. Innocent 2015 Momtazi Vineyard Pinot Noir (McMinnville); \$42, 93 points. The subtle flavors of the fruit from this biodynamically farmed vineyard sneak up on you, and reward your close attention. Light cherry fruit is wrapped in delicate details of herbal tea, dried leaf and clean earth. The overall balance is exceptional. A little extra breathing time helps to open it up, and it should age nicely for at least another half decade. **Editors' Choice.**

Holocene 2017 Memorialis Pinot Noir (Oregon); \$54, 92 points. This is a new, under-the-radar project from Force Majeure winemaker Todd Alexander. The grapes are sourced from the Monks' Gate vineyard in Yamhill-Carlton. Lush aromatics roll from spicy cranberry into rich strawberry, blueberry and red plum, along with details of baking spices and composted earth. Hints of herbs continue on through the finish. Fermented with native yeast, it was finished in 25% new French oak.

MonksGate 2017 Classic Pinot Noir (Yamhill-Carlton); \$38, 92 points. The evolving percentages of new oak barrels in the MonksGate Pinots favor the less-is-more concept, and rightly so, especially as this is noted as having been picked early. Strawberry and raspberry flavors abound, with plenty of jammy power, along with notes of tobacco and a hint of peach. One-quarter of the barrels were new.

Big Table Farm 2017 Sunnyside Vineyard Pinot Noir (Willamette Valley); \$62, 91 points. The 2017 Pinots from BTF are significantly lighter than the previous vintage, but well-made and balanced nonetheless. This blends its rhubarb and cherry fruit with hints of earth, stem and a light dusting of baking spices.

Domaine Divio 2017 Pinot Noir (Willamette Valley); \$32, 90 points. This was held back for release after the winery's single-vineyard selects, perhaps because the wine remains stubbornly mute. It's lightly high toned, with stiff tannins. It puts an herbal face forward, though with ample aeration a strong core of tart cherry emerges, along with citrus highlights.

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