
WINE

Top 100 Wines: Pinot Noir

By **Jon Bonné** | December 5, 2014 | Updated: December 5, 2014 5:47pm

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Lacy Atkins / The Chronicle

Ted Lemon of Littorai Wines strides through his Sebastopol vineyards. For decades, he has sought to define great Pinot Noir in a uniquely Californian context.

American Pinot Noir faces some tough questions today. Its popularity has soared in the past decade, but with that has come what happens to any star-struck grape: too many examples that are generic and fruity, with nothing to make them distinctive.

Luckily, there are winemakers who have not been seduced by the easy road, and whose examples reveal the mysteries of site and soil, as great Pinot Noir always has. Pinot's best nature is in its complexity and intrigue, and today there are examples up and down the coast that hold true to that ideal. They reveal the good fortune vintners have had finding exceptional places like Santa Rita's La Encantada, Mount Eden in the Santa Cruz Mountains or Oregon's Beaux Freres.

Which is not to say every wine here is about one specific place. Sometimes the most pleasure can be found by combining the virtues of multiple vineyards. These blends deserve credit, and they get that here.

Jon Bonne's Top Pick:

2013 Littorai Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$46, 13.8% alcohol): There is no better defender of American terroir than Ted Lemon. As the first American to run a Burgundian domaine, he could easily have spent the rest of his career mimicking the virtues of France on these shores.

Instead, the work he and his wife, Heidi, have accomplished at Littorai



over the past two decades has been nothing short of an earnest meditation on the greatness of place in a true California context, specifically on the far reaches of California's North Coast.

Why, then, am I focused on his Sonoma Coast blend, which combines lots from several of his exceptional sites into a more easygoing wine? Because sometimes the virtue of the blend is undeniable. And in 2013, from the moment I tasted it, this wine was on fire, with supremely forward, fresh strawberry fruit, kirsch and a seamless structure — tannins so fine and full you barely recognize they're there.

This is one of California's best talents in a great vintage, of course. But it's also a reminder that a sense of place, where Pinot Noir is concerned, remains a complicated, gray-area conversation. Sometimes the virtue is in a broader view. It's a true master of terroir who can embrace that.

2012 Baxter Valenti Vineyard

Mendocino Ridge Pinot Noir (\$48,

13.2%): This planting at 1,200 feet near Greenwood Ridge lies just west of Anderson Valley and is a magnet for great winemaking — including here by the Baxter family. An iodine edge that always seems to mark bottles from Valenti jumps out, giving vigor to cherry skin and blackcurrant, and an herbal thyme-like side.



The Best of the West Coast in 2014



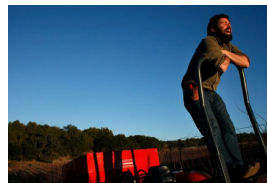
Cabernet and blends



Pinot Noir

Rhone-style reds

Zinfandel and other reds



Chardonnay



Other whites



Sparkling wine, rosé and other wine



2012 Beaux Freres The Beaux Freres Vineyard Ribbon Ridge Pinot Noir (\$90, 14.1%): The magic of this wine, from Mike Etzel and winemaker Grant Coulter, is how it finds such finesse and subtlety in a year that wanted to speak in a much louder voice. It's slightly elusive in its flavors, in a quintessentially Pinot way, with seafoam, juniper and rich, ripe berry flavors, and a profound mineral backbone.

2012 Big Basin Lester Family Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains (\$44, 13.5%): A big shift in styles at Bradley Brown's winery outside Saratoga, here seen in one of Santa Cruz's little-known vineyard gems, the Lester site near Corralitos. It's full of spice: cypress, peppercorn, violets, with bright cherry and a lovely, deep bass tone akin to salted licorice.

WINE



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2012 Calera Central Coast Pinot Noir (\$28, 14.6%): Josh Jensen's single-vineyard Pinot Noirs are so exceptional that it's easy to dismiss his larger-production wines — except in a vintage like 2012, when this mix of 10 vineyards from San Benito to Santa Barbara was so outperformingly complex. Deep, musky and showing a ripe barrage of fruit, yet with all of Calera's classic power and strut.

2012 Chehalem Ridgecrest Vineyards Ribbon Ridge Pinot Noir (\$50, 13.6%): One of the best Chehalem wines in years, from its original estate parcel dating to 1981, in a vintage that could have yielded a pleasing, simpler wine. But this is downright heady in its representation: wet soil, toasted anise and a soy-like salty aspect to balance bright cherry fruit.

2012 Copain Wendling Anderson Valley Pinot Noir (\$65, 13.6%): It's been a long wait to see this vineyard in Anderson Valley's remote northern end, shared by Copain's Wells Guthrie and Littorai's Ted Lemon, step into the spotlight. Guthrie's debut with this bottling equals his stupendous Kiser, grown across the road: full of damp earth and forest, and a heady mix of dark fruit and brilliant pomegranate. Give it time to mellow out a

powerful mineral edge.

2012 Domaine de la Cote Bloom's Field Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$70, 12.5%): A swing for the fences that succeeds, in this estate project from Rajat Parr and Sashi Moorman. Just over 7 acres at the western edge of Santa Rita, made with all whole clusters and no new oak, it's a formula for intensity. Astonishing chamomile, coriander and sage aromatics paired with nuanced berry fruit and an intense white-stone minerality. Pure, and built for a long cellar stay.

2012 Domaine Drouhin Dundee Hills Pinot Noir (\$45, 14.1%): A great example of Oregon know-how (in this case from Veronique Boss-Drouhin) finessing a vintage that could have been a bit far to the ripe side. This has heft and a good dose of oak, but it's matched by deep, ripe, earthy fruit: blackberry, wet forest, a savory, salty high tone.

2012 Drew Fog-Eater Anderson Valley Pinot Noir (\$45, 13.5%): When I say this is the best Fog-Eater in several vintages, that's deep praise, because this wine never fails to be one of California's best. Here it's from four vineyards, including sites like Morning Dew and Balo, and the tension that Jason Drew can finesse is on full display, with Bing cherry and bayberry flavors, plus a classic foresty side — ferns, moss — that telegraphs those Mendocino origins.

2013 Easkoot Chileno Valley Vineyard Marin County Pinot Noir (\$39, 12.5%): Emily and Stephan Schindler (they also have the import firm Winemonger) work with cellar talent Matt Duffy on this label, and this site on the Marin side of the Petaluma Gap yielded them a wine full of robust, lacquered cherry and zingy pomegranate, plus accents of sesame paste and toasted spices.

2012 The Eyrie Vineyards Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$35, 13.5%): A fine continuation of the Eyrie name and style, by Jason Lett, son of Oregon wine pioneer David Lett. Age this one; it's slightly raw, cool and almost marine, with driftwood, nori, bayberry and fresh mint.

2011 Iota Pelos Sandberg Vineyard Eola-Amity Hills Pinot Noir (\$38, 12.9%): The Sandbergs came west from Minnesota and now work to meticulously farm Iota's 11½

acres. Their own effort from six vineyard blocks is intensely spicy and aromatic: chamomile, white pepper, peach pit. Atop that sits a rich mix of fruit, for an alluring, supple-textured result that's heady but not heavy.

2012 Knez Anderson Valley Pinot Noir (\$32, 13.5%): Not to overlook the single-parcel bottles from Peter Knez's two vineyards, Demuth and Cerise. But winemaker Anthony Filiberti has crafted an extraordinary blend of the two. Such nuance is hard to find for this money: bright raspberry, mandarin peel and toasted cardamom, with ripe fruit and the signature mineral intensity that marks the valley's best hillside plantings.

2012 Kutch Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$39, 13.2%): Jamie Kutch's single-vineyard wines have become deeply structural efforts with a lot of whole grape clusters. But this blend has blossomed in recent months, with bayberry, black cherry and blood orange, along with subtly savory spices — caraway and black mustard. It's less austere than his single vineyard wines, ready to embrace now.

2012 Lutum La Rinconada Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$50, 13.83%): A compelling result for this new project from winemaker Gavin Chanin and vineyard investor Bill Price. It's a stylish wine from a well-known Santa Rita site: a bit of classy oak, with a copper and citron tang, and plummy fruit that's given heft by big, chewy tannins. A flashy, but tactful, dresser.

2011 Montebruno Crawford Beck Vineyard Eola-Amity Hills Pinot Noir (\$50, 13%): This tiny label run by New Jersey native Joe Pedicini is one of Oregon's promising new names, with a focus on minimalist cellar technique. The vineyard combines both volcanic and marine soils — the Willamette two-step — for a result evocative of the great Cristom wines in years past. Aromatic to the point of floral, like lilies, with pomegranate, wild strawberry, cracked pepper and matsutake. Bright, tight-knit and a great success for tricky 2011.

2012 Mount Eden Vineyards Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir (\$60, 13.5%): Jeffrey Patterson's Pinot Noir can sometimes sit in the shadow of his epic Chardonnays, but not in this vintage. Mount Eden is, of course, Pinot at one of its American sources, with some of the oldest extant plantings in this country. The intensity here is amazing: packed with pure

red fruit and a heady marine aspect (think sea beans) that can be found in wines from this particular corner of the mountains.

2012 The Ojai Vineyard Fe Ciega Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$60, 13.5%): Adam Tolmach's interpretation from Santa Barbara talent Rick Longoria's exceptional site is a sign of what you might call the Santa Barbara continuum: two veteran talents making an utterly contemporary wine. Juicy and deep in its flavors — a Santa Rita riff with muscle, and a plushness of cherry and plum fruit to balance its intense mineral side.

2012 Skewis Lingenfelder Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$50, 13.8%): A slight stylistic departure of sorts for the Skewises, but one that will seem familiar to those who recall the older, classic Russian River approach. The site is unique: Martini-clone plantings near Fulton on denser Huichica loam. The result is bright red fruit, with a transparency to the dried-moss and coriander flavors, and a tautness to the palate.

2012 Transcendence La Encantada Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$45, 13.7%): This tiny Lompoc label from Kenneth and Sara Gummere has been quietly turning out exceptional wines for years. No difference here, from one of Santa Rita's premier sites. The area's intensity and bright bell-clear plum fruit is on display, with a mineral edge coming strong on the finish, the scent of laudanum and an elegant cypress-like foresty side.

2012 Waits-Mast Deer Meadows Vineyard Anderson Valley Pinot Noir (\$55, 14%): This vineyard above Boonville has turned out some epic wines, and this collectible effort from Jennifer Waits and Brian Mast is no exception. The lineage of Rich Savoy's site speaks from the glass: rich with black cherry and boysenberry; heady with allspice, bark and damp leaves; intensified by a profound, dark minerality.

2012 Willakenzie Estate Emery Yamhill-Carlton Pinot Noir (\$48, 14.2%): Scientist Bernard Lacroute's estate is making some of its best wines yet under winemaker Thibaud Mandet. Emery, from the highest portion of its plantings, yielded a powerful, distinctive wine, with a perfect offset of dark, burnt-earth aspects and bright spice: tamarind, dried curry leaf, pine.



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