

## 2012 California Pinot Noir: A Year of Plenty

In 2012, when it came to making great Pinot Noir, Mother Nature didn't stand in the way. With kind weather throughout the growing season, grapes were able to hang until winemakers were ready to pick. The challenge was man's ability, or lack thereof, to rein in the abundance.

After a challenging 2011 vintage, when yields were down and cold, wet conditions provoked unwelcome mold, winemakers and growers could exhale in 2012, a collective sigh of relief with quantity and quality both on the horizon.



That doesn't mean that all the Pinots produced are works of art. Thinning in the vineyard and the development of concentration in the cellar were both required in many cases to coax great wines.

“For me, vintages are defined by the challenges they pose,” says Carroll Kemp, winemaker for Red Car Wines, who sources most of his Pinot from Sonoma Coast vineyards. “There were no obvious challenges, so 2012 forced you to have to look deeper.”

The result? Wines of flab and flash, pleasurable and easy to love. Within that lies a smaller selection of more carefully made wines of substance.

“It will make it an early-drinking vintage, pleasant but not ultimately as long lasting,” Kemp says. “It's a year to buy producers you know and trust. Wines need conflict to be great.”

—Virginie Boone, Jim Gordon and Matt Kettmann

## Central Coast: The Drink Now Generation

For such a warm, moderate and curveball-free growing season along California's Central Coast, the 2012 Pinot Noir harvest proved quite variable around the region.

Some vineyards in Monterey County, for instance, delivered three times the normal fruit. Other appellations, like the Edna Valley, weighed in a bit lighter than the ideal weather predicted.

That's led to a broad range of flavors in the vintage, from deep blackberry fruit, cardamom and tight graphite in dark wines to blistered tomato, olive elements and fragrant crushed clove in lighter ones.

But quality is strong: Of the nearly 180 Pinot Noirs from 2012 that I've tasted since March, only 60 have scored less than 90 points, and most of those were in the 88–89 range, meaning they are still very good wines.

There's a growing consensus among the region's winemakers that the 2012s are lower in acidity compared to the cool years of 2010 and 2011. Consequently, those ripe fruit and strong spice elements that are showing exquisitely now may not last far into the future.

Not all agree with that conclusion—especially those from the reliably high-acid-promoting Sta. Rita Hills. However, many advise holding onto those 2010s and 2011s while popping the tops off 2012s today, because they're delicious right now.

“These are younger, yummy, in-your-face wines, which is what a lot of Americans like,” says Stephen Ross Dooley, a San Luis Obispo-based winemaking veteran who makes wines from around the region under his Stephen Ross label. “Maybe they're not the best agers, but that doesn't seem to be a big factor when most people are buying the wine and drinking it quickly.”

A bit down the coast in the Santa Maria Valley, Bien Nacido Vineyards's Vineyard Manager Chris Hammell says that the vintage really comes down to farming strategies.

"If there is one knock on the vintage, it's that some winemakers, coming off a couple short years, may have gotten greedy, so you could have high crop loads," says Hammell. "That doesn't characterize the whole vintage, but I'm seeing variability. There are some really nice wines from people who did it right, thinned early and didn't overwater."

Up north, Bill Brosseau makes wines from the Santa Lucia Highlands and elsewhere for Testarossa Winery, and he also tends to his family's vineyard near Chalone on the other side of Monterey County.

"It was just a year when you could twiddle your thumbs, like a winemaker's paradise," says Brosseau, who was caught off guard by the varying yields.

On those vineyards where the berries were quite big and plentiful, he concentrated intensity by bleeding off 10–15% of the juice. He was still worried while bottling the wines due to lack of acid and tannin.

"But it's really been coming around the last year in the bottle," says Brosseau. "I'm really enjoying how the wines are evolving."

Most joyful about 2012 is Greg Brewer, who's been making Pinot Noir in Sta. Rita Hills for 23 years, both for his own Brewer-Clifton label and for Melville Winery. He sees it as one of two standout vintages, the other being 2007.

"Something about those years were just a gift," he says. "The fruit was ripe, but it came in at a very metered, predictable pace. The acids, I felt, were appropriate. The yields were economically viable, but not overly abundant."

Brewer equates the 2012s to a great day in life.

"It's not one of those days when you're going to the prom, with the white limo and corsage, not one of those build-up days," he says. "It's one of those days when you get up feeling good, the laundry is done, the coffee tastes good, there's gas in the car and you make all the green lights—just a good, solid day."

So what about the actual wines?

"They're very hygienic, correct and clean," he says. "They're generous, but not over-exuberant. I think they're gonna age for a super long time."

—Matt Kettmann

### **Top Central Coast Pinots**

94 Foxen 2012 Block 43 Bien Nacido Vineyard (Santa Maria Valley). Violet, root bark, sage and cherry blend for perhaps the best Foxen Pinot Noir of the vintage. There's bright acidity, but also plush juice from really ripe raspberry and black cherry, with amazing black pepper spice, as well.

abv: 14.4% Price: \$58