



Wine: Côte d'Oregon

Last Updated: 12:01am GMT 22/02/2008

Côte d'Oregon is top gun in a Noir shoot-out, writes Jonathan Ray

Burgundy is indisputably the daddy when it comes to Pinot Noir. This most capricious of grapes flourishes in Champagne too, of course, as well as producing wines of varying quality in places such as Alsace, the Loire Valley, Germany, Italy, California, Chile and South Africa. Nowhere, though, does Pinot Noir reach the sublime heights that it does in the Côte d'Or.

Or so they say. These days, three regions in particular are mentioned with increasing frequency as possible pretenders for Burgundy's crown, namely Central Otago in New Zealand, Oregon in the US and Victoria in Australia.

Keen to see how these rival Pinots currently compare, I arrange a small tasting - a sort of tri-nations taste-off - at **In Vino Veritas**, the popular new haunt for wine lovers in Brighton. Each of the three countries enters six wines and, to ensure our impartiality, the dozen or so of us present will taste them blind. Steve Pineau, owner of In Vino, is agog.



Grow west, young man: the vineyards of Oregon in the US produce Pinot Noir wines of exceptional elegance

"This will be fun," he says. "Although I'm not a Burgundian, I am a Frenchman and come from a different tradition. Will these wines challenge Burgundy? Frankly I doubt it, not least because of our trump card - the great age of our vines. But let's see!"

We buckle down to our task and slurp our way through the 18 wines. The murmured oohs and aahs around me sound promising and there are indeed some lovely wines on show.

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For me, an up-front vibrancy of fruit seems to be the common thread and, generally speaking, the wines are instantly appealing and rewarding with silky smooth tannins, luscious fruit, herbs, spice and game on the palate.

Equivalent red Burgundy might be more subtle and complex, but there is much to enjoy here.

It takes a while to tot up the scores since everyone has a completely different system of marking, but we do our best. Only a very few points separate the contenders but, for the record, the overall winner is judged to be 2004 Cristom

Mount Jefferson Pinot Noir from Oregon, priced at £20-£25 a bottle.

We all agree that it is wonderfully structured with scrumptious dark berry fruit and a long silky finish. Second is 2005 Domaine Drouhin Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (£25), also from Oregon, and third is 2005 Mount Difficulty Long Gully Pinot Noir (£35) from Central Otago, the region that we judge to be the most consistent in terms of quality.

After good-natured joshing between each region's representatives, Howard Rossbach, president of Firesteed Wines in Oregon, is delighted with his state's one-two: "Pinot Noir is all about fruit character. Other varieties can be manipulated during production, but with Pinot you have to grow perfect fruit and it's clear that we all do. For me, Oregon was the most elegant, Central Otago the most up-front and Victoria the most vibrant."

Warren Adamson from New Zealand Winegrowers thinks his Kiwi wines show real promise. It's certainly true that Pinot Noir is taken seriously in New Zealand these days.

It's the second most planted variety after Sauvignon Blanc, with plantings rising from 1,065 acres (431 hectares) in 1996 to 10,040 acres (4,063 hectares) in 2006, and exports up from 66,000 gallons (300,000 litres) in 2000 to 903,000 gallons (4.1m litres) in 2006.

"We're not trying to make Burgundy," says Adamson. "We're simply trying to make the best expression of this wonderful grape that we can. Treat it well and you will be rewarded. Of course, the reality is that we need greater vine age, but we're getting there for sure."

Steve Webber, winemaker at De Bortoli in Australia agrees. "Vine age is key," he says. "Pinot Noir has a great future in Victoria and, no doubt, in Oregon and Central Otago too."

"We are well on the way to producing definitive examples in the Yarra Valley. The future lies in single vineyard sites that reflect soil and season and wines that can be shown to age well."

The wines we have tried aren't cheap though (they start at £15 a bottle and go up to about £35), and, for wine merchant Henry Butler of The Butlers Wine Cellar, this is their downside.

"Why pay this when you can get fine red Burgundy for the same price?" he asks. "Something unexplainable happens in Burgundy that adds detail to the wine, lifting it above all others. Of course, there's rubbish too, but Pinot needs something more than just red fruit flavours. Although these wines are clearly well made, I don't reckon they have enough character."

Howard Rossbach is having none of this. "Give us a chance!" he exclaims. "Burgundian Pinot has a 2,000 year head-start on us johnny-come-latelys. And although Burgundy will always be the icon, one day we'll look back at these wines as benchmarks in their own right."

NEW ZEALAND WINE TASTING IN LONDON

Readers who haven't already registered their interest are invited to apply for

tickets to join me at a very special New Zealand tasting on April 1, from 6.30pm-8.30pm. The event, which is exclusive to Telegraph readers, will be held at the Penthouse at New Zealand House, Haymarket, London SW1.

Held jointly by New Zealand Winegrowers and Air New Zealand, in association with Telegraph Wine, the tasting will showcase more than 140 newly released wines arranged by variety, region, vintage and price. Jim Harré, one of Air New Zealand's three wine buyers, will be flying over specially to talk readers through the wines.

To order tickets, priced at just £20 each, call Telegraph Wine on 0845 863 0996 quoting TCW/09232NVZ.

PINOT NOIR READER OFFER

Telegraph Wine is delighted to offer readers a fabulous mixed quartet of Pinot Noirs from around the world, hand-picked by Jonathan Ray. With a fine 1er Cru red Burgundy and outstanding examples from Central Otago, Oregon and Victoria, you can judge for yourself just how the different regions compare.

The boxed quartet, which is exclusive to Telegraph readers, includes one bottle each of the following (further details of which can be found at www.telegraphwine.co.uk/TW344):

2005 Domaine Joblot Givry 1er Cru Clos de la Servoisine, Burgundy

2005 Firesteed Pinot Noir, Oregon

2006 Felton Road Block 3/Block 5 Pinot Noir, Central Otago

2005 de Bortoli Yarra Valley Reserve Pinot Noir, Victoria

To order the box of four wines for just £75 (plus £5.99 p&p) call Telegraph Wine on 0845 863 0996 and quote TW344.

Note that there are only 45 boxes available.

- For stockists of 2004 Cristom Mount Jefferson Pinot Noir, contact Playford Ros (01845 526777) or see www.everywine.co.uk; for 2005 Domaine Drouhin Willamette Valley Pinot Noir, contact Berry Bros & Rudd (0870 900 4300) or see www.everywine.co.uk.
- For 2005 Mount Difficulty Long Gully Pinot Noir, try Ellis of Richmond (020 8744 5550) or www.nzhouseofwine.co.uk.
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