

NORTH AMERICAN PINOT NOIR NATURE AND NURTURE

Mark Savage MW introduces a tasting shared with Stephen Brook and Alex Hunt MW in the hope of understanding the development and natural style of this most fickle and magical variety in several top regions

Of the 53 wines submitted for this interesting if rather exhausting tasting, 30 came from Oregon, 16 from California, six from Canada, and one lone ranger from darkest Idaho. These were not wines that could be tasted at speed and given an instant score. Most needed to be tasted and retasted, especially those wines that required time in the glass to shake off any reductivity and reveal their true colors.

It is hardly surprising if judges draw different conclusions about the same wine. This may be because of individual stylistic preferences, or it may be due to a failure to spot something of interest when one is up against pressure from the clock. An intrinsically good wine can easily be dismissed as a result of not allowing sufficient time to listen to it or wait for it to start singing. The risk of palate fatigue is also a real one, and doing justice to the final flight requires particular care and concentration. Had I not resisted the temptation to accelerate toward the end, I have no doubt that I would have failed to spot the quality of the 2010 Eyrie Vineyard wine, reductively weird when first raised for nasal inspection and demanding another 15 minutes before the problem was resolved, as a result of which I missed my train home. The reward of finally unearthing the real wine behind the mask more than made up for any such minor inconvenience, however. I know that I was not the only taster to feel somewhat exhausted, even possibly a shade intoxicated, by the end of the session. If we dare not ask for sympathy from readers, we may at least beg for some understanding.

Delicacy, power, and longevity?

In general, I think the notes of the tasters resonated much more enthusiasm than disappointment. There was more to like than dislike, though any tasting of Pinot Noir wines is almost sure to raise a few shocked nostrils along the way, for the path to good Pinot is often a bumpy ride, with more than a few potholes. Furthermore, Pinot Noir wine is likely to polarize opinions rather more than, say, Cabernet. Pinotphiles tend to prefer certain stylistic traits. How much priority is allowed to delicacy over power is a very individual decision. Some judges are immediately influenced by depth of color in a red wine and find it hard to give a high score to a pale wine. Such tasters need to taste Pinot Noir in a black glass, or simply learn to overcome their color prejudice and remember that Pinot Noir is not Zinfandel.

Another topic for consideration concerns potential for longevity. Most wines made from Pinot today are probably at their most enjoyable while still showing the fresh bloom of youth, with the primary-fruit perfume unclouded by the effects of age. But the proof of a great "terroir" lies surely in its potential to deliver wines of exceptional depth and individuality when fully mature after extended age in bottle. Few vineyards outside the Côte d'Or have yet developed the track record to confer such status, but a track record is by definition something that takes time to establish, and in the realm of viticulture it surely takes more than a generation. After all, as recently as about 30 years ago, the generally accepted view was that Burgundy was the only vineyard region

on the planet that could produce great wine from Pinot Noir. It was David Lett's 1975 South Block Reserve from his Eyrie Vineyard in Oregon that did much to alter that perception (*see WFW II, pp.36-37*) and give encouragement not only to other New World growers, but also to already expert Burgundians such as Robert Drouhin. It was not long before New Zealand started to realize the potential for Pinot down under, while Pinot-loving Californians were searching for cool enough locations in which to plant this climate-sensitive grape.

It was certainly not the aim of this tasting to stage some kind of Pinot Noir Olympiad to see if California or Oregon came away with the most medals. Had that been the plan, then a stronger team from California could certainly have been assembled, for there were some notable absentees. The objective on this occasion was rather to get a feel for the development and the natural style that is currently evident from a variety of locations in North America. The California contingent performed creditably, though there may have been a lingering sense that it is more of a struggle for Pinot to achieve natural balance and finesse in that location than it is in a latitude with greater proximity to that of Burgundy, and I cannot quite put out of mind Dr Johnson's famous remark concerning women preachers and dogs walking on their hind legs ("It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all"). Funnily enough, the professors from UC Davis in the 1970s would probably have applied such a remark to Oregonians rather than Californians.

AVERAGE AND RANGE OF SCORES

	Average	Range
SB	15.5	12-18
AH	14.5	5-18
MS	14.5	8-17.5

Confidence and direction

There was a confident turnout from Oregon, and I am beginning to see a more convincing sense of self-belief in that industry. On my last visit to the state in July 2013, I felt, perhaps for the first time in my 35 years acquaintance, that it had begun to come of age. There now seems to be a more confident and proper sense of direction than was the case a decade ago, when there was a real danger that its natural expression of Pinot might be blown off course by the prevailing fashion for wines of dark color, heavy extraction, and excessive new oak. This student of Oregon wines, for one, is hugely relieved that the majority of Oregon wine growers seem to have resisted the siren but ephemeral voices of fashion in favor of a more lasting and worthwhile destiny. There is still a long way to go, and progress in this kind of business is bound to be steady rather than rapid, but there was much to like about the quality of the wines here.

The six wines from Canada were something of a revelation. There were no horrors, and one of the wines was outstandingly good. (Which one depends upon which taster you ask!) As for the lone ranger from Idaho, it more than merited inclusion, albeit as an intriguing curiosity, to use Stephen Brook's words. But then, so much about wine is intriguing and curious. As a wine from a notoriously tricky grape variety and an unconsidered wine region, this was a pleasant surprise rather than a nasty and unnecessary shock. I can certainly think of a few mean and expensive wines of that same vintage from Vosne-Romanée that provided less fun.

MARK SAVAGE'S TOP WINES

Beaux Frères The Beaux Frères Vineyard Ribbon Ridge AVA Pinot Noir Oregon 2011	17.5
The Eyrie Vineyards Pinot Noir Oregon 2010	17.5
The Eyrie Vineyards Pinot Noir Reserve Dundee Hills Oregon 2007	17.5
Bergström Wines Bergström Vineyards Oregon Pinot Noir Dundee Hills AVA Oregon 2011	17
Chehalem Ridgecrest Vineyards Ribbon Ridge Reserve Pinot Noir Oregon 2010	16.5
Norman Hardie County Pinot Noir Prince Edward County VQA Ontario 2011	16.5
Sokol Blosser Estate Cuvée Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Oregon 2010	16.5
Bakerlane Sonoma Coast Ramondo Vineyard Pinot Noir Santa Rosa California 2008	16
J Christopher Dundee Hills Pinot Noir Sandra Adele Oregon 2011	16
The Eyrie Vineyards Willamette Valley Dry Table Wine Dundee Pinot Noir Oregon 1979	16
Mount Eden Vineyards Pinot Noir Estate Bottled Santa Cruz Mountains California Walter Hansel Russian River Valley Pinot Noir The South Slope Vineyard California 2010	16
Rhys Horseshoe Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir California 2011	16
Domaine Serene Evenstad Reserve Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2010	16
Domaine Serene Yamhill Cuvée Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2010	16

Effortlessness and freshness

An analysis of our tasting notes reveals the use of terms such as "spicy," "jammy," "black fruits," and "hot" occurring quite frequently in wines coming from California, while the word "delicacy" is conspicuous by its absence; whereas those from Oregon evoke a vocabulary that includes "red fruits," "cherry," "raspberry," and a sense above all of greater refreshment. In fact, the word "fresh" occurs 22 times in the notes on the Oregon wines but just three times for the Californians. Even allowing for the fact that there were twice as many Oregon wines on show, this still means that the word "fresh" was almost four times more frequently applied to them. It is often, perhaps usually, true that the energy of the best wines appears almost effortless, whereas others give the impression that a lot of hard work has been involved. Effortlessness must suggest that success comes naturally rather than being forced. That conclusion may be the explanation for why the Oregon wine industry is beginning to believe in itself with increasing sincerity and conviction.

The test of time

In the veteran class—wines with the best part of two decades or more under their belt—there were three contenders. The wild card from Idaho was still in good shape, mature but in good health. The old man from Sonoma in the shape of Hanzell was losing the plot, at least in the case of this particular bottle, and one must always accept that bottle variation becomes ever more significant with bottle age, but the relics were not

without interest and suggested a wine that had possessed merit and individuality in its day, as I know to have been the case from tasting it in the past. From a warm site, this was never a wine that was intended to draw its inspiration from Burgundy, for it recognized that the climate demanded a very different expression from the grape, and in its own unique style Hanzell managed to achieve a great reputation for the longevity of its wines ever since the 1950s. The 1970 Pinot Noir still tasted magnificent in 2011 at over 40 years old, and indeed there are those who feel that Hanzell Pinots do not really get into top gear until they are 35!

The "Father of the House" in this tasting, however, was the Oregonian, the venerable 1979 Reserve from The Eyrie Vineyard in the Red Hills of Dundee, now halfway into its fourth decade and still tasting remarkably cool and refreshing—always a nice attribute to find in an old wine. Pinot Noir often has a tendency to dry out when there is not enough flesh on the bones or sufficient natural acidity to provide vitality and nerve, but that was never the problem for this wine, all the more remarkable coming from what were then very young vines and a "terroir" with no established track record. I recall giving it a high score when I last tasted it in Oregon five years ago, again being struck by its cool, refreshing style. With a consistent set of good scores from the three of us, it managed to finish in our top ten, Alex Hunt considering it "a triumph of its vintage and pedigree." It certainly helped one reach the conclusion that Oregon was not, after all, such a crazy place to plant Pinot.

J Christopher Dundee Hills Pinot Noir Sandra Adele Oregon (unfiltered) 2011 (13.5% ABV) | 17

SB | Dumb nose. Medium-bodied yet precise, with an effortless concentration. This has poise and lift and an engaging red-fruits succulence. The acidity, while not excessive, gives bite as well as freshness. Natty rather than exuberant. Still youthful but has very good potential. | 17.5

AH | Here there's some really funky, stemmy Pinot aroma. Very inviting. The palate is supple, fluid, yet with plenty of intensity. There's a fine balance of fruity and savory characters; the whole is unmistakably Pinot Noir, with a grace and precision that supports the delicate balance of flavor. | 17

MS | There is a nice luscious character to the fruit here, vinosity without intrusive alcohol, balance and refreshment. There is, I believe, a Dundee Hills style to the fruit, a pleasing softness yet enough structure in the acidity to allow for further bottle age and development. So, all in all, there is present pleasure and future promise. It has more elegance than most of the other wines in this tasting. | 16

Beaux Frères The Beaux Frères Vineyard Ribbon Ridge AVA Pinot Noir Oregon 2011 (12.9% ABV) | 16.5

SB | Fairly deep red. There's a lot of oak on the nose, but also abundant red fruits. Medium-bodied, quite succulent, only moderately concentrated on the palate, but it does have freshness and balance. Already attractive now, but this surely has more to give. A long and lively finish. | 16.5

AH | There's an encouraging mid-red color here, and a perky nose of game, red fruit, and rocks. I like the nose so much—but I wish the palate weren't quite so austere. It feels really pinched and sour; the acid is not disjointed, but it certainly constricts the texture and dampens the enjoyment of the wine overall. What a shame! | 15.5

MS | Good depth, balance, and intensity on show here. This is already going to offer pleasure if consumed now, but I sense that it has excellent potential for development. There is some individual personality evident already and more will probably develop. The winemaking is assured and has been built on well-managed vineyards and properly mature fruit. It shows some complexity, and the final effect is very complete. Professional winemaking of a high order here, and a very fine expression of Oregon Pinot. | 17.5

Chehalem Ridgecrest Vineyards Ribbon Ridge Reserve Pinot Noir Oregon 2010 (SC) (13.1% ABV) | 16.5

SB | Closed nose. Rich cherry fruit with firm but ripe tannins, and this has more density than many other 2010s, though not at the expense of freshness. The balance is exemplary and the finish long and stylish. | 17

AH | This nose is fairly closed, though with some promising aromas of berry fruit and mineral. On the palate, there is satisfying balance and grip, with very fine tannins offset by commendable richness of flavor. I feel confident this could still improve for a further three years. | 16.5

MS | Relatively backward, this shows future promise, I feel, with some particular earthy hedgerow scents that will give personality as they evolve. I like what I see already but I think that there is a lot more to come. Not the easiest one to assess perhaps at this stage but I would fancy it to get a higher score with a bit more time in bottle. It is already rather good anyhow. | 16.5

The Eyrie Vineyards Pinot Noir Reserve Dundee Hills Oregon 2007 (13.5% ABV) | 16.5

SB | Fairly deep red, slight evolution. Muted leafy nose, with very subdued fruit. Medium-bodied, silky, and quite concentrated, this is still fresh and balanced. The brightness on the mid-palate is most appealing and lifts the wine through to a convincing finish. Balanced and quite long. | 17

AH | With considerable browning at the rim, the wine nonetheless shows a lot of freshness and savory interest on the nose. However, the stemminess that brings vitality of aroma lends a certain clunky, pithy quality to the palate. Despite the freshness, this is quite a tiring wine that seems at or past its best. | 14.5

MS | The very opposite of the previous wine in that the tannins here are beautifully ripe and soft and silky. The color is now showing maturity as could be expected, though nothing that might suggest any oxidation. There is a velvety softness here and a delicacy that is seductive, and it comes in contrast to the previous wines so a slight change of gear in the palate is required perhaps. A rather lovely wine that shows that Oregon Pinot does not have to be drunk in its youth. | 17.5

Norman Hardie County Pinot Noir Prince Edward County VQA Ontario 2011 (unfiltered) (SC) (12.5% ABV) | 16.5

SB | Pretty cherry-and-vanilla nose, with some lift and charm rather than depth and power. Medium-bodied but has some intensity of sweet fruit and bright acidity. Spicy and tangy, but it seems fully ripe despite the low alcohol. Long, lively finish and an overall sprightliness. | 16.5

AH | The delicate red color doesn't quite prepare you for the whack of new oak on the nose, but it's clearly good, clean oak, and there's plenty of red cherry fruit behind it. The palate is pleasant, with the spicy oak offsetting the slightly jammy fruit quite nicely. It just lacks a little bit of energy and length. | 16

MS | Slightly pale in color than the previous wines, there is a fine intensity in the aroma with a real Pinot character and more than a touch of class. The fruit character suggests a climate that is relatively cool and entirely suitable for the variety. There is freshness, complexity, length and precision, making this more than merely commendable. | 16.5

Antica Terra Antikythera Eola-Amity Hills Pinot Noir Dundee Oregon 2011 (12.50% ABV) | 16

SB | Deep red. Toasty nose, intense red fruits, very stylish. Medium-bodied but has fine acidity and intensity, tangy and almost raw, and needs a bit more time to settle down and harmonize. The combination of sophisticated oak, good acidity, and ripe but not overripe fruit gives a wine of considerable complexity and potential. Long, silky finish. | 17.5

AH | There's left-field, brambly, stemmy fun on the nose here. Yet the palate attack is a bit lackluster; sharp acidity and a lack of charismatic flavor conspire to create underwhelming experience after that promising aroma. | 14.5

MS | Deep color and maybe more concentration than it needed. It is so easy to dumb down Pinot fruit if you are not careful and end up just making red wine. That may sound harsh about a wine that is probably quite ambitious and not without further potential. This is a very respectable wine, generous, with depth and flavor. All I want is a shade more delicacy and precision. | 15.5

Bakerlane Sonoma Coast Ramondo Vineyard Pinot Noir Santa Rosa California 2008 (14.4% ABV) | 16

SB | Very deep red. Very ripe cherry nose, with some exotic spices. Rich and juicy without being overripe, this has some welcome precision and intensity of flavor. There are some mocha tones from the oak, and the alcohol is quite high without seeming excessive. This shows the generosity of Sonoma Pinot without being overripe, and the acidity lifts the finish. Good length. | 17.5

AH | Even at five years old, there is a fair bit of mocha-oak character on the nose, but some intriguing undergrowthy notes come through, as well as some smoked-meat character. The palate has brightness and lift and an appetizingly salty finish but remains somewhat burly, with a beef-gravy note. This seems old before its time. | 14.5

MS | Good fleshy depth here with generous ripe plum flavors on the palate, with a certain spiciness, too. Warmth, depth, and it has now probably reached close to its peak without showing imminent signs of decay and collapse. A very valid expression of Pinot, with enough individuality to give it a personality of its own rather than be simply a varietal wine. Ripeness here, but not overripeness. It carries its alcohol lightly, and the finish does not burn. | 16

J Christopher Chehalem Mountains Pinot Noir Lia's Vineyard Oregon 2011 (13.5% ABV) | 16

SB | Fairly deep to deep red. Toasty nose, cherries and raspberries, with seductive and elegant fruit. Medium-bodied, but this has exemplary poise and finesse, with just the right amount of acidity to balance but not dominate the palate. Quite boldly flavored without being coarse or obvious. Balanced and very long. | 18

AH | This nose is very much in the mocha/vanilla/kirsch school of ambition. There is a certain redcurrant brightness on the palate that mitigates the sweet aroma, though the price paid is a fairly tart acidity. Overall, a pretty satisfying, typical Pinot. | **15**

MS | Round and soft on the palate without being spineless. A pleasure to drink now and will not disappoint if kept for a few years more, since the balance is natural rather than forced. | **15.5**

The Eyrie Vineyards Willamette Valley Dry Table Wine Dundee Pinot Noir Oregon 1979 | **16**
(12.5% ABV)

SB | Fairly deep red, with considerable evolution but just a hint of browning—so in very good shape for a Pinot of this age. Closed nose, with a whiff of tea. Medium-bodied, quite concentrated, still polished, but the fruit is fading, leaving the rather strident acidity. However, the wine is far from dead, and the finish isn't dry, though it does seem some years past its best. Eyrie? | **15**

AH | For such a mature wine, this has a quite gorgeous toasted-almond freshness—to smell, it is genuinely invigorating. On the palate, it is a touch threadbare and yet retains a taut, balanced structure. Intensely savory in flavor, this is nonetheless a harmonious, concentrated, utterly satisfying wine that should be considered a triumph of its vintage and pedigree. | **17.5**

MS | Well into its third decade, so fully entitled to be showing its age as most wines from the Côte d'Or would be too by this stage. It is therefore in the tertiary stage of its development, well on from any primary fruit flavors or even the secondary ones. Those who appreciate the characteristics that emerge with full maturity will find much to enjoy still in this wine that was made in the very formative stages of the modern Oregon wine industry from young Pinot vines in a "terroir" with little track record. The color remains healthy and the aromas are still attractive. There is still a certain cool freshness that is nice to find in an old wine. It suggests that Oregon was not a crazy place to plant Pinot after all. | **16**

Saintsbury Toyon Farm Carneros Pinot Noir California 2009 (14.5% ABV) | **16**

SB | Deep red. Subdued yet very oaky nose, with smoky cherry fruit aromas. This is not the most concentrated wine, but there's an appealing limpidity and freshness, and the acidity seems less forced than on some of the other wines. Ripe but balanced with integrated tannins and good length. | **17**

AH | A very different beast to many California Pinots here. It's at the higher end of the alcohol spectrum, and yet demonstrably unfruity. This is taut, savory, mineral stuff, with a far greater nod to the Côte de Nuits than most of its state-mates. In fact there's a sour-cherry character that is very Burgundian, and on the palate the alcohol is barely noticeable. Instead, there is palpable focus and cohesion, as well as an appetizing, salty quality that makes it intensely moreish.

A bit of a black sheep, ineffable, difficult to pigeonhole, yet with a real sense of place: altogether, very Pinot. | **17.5**

MS | Deep, dark dense wine that would never have been identified by this taster as Pinot. Does it work? That depends on the individual palate I guess. There is something to recommend it as a robust red wine with no aspirations to finesse. I would struggle to finish the bottle but if in the right mood would be happy to drink a glass. | **14**

Rhys Horseshoe Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir California 2011 (12.4% ABV) | **16**

SB | Deep red, like so many of these California Pinots. Sweet smoky nose, ripe cherry fruit with hints of undergrowth. A ripe attack on the palate is immediately qualified by firm tannins that give the wine plenty of grip. There's intensity here and despite the low alcohol no greenness. The wine has great presence and ample concentration and spice. It should age well and develop greater complexity. Long. | **17**

AH | This funky number is pretty much at my limit for leafy-stemmy whole-bunch character, but there is agreeable brambly fruit and peppery spice to give it aromatic depth. The palate is already quite autumnal in style for such a young wine, and curiously finishes on a bacon-fat flavor. It is also fatter than its 12.4% alcohol would suggest—a lean, athletic beauty this is not. Given that, I wonder if slightly higher ripeness might have benefitted the fruit without really changing the structure. The fact that the descriptors I've found myself using belong more typically to Syrah than Pinot has piqued my curiosity, too. | **14.5**

MS | The same age as the previous wine but showing much more development in the color, possibly prematurely. Rather more oxidative *élevage*, so perhaps greater proportion of newer barrels here, and there are signs of oak on the nose, but they are well enough integrated. Not quite sure about the natural acidity here, and it could be more refreshing, but there is plenty to like about it in a style that is ripe and rather fully mature. Some stemminess and perhaps a less-than-perfect physiological ripeness. But there is more to like than dislike here. It may have some imperfections, but they are small ones if so, and it has personality. | **16**

Tawse Pinot Noir 17th Street Vineyard Twenty Mile Bench VQA Ontario 2007 (13.5% ABV) | **16**

SB | Deep red-russet, rather too deep in color for Pinot. Lush sweet cherry aromas, showing both weight and finesse. Broad and supple, but the ripeness is balanced by good acidity, that keeps the wine linear and fresh. It has fine length if no great complexity. It's impressive that it's holding up well, and the underlying tannins, which give a certain chewiness, suggest it has a way to go, though it does seem at its peak. | **16.5**

AH | This shows very pleasant signs of early maturity, although it doesn't initially shout "Pinot": gentle red and black berry fruit that has acquired some minty-herbal complexity. Generously

proportioned on the palate, with no shortage of very smooth tannin, this suggests a riper harvest, and is not unlike some of the milder-mannered 2005 Burgundies just now. Slight dryness on the finish tempers the rich, almost liqueur-like fruit up-front. Entirely convincing. | **17.5**

MS | Deepest color of flight, rather earthier and more concentrated, the result is depth but a lack of finesse. Satisfactory certainly but solid rather than spectacular. | **13.5**

Willakenzie Estate Reserve Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2008 (14.1% ABV) | **16**

SB | Deep red. Rich, savory nose, though some pure red fruits still shine through. The attack is distinctly sweet, and alcohol shows on the palate. Unlike the lovely nose, the palate shows a slight coarseness. But this has a welcome vigor and energy, and the overall impression is positive, even if the balance is a bit gawky. Quite long. | **16.5**

AH | With a surprisingly purple color for five years old, and a very youthful nose of berry compote and vanilla, this wine is something of an anomaly. It has impressive intensity and grip, alcohol is completely hidden, and there is genuine length here. A harmonious wine of considerable ambition, this is very smart, savory Pinot. | **17.5**

MS | Rich, and a little hot perhaps for perfect balance. The fruit is a bit too sweet for some palates, so a bit jammy and there is some unhelpful tannin kicking in on the finish, too. | **14**

Bergström Wines Bergström Vineyards Oregon Pinot Noir Dundee Hills AVA Oregon 2011 (13% ABV) | **15.5**

SB | Lush but spicy cherry nose. Fresh and lively, with appealing perkiness and spice. But there's underlying tannin, too, and ample acidity. Not a wine of great complexity, but it's balanced and charming. Quite good length. | **16**

AH | There's a peculiar aromatic blend here of ripe berry fruit and reductive-vegetal sourness. This continues to the palate: lean, correct, austere, with some poise but no generosity or complexity, and already some development. Not particularly fresh or appetizing despite the acidity, this is quite a tough mouthful. | **13.5**

MS | Ripe but not overripe, silky tannins, nothing harsh or astringent. There is much indeed to like about this wine. It has a personality and style that is original and is not just a varietal Pinot Noir. There is more to it and it shows elegance and breed. Maybe all that is missing is a shade more intensity, but it is sometimes better to avoid the risks of overconcentration and this wine delivers very nicely. It has some class. | **17**

Bethel Heights Vineyard Casteel Estate Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills Oregon 2011 (12.5% ABV) | **15.5**

SB | Very deep red. Spicy and sumptuous nose, oaky and fleshy and hedonistic. Rich and ripe, very concentrated, decidedly tannic but not too tough, spicy and assertive. It's still tightly wound and

rather hard to detect any nuances, but it seems well balanced and has drive on the finish. | 17

AH | Underneath the creaminess and despite the inky purple color, there is some gorgeous fresh black cherry fruit aroma here. Acid is distinctly on the high side, though, and distracts from an otherwise focused, composed palate. | 15

MS | Deep color for vintage... I sense that I would have preferred a paler color and lighter extraction. This is a vintage for finesse rather than power so the winemaking needs to be even more than normally sensitive. This is a very satisfactory glass of wine, but it could perhaps have been more than that. There is nothing I dislike, but I yearn for a bit more precision, a clearer sense of individual personality somehow. Anyhow this will certainly provide pleasure. | 15

The Eyrie Vineyards Pinot Noir Oregon 2010 (13.5% ABV) | 15.5

SB | Sweet succulent red-fruits nose, with discreet oak. Juicy yet limpid, this has freshness and poise. Acidity drives the palate rather than the tannins, which seem very discreet. But it's elegant and persistent, and the exemplary balance makes up for the slight lack of depth and grip. | 17.5

AH | Cor, blimey! A really strong aroma here, somewhere between tomato leaf and a cat's litter tray. Surely Pinot can aspire to more? Sour and bitter on the palate, with a chalky texture and unremittingly vegetable aftertaste, this is a travesty of a great grape variety. | 11

MS | Slight reduction here, but I think this may develop really well, so it is a wine for the patient palate. There is a lot of flavor here in the background, and texture/structure. Hard to assess today but one to watch. Already deserves a good mark, though. The longer it is allowed to breathe in the glass, the better it gets. There is the same sort of racy grapefruit/citrus-fruit character emerging that I find in Ruchottes Chambertin—an ethereal character that is so refreshing and intriguing. The taster in a hurry would be unlikely to notice the merit and potential of this wine. | 17.5

Flowers Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast California 2011 (13.2% ABV) | 15.5

SB | Fairly deep red. Stylish red-fruits nose, showing charm and finesse. Medium-bodied and very discreet, yet there's purity of fruit here and no lack of structure, thanks to its fine-grained tannins and lifted acidity. The finish is quite spicy, even peppery, and there seems to be a bit more alcohol than the 13.2% suggests. Fine balance and persistence. | 17

AH | Very much in the black-fruit camp and demonstrating that aromatically you can attain almost syrupy ripeness with only moderate alcohol. A blackcurrant bud note provides the necessary freshness. Not the longest or most dramatic wine, this is nonetheless a well-balanced and quite appetizing Pinot, in a sort of Vougeot mold: supple, sexy, with juicy black fruit and some earthy complexity. A very good drink. | 16

MS | A bit more flesh on the bones here, but the fruit is simple and satisfying rather than really

interesting. The grapes have been turned into wine very competently, but the results are not going to linger long on the palate or in the memory. | 14

Mount Eden Vineyards Pinot Noir Estate Bottled Santa Cruz Mountains California 2010 (13.5% ABV) | 15.5

SB | Deep red. Sweet oaky nose, slightly confected. Distinctly sweet on the palate, and the high acidity seems detached from the fruit. This is fatiguing and lacks nuance. Medium length. | 13

AH | Leafy, crunchy, vivid, stemmy aromas—and here it really works. Invigoratingly sweet-sappy, like blackberry picking in autumn. The palate has excellent focus and intensity, built on a very linear structure: This is no mouth-filler. The balance is seamless, as is the interface between just-ripe-enough fruit and softly herbaceous characters. Intriguing and brilliant. | 18

MS | A rather dense expression of Pinot here—by no means unpleasant, but it is a bit like fighting one's way through the jungle, trying not to trip over the odd roots and stems. But this means it has personality, and there is something intriguing rather than just facile about it, a certain earthiness. Delicacy? Probably not. But the power is under control. But watch out for the odd root and branch. It is more herbaceous than expected. But future development could be interesting, I suppose. | 16

Domaine Serene Yamhill Cuvée Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2010 (13.3% ABV) | 15.5

SB | Sweet raspberry nose, perhaps a touch confected, but it's still very pretty even so. Medium-bodied, rather light and simple, though it's bright and delicate. I don't find much complexity here, and the fruit is still primary. Simple and fairly short. | 14.5

STEPHEN BROOK'S VERDICT

The tasting was dominated by Oregon Pinot, and many of the best wines came from there. I had hoped for better results from Niagara, especially given the region's strong performance in *WFW's* recent North American Chardonnay tasting. Not that the wines were poor, but some of them exhibited rather hard tannins. The high acidity that can give elegance to Chardonnay resulted in some astringency and a lack of succulence.

I would have expected California Pinots to shine more than they did. Of course, California's Pinot country is a collection of large coastal regions, some of which were thinly represented in the tasting. So, it was difficult to draw conclusions about regionality. Perhaps it was because this flight of wines was tasted immediately after the rather austere Canadian flight, but I was struck by the jamminess of some of these Pinots. I had hoped that the search for cooler sites in areas such as the Sonoma Coast and Santa Rita Hills would have given wines with greater finesse, but this was rarely the case in this tasting.

Moreover, a few of the most restrained wines did flirt with greenness.

Oregon benefited from a more focused selection of estates all in the same, admittedly large, region: Willamette Valley. The best wines—and there were many—showed neither the severity of some Canadian Pinots nor the excursions into overripeness of the Californians. On the contrary, they seemed very well balanced, with fine aromas, a judicious use of oak, and a natural Pinot-ness, by which I mean they didn't strive for effect. They were at ease with location and winemaking and were very persuasive. (I know this seems a bit anthropomorphic.) There was a collective typicity that was very impressive. I also note, as I did on my visit to Oregon in 2012, that the big overwrought wines (for example, Beaux Frères) have reined back the extraction and are now delivering far more elegant wines. The 2012 are still closed but show great potential; the 2011s seem to lack a little complexity; but the 2010s, from a cool vintage, exhibit more charm than power.

STEPHEN BROOK'S TOP WINES

J Christopher Chehalem Mountains Pinot Noir Lia's Vineyard Oregon 2011 **18**

Antica Terra Antikythera Eola-Amity Hills Pinot Noir Dundee Oregon 2011 **17.5**

Bakerlane Sonoma Coast Ramondo Vineyard Pinot Noir Santa Rosa California 2008 **17.5**

J Christopher Dundee Hills Pinot Noir Sandra Adele Oregon 2011 **17.5**

The Eyrie Vineyards Pinot Noir Oregon 2010 **17.5**

Adelsheim Elizabeth's Reserve Willamette Valley Pinot Noir Oregon 2010 **17**

Bethel Heights Vineyard Casteel Estate Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills Oregon 2011 **17**

Chehalem Ridgecrest Vineyards Ribbon Ridge Reserve Pinot Noir Oregon 2010 **17**

Cristom Pinot Noir Eileen Vineyard Eola-Amity Hills Willamette Valley Oregon 2011 **17**

Elk Cove Vineyards Clay Court Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2012 **17**

The Eyrie Vineyards Pinot Noir Reserve Dundee Hills Oregon 2007 **17**

The Eyrie Vineyards Willamette Valley Estate Grown Pinot Noir Oregon 2000 **17**

Flowers Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast California 2011 **17**

Rhys Horseshoe Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir California 2011 **17**

Saintsbury Toyon Farm Carneros Pinot Noir California 2009 **17**

AH | Though bright and herbal, there's a lot of mocha oak on the nose here. However, the palate is satisfyingly structured, with a real focus of redcurrant/raspberry fruit. With good length and balance throughout, this is a classy Pinot. | **16.5**

MS | Fleshy but not flabby, this is generous and will give much satisfaction as it is complete and balanced. Some more individual nuances would have been a bonus but they may be revealed with more time. There is delicacy here. | **16**

Domaine Serene Evenstad Reserve Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2010 (13.5% ABV) | **15.5**

SB | Firm, brooding, raspberry nose. Medium-bodied, ripe and supple, its juiciness moderated by distinct tannins that don't disturb the overall smoothness of texture. But it seems fairly one-dimensional, very attractive without being challenging. Medium length. | **15**

AH | Lots of smoky oak and cleverly managed reduction here—a very bright nose. Good energy and cohesion on the palate, too, though very backward and primary for a three-year-old. There's good plushness of texture, but the fruit is a little sour. | **15**

MS | Deep color, this certainly has depth and power on both nose and palate. Does it show elegance, too? Perhaps not much yet but it may have potential to develop some if the alcohol does not interfere. Bold and generous anyhow without being aggressive. | **16**

Sokol Blosser Estate Cuvée Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Oregon 2010 (13.5% ABV) | **15.5**

SB | Delicate red-fruits nose, with a touch of oak. Medium-bodied, fresh and delicate. There are light tannins yet little overt structure, and the acidity seems more pronounced than the tannins. Charming but charm isn't quite enough. Quite good length. | **15**

AH | On the nose, this shows some evolution, with animal notes alongside evolved berry fruit. It's beguiling, complex, and very Pinot. The palate, however, is unremittingly sour, with a tomato-like hardness from start to finish. Structurally, this is a sad betrayal of fine aromas. | **14.5**

MS | Great flavors here with individuality and some delicacy. Some lovely fruit expression in a style that you do not get from California. It is understated. Fine. | **16.5**

Talley Vineyards Arroyo Grande Valley California 2011 (13.9% ABV) | **15.5**

SB | Deep red. Fortright cherry-liqueur nose, with some smoky oak. Surprisingly soft on the attack, making this an approachable wine, though it has ample concentration and acidity to sustain it. There's abundant fruit but little subtlety or nuance. It seems to be giving all it's got. Certainly enjoyable, and it finishes with considerable persistence and swagger. | **15.5**

AH | A vivid nose, but sappy rather than sweet, as if some whole bunches were included. This aroma

needs some coaxing, and I suspect is several years from being ready. Full, slightly oily in the mouth, this wine still has its puppy fat, but the balance is fine. Give it a few years to tighten up, and excellence should emerge. | **16**

MS | Deep color, youthful, with concentrated aromas and flavors, generous and satisfying on the palate without being subtle or complex. It is balanced, well made, and opulent but essentially quite simple. | **15**

Adelsheim Elizabeth's Reserve Willamette Valley Pinot Noir Oregon 2010 (13.4% ABV) | **15**

SB | Deep red. Retent nose, but there are attractive cherry and raspberry fruits lurking. Lightly oaky on the nose, but the fruit shines through. Not that weighty or concentrated on the palate, but fresh and bright, with fine-grained tannins and ample acidity. Balanced and graceful, this has good length. | **17**

AH | This has quite a muted nose, slightly dusty, with a hint of cherry fruit. The palate is markedly acidic, and doesn't provide enough succulence or nuance to balance. A simple wine. | **14**

MS | A bit dumb in terms of aroma and flavor. There is viscosity but not a lot of individual flavor. Perhaps it will develop in bottle, but right now it is a bit lacking in vitality. | **14.5**

Le Clos Jordanne Le Grand Clos Twenty Mile Bench VQA Pinot Noir Ontario 2011 (13.5% ABV) | **15**

SB | Smoky cherry nose, with considerable oak. Sleek, fresh attack, with ample lift but some surprisingly hard tannins. Severe on the palate with little depth of fruit. It's not green, but it does lack flesh and succulence. Quite long, but the finish is dry. | **13.5**

AH | Quite a dark, brooding fruit style: blackberry, even sloe. Slightly piney-herbal aromas, too. Structured, fairly tannic in the mouth, but very fine-grained, with a sort of limestone freshness and linearity. A sense of natural rigor rather than heavy-handed winemaking, and all the more impressive for that. Excellent medium-term potential here. | **17.5**

MS | Some depth and intensity to the aroma and flavor here, sweetness without being too jammy, though it may be less refreshing than some, and the sweetness might pall on the palate by the third glass if not sooner. The flavors are good if quite simple. | **14.5**

Elk Cove Vineyards Clay Court Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2012 (13.5% ABV) | **15**

SB | Very deep youthful red, looking rather more like Cabernet Sauvignon than Pinot Noir. Reserved black-fruits nose. Rich and dense, highly concentrated, this shows the rigidity of its youth, but the fruit quality seems excellent and the balance is fine. It's very solid and subdued, so hard to assess, but also has natural acidity and flow and should open up impressively in a year or so. Long. | **17**

AH | Hard to find much Pinot character here under all the sweet, creamy, vanilla-scented oak.

This smells so much like a dessert, I'd be scared to serve it with meat. On the palate, marked acidity is out of step with soft compote fruit. Length is good but overall balance and interest is lacking. | **14**

MS | Very youthful, exuberant, almost more Gamay than Pinot character at this stage. Some whole bunches? I would struggle to drink it now, but there is character in the fruit, and it should reward you in a year or two, when one hopes that some of this initial jammy baby fat has worn off. One to watch and wait for rather than try to drink at this stage. | **14.5**

Walter Hansel Russian River Valley Pinot Noir The South Slope Vineyard California 2010 (14.8% ABV) | **15**

SB | Deep red. Opulent cherry and raspberry nose, with appealing swagger rather than finesse. Rich and juicy and despite the relatively high alcohol it's not overripe. However, the alcohol does creep up on the palate, and there's a slight burn on the finish, which is a pity, given the appealing quality of the fruit. If you can accept the rather overwrought style, this is a wine of lushness and generosity. Quite long. | **15**

AH | An initial blast of mocha oak gives way to cherry-chocolate depth, aided and abetted by generous, wafting alcohol. On the palate, something doesn't ring true. There is a gherkin component, and yet I'd be surprised if American oak were being used on Pinot at this level.

Nevertheless, a sort of dill-sharp note interrupts the smooth, sweet progression through the palate. Today, this tastes confused. | **14**

MS | Deep colored, a big bold statement, full of ripe plum fruit, heavy with alcohol, so not a wine to quench the thirst, but the odd glass would give pleasure to the drinker in the mood for a bit of a Pinot monster. Much more might pall and fatigue the brain and the palate. So, share this bottle with a few other people rather than trying to drink it without assistance, lest you need assistance when you rise from your chair. A high score could be given but with a slight warning attached. | **16**

Hirsch Vineyards San Andreas Fault Sonoma Coast 2011 (13.4% ABV) | **15**

SB | Ripe, juicy, cherry nose. Broad, rounded, and succulent, this has generosity and weight, yet there's some freshness, too. The appeal is immediate and this can already be broached and doesn't seem to have a great deal of tannin or structure. But it seems to have the balance to age quite well. | **16**

AH | Juicy blackberry and blueberry aromas persist on to the palate, but the structure is a little bit tart in relation to the fruit. Though the palate possesses some intensity, there is not enough generosity or richness to provide a truly satisfying balance. | **14.5**

MS | Heat shows and a consequent lack of freshness. The taste is okay but more reminiscent of boiled sweets than fresh grapes, I fear. | **14**

**William Neville Stowe Winery
Indian Creek Pinot Noir Idaho
1996** (12.5% ABV)

15

SB | Fairly deep red, light browning. Earthy savory nose, with some fruitcake aromas. Fairly rich but also hollow, with a skinny mid-palate. I imagine the vines were young, which may account for the lack of depth and complexity. An intriguing curiosity, but not that remarkable as a wine. Fairly short on the finish. | 14

AH | Distinctly tawny at the rim, and certainly mature on the nose, but with a vibrant, engaging, tomato-paste/dried-herbs aroma that is entirely appetizing. The balance in the mouth is excellent, with a plush texture up front, well-managed tannin, and acidity in check until the finish, which unfortunately is quite sour. That aside, this is still a lovely, surprising, eloquent mature Pinot Noir. | 16

MS | Fully mature color but still looks healthy. There is a nice developed Pinot character to the fruit and a richness in the flavor. For a wine from Idaho approaching the end of its second decade, it is rather remarkable. It may have aged a little more rapidly than a good Côte de Nuits at this age, but then it was never made with this amount of aging in prospect and was not given the kind of Rolls-Royce treatment that would have been afforded to a Chambertin. No smart new French Oak casks here, I suspect. A more than creditable performance. | 15

**Joseph Phelps Freestone
Vineyards Pinot Noir Sonoma
Coast California 2010**

(13.5% ABV)

15

SB | Deep red. Spicy oaky nose, with aromas of cherry compote. There's abundant fruit on the nose but also a stewed character. Super-ripe on the palate, with a sleek texture and considerable succulence, but it lacks restraint. It's bright and lively but also rather obvious, and there's not much drive. An up-front style with plenty of oak. Quite long. | 14.5

AH | Quite a rich, plummy color, and a certain density on the nose. Black fruit rather than red, and mineral/savory aromas, as well as some creamy-leesy influence. The palate is supple and open, with quite a grand scale: It fills the mouth without being thick or heavy, and there is some persistence as well as that elusive Pinot intensity. It's satisfying, complex, and quite tautly balanced, while seeming completely ready—not a long keeper, I suspect. | 16

MS | A distinct rather milk chocolate element to the character here sets it apart at first; it is warm flavored, deep in color, solidly satisfying rather than subtle. Fat and plummy rather than nervous or linear. | 14

**Rhys Pinot Noir Santa Cruz
Mountains Skyline Vineyard
California 2010** (12.4% ABV)

15

SB | Deep red. Lush, generous, cherry nose, well out on the darker end of the Pinot spectrum. Fine attack, with good concentration and acidity

and firm underlying tannins. It's a bit raw on the mid-palate, because the acidity is still aggressive. Despite the nose there's a suspicion of greenness here, and I would guess a generous proportion of whole clusters in the vat. Assertive, intriguing, yet not really harmonious. Quite good length. | 15

AH | Aromatically, this is herbal yet a bit flat—like thyme left in the fridge—though there's some attractive black fruit underneath. The palate is balanced, with a brightness suggesting whole-bunch, but quite short and simple, without a lot of Pinot character. | 14

MS | Some evolution in the color now (cf [Rhys Horseshoe Vineyard, Santa Cruz Mountains, Pinot Noir California 2011]), and there is age showing on the palate, too. So, where will it go from here? Probably nowhere better. Right now it is enjoyable enough, though a high price might not be obviously justifiable. | 15.5

**Siduri Pinot Noir Keefer Ranch
Vineyard Russian River Valley
Sonoma County California 2012
(SC)** (14.2% ABV)

15

SB | Fairly deep to deep red. The nose has immediacy: ample cherry fruit, and hints of red-berry fruit as well as vanilla. Rich and plump, but also a touch sweet. A shock to the system after a flight of more austere Canadian Pinots! There's plenty of acidity but it seems rather forced and assertive. Big and rather obvious, but it's the sweetness rather than the volume that disturbs. Medium length. But coming back to the wine after more California wines, it seems less confected and more appealing in its generosity of fruit. | 15.5

AH | Classically Californian, with gorgeously expressive, vivid blackberry and black-cherry fruit aromas, lifted by herbal notes. The nose is just marred by the tiniest bit of stinky reduction: new convert to screwcaps, perhaps? The palate tastes clean, but is a bit soppy, finishing sweet and unctuous rather than poised. When you have kirsch-like fruit on entry, a bit of tautness at the end rarely goes amiss. | 15

MS | Much darker and more youthful color than the previous flight evident at once, the fruit character is also very different with rich plums and definite weight. Is it refreshing? Perhaps not, but the fruit is certainly very generous and it is not raised or clumsy and the rather high alcohol for Pinot does not burn the palate on the finish. It is a bold expression of the grape that will give plenty of pleasure to those not looking for something more delicate. | 15

**Bachelor Pinot Noir Niagara
Lowrey Vineyard St David's
Bench VQA Ontario 2011**

(13% ABV)

14.5

SB | Lean, leafy nose, slightly evolved, but has some rather pallid charm. Sharp attack with high acidity that makes this a rather pinched style. Has precision and texture but lacks some generosity. It has a bright finish with light tannins and considerable persistence. But it's not exactly seductive. | 14.5

AH | Unforced pale red, and a very true Pinot aroma of redcurrant, undergrowth and flowers. It's quite Chambolle-esque, only a little jammier and headier. The palate is nicely balanced, with fresh but well-judged acidity. The fruit tends slightly to soupiness, but there is some complexity and length here. | 15

MS | A correct color and the nose shows freshness without special intensity, recognizably Pinot, good acidity and balance with no interference from alcohol. Satisfactory rather than special and perfectly commendable. | 14

**Calera Selleck Vineyard Pinot
Noir Mt Harlan Central Coast
California 2010** (13.9% ABV)

14.5

SB | Fairly deep to deep red. Subdued nose but there's an underling sweetness of fruit. That sweetness is even more pronounced on the palate, where a certain jamminess isn't effectively cut by the high acidity. The wine seems forced and assembled and it doesn't flow. One-dimensional and not particularly long. | 13.5

AH | Sexy, exuberant, quintessentially Californian aromas, although so close to plum jam that it's as much like Sonoma Zinfandel as Central Coast Pinot Noir. The palate structure, of course, is more representative: not just bright acidity and gentle tannin but a very Pinot-like fluidity. Overall, the wine is delicious, it is balanced, and it has good length. I just wish for a bit more specific, nuanced character. | 15.5

MS | Color more red than black, considerable fruit intensity on the nose, the alcohol level is high but not unbalancing though the very final flavor is a touch warm. The fruit manages to avoid being too confected. There is much to like about it even if it does not scream Pinot. | 15

**Cristom Pinot Noir Eileen
Vineyard Eola-Amity Hills
Willamette Valley Oregon 2011**

(13% ABV)

14.5

SB | Fairly deep red. Fragrant and smoky raspberry nose, of considerable charm. Medium-bodied yet has considerable tannic grip and fine acidity. This is lifted and persistent, with elegant red fruits, but it's still youthful and not that expressive. But the poise is admirable and this should develop well if given a chance. | 17

AH | Suitably unforced, palish red color. Very pretty aromas of slightly overripe strawberries and undergrowth. The alcohol, although quoted at only 13%, seems very obtrusive here, but otherwise there is some elegance, even austerity, to the palate. | 15

MS | Rather watery rim, some carbon dioxide, a bit soapy and rather awkward at present, not very harmonious, alcohol here, acid there, fruit somewhere else and I am not quite sure where, but some of it is still a bit green. Better grapes needed, I suspect, and then more skillful winemaking perhaps, since there seem to be some slight flaws here in the cooking as well as the vineyard management. All is not lost, but even further bottle age is unlikely to resolve all the problems here I suspect. | 12

ALEX HUNT MW'S VERDICT

This being a Pinot tasting, I expected highs and lows. This is a capricious variety, of course: capable of magnificence but notoriously difficult to tame. And magnificence was offered by all three regions represented here. Not having encountered much Canadian Pinot to date, I was stunned and delighted to have two Ontario wines among my top seven (scoring 17 and above). Given that in total only six wines from Canada featured, this is a brilliant result. Moreover, the wines were not even in the same style, showing that Canada has versatility up its sleeve, even at this high quality level.

Between the two US regions—California and Oregon—the former was distinctly underrepresented here. Although California both fielded my top score and also proved the most reliable region, with nothing below 14 out of 20, I know the state has a great deal more to offer in terms of quality and diversity. Nonetheless, it was an interesting snapshot of a style that is arguably in transition. There were some syrupy-ripe wines that were more

stereotypically Californian than expressive of Pinot Noir, and others at the opposite end of the scale, with early picking and/or whole-bunch fermentation creating a greener, fresher, more herbal style. The best combined freshness with power, and considerable complexity.

The top Oregon examples showcased the region's fabled grace, harmony, and balance. These are not slavish Burgundy copies, but wines with their own unique structure, taut and vigorous, with plenty of intensity. Worrying, though, was the number of dogs in this flight: I found myself scoring almost 40 percent under 14. These wines tended to be thin, scrawny, very acidic, and even in some cases unrecognizable as Pinot Noir. Ripeness appears to be a common problem, therefore, along with some serious defects in winemakers' vision of how this grape is best expressed. Given that Oregon Pinot is rarely inexpensive, I would consider it a high-risk purchase without prior tasting or a strong recommendation behind it.

fail to inspire the more experienced palate. No faults and good overall balance. Amiable rather than distinguished. | **14.5**

Montinore Estate Graham's Block 7 Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2010 (13.3% ABV) | **14.5**

SB | Light but bright raspberry nose, still fresh. Medium-bodied, supple and fresh, with an overall prettiness rather than depth or complexity. Light tannins give some structure on the finish, but I imagine this would be best enjoyed in the medium rather than long term. | **15**

AH | Happily, no great claims to deep color here, and an intriguing combination of opulence and brightness on the nose. The palate is frustratingly austere and tannic—it cannot help but seem self-conscious—and the fruit is rather simple, in the redcurrant-jelly mold. There's something here, but it could be so much more... Couldn't it? | **15**

MS | Somehow quite meaty, this lacks a bit in the perfumed school of Pinot, and it is just a shade astringent already, so I hope it is not drying out prematurely. In a wine this young, I would like to see greater vitality. | **14**

Montinore Estate Reserve Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon (organic) 2011 (13.2% ABV) | **14.5**

SB | Fairly deep to deep red. Oaky leafy nose, rather subdued. Medium-bodied, juicy, and succulent, with good acidity keep it fresh. The tannins give a slight angularity that should diminish with a bit more age. Indeed, this still seems youthful, with little secondary development. But good length and potential. | **16.5**

AH | This nose is certainly complex: malty, chocolaty, kirschy, with a real bitter-almond brightness. There is also an appetizing herbiness on entry—but then the tannin clamps down and betrays overextraction. A lighter touch was necessary here. | **14.5**

MS | This is an acceptable mouthful of red wine, but it lacks real Pinot character, and it is a little awkward, with little if any perfume on the nose and a finish that is somewhat hard. It is a bit lean and mean, in fact, so probably does not justify its probable price tag. The final impression is one of astringency. | **12.5**

Siduri Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2012 (SC) (14.1% ABV) | **14.5**

SB | Fairly deep red, showing a slight evolution for a wine of the 2012 vintage. Oaky cherry nose, with a whiff of beetroot. Medium-bodied, fresh and limpid, with fine acidity and a graceful character that's not at the expense of concentration. It's still rather closed and inexpressive, but all the elements seem in place. What hasn't yet emerged is any personality or distinctiveness. Just needs time. Quite long. | **16**

AH | A strange nose here: Freshly roasted coffee character meets a malty, milk-chocolate character overlaying raspberry leaf tea—as if skinny fruit

ALEX HUNT MW'S TOP WINES

- Mount Eden Vineyards Pinot Noir Estate Bottled Santa Cruz Mountains California 2010 **18**
- The Eyrie Vineyards Willamette Valley Dry Table Wine Dundee Pinot Noir Oregon 1979 **17.5**
- Le Clos Jordanne Le Grand Clos Twenty Mile Bench VQA Pinot Noir Ontario 2011 **17.5**
- Saintsbury Toyon Farm Carneros Pinot Noir California 2009 **17.5**
- Tawse Pinot Noir 17th Street Vineyard Twenty Mile Bench VQA Ontario 2007 **17.5**
- Willakenzie Estate Reserve Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2008 **17.5**
- J Christopher Dundee Hills Pinot Noir Sandra Adele Oregon 2011 **17**
- Chehalem Ridgecrest Vineyards Ribbon Ridge Reserve Pinot Noir Oregon 2010 **16.5**
- Domaine Serene Yamhill Cuvée Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2010 **16.5**

Cristom Pinot Noir Mt Jefferson Cuvée Oregon 2011 (13.5% ABV) | **14.5**

SB | Fairly deep red. Light, leafy nose, which has considerable delicacy and charm. Medium-bodied yet concentrated on the palate, and showing fine acidity. This has elegance and purity but does lack a little complexity and drive. But it's finely tuned and well balanced and should develop well. | **16**

AH | Bang! Rustic, savory, animal fur, brown sugar, sweet autumn fruit—all of these are on the nose, and we could easily be in Morey-St-Denis here. Aromatically, that is. On the palate, the mask drops, thanks to sharp, exaggerated acidity that terminally distracts from the potential complexity and harmony. So close; so frustrating. | **15**

MS | Some soft sweet fruit on the nose here, but without much complexity or real precision as there is a bit of a hole in the mid palate, a sense of some dilution, a lack of grip and intensity. It is a nice enough glass of wine, but it lacks drive and ambition and does not promise much in the years ahead. | **13**

Hidden Bench Pinot Noir Locust Lane Vineyard Beamsville Bench VQA Ontario 2010 (13.5% ABV) | **14.5**

SB | Unusually deep in color for Pinot. Reticent nose, cherries and plums. Quite rich and broad on the palate with good weight of fruit, and balanced by quite high acidity. It doesn't shout Pinot, though. Just a touch of mocha on the finish, probably from the oak, and some light tannins to give it grip. It does have personality that makes up for its lack of typicity. Moderate length. | **14.5**

AH | Relatively dark in color, with a confected, blackcurrant-pastille aroma dominating for the moment. With angular acidity on the palate and not enough tannin to temper the sweet fruit, this seems slightly unbalanced overall, as well as a bit medicinal. | **14**

MS | Some depth to the color, the nose is quite simple but pleasant enough and the flavors consistent with that impression. A little lacking in individual personality, but the overall effect is one of sound balance. A wine that would give pleasure to the normal consumer but that might

character is being subsumed under winemaking. The palate has good concentration and freshness of flavor up front, but the finish seems rather tired, even cardboardy, and the acidity sticks out as disjointedly sharp. | 14

MS | It seems a little awkward at present, lacking harmony. The aromas are not perfectly clean and more Pinot perfume is needed, while the palate finish is a little rough, with some green tannins. It is young so the jury must still be out, but there are question marks. A final verdict would be very premature at this stage. On what we see today it seems a little mean. | 13.5

Bachelder Pinot Noir Johnson Vineyard Yamhill-Carlton District AVA Oregon 2011 | 14
(13% ABV)

SB | Deep red. Still quite closed on the nose. Supple and rounded, this is already accessible yet lacks a little concentration and density. There's no lack of tannin and acidity, but overall it's still gawky and needs time to blossom. Moderate length. | 15

AH | Close your eyes, and this smells quite like a white wine in the old Chablis style: apple, yogurt, nuts—there's red cherry there, too, but only if you really hunt for it. Amazingly, it tastes like it, too. More tannin, otherwise a dead ringer for Chablis. Where did the Pinot go? | 13

MS | This seems quite beefy for Oregon especially in this vintage. There is a consequent lack of pure Pinot personality. It falls a little short of what I look for in Oregon Pinot, though it will offer drinking pleasure to those who demand less. | 14

Beaux Frères Willamette Valley Pinot Noir Oregon 2011 (unfiltered) | 14
(13.1% ABV)

SB | Fairly deep red. Sweet ripe juicy nose, quite open and forthright. Fresh and lively though only moderately concentrated. It's relatively forward and has immediate appeal, though it does lack complexity. Sweet but not jammy finish with some charm. Medium length. | 15

AH | This nose is dusty and hard to determine, with some vaguely stemmy, herbal notes as well as brambly fruit. The palate is medium-bodied and equally inscrutable, with marked acidity and the lingering taste of pulverized masonry. | 13.5

MS | More Pinot perfume and more fruit on the palate are required here, I feel. It is warm and soft but needs more intensity and character from grape and place in order to generate excitement. It is a little dumb, in fact—at present, at any rate. No faults but no thrills. | 14

Bethel Heights Vineyard Estate Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills Oregon 2011 (SC) | 14
(12.2% ABV)

SB | Deep red, especially for Pinot. Muted raspberry-coulis nose. Soft and rather slack, though it doesn't lack tannins. Yet there's not much drive or energy here, and it fades on the finish, which is fairly short. | 14

AH | Serious reductive stink of blocked drains. This producer hasn't got the hang of screwcaps yet. Simple, scrawny palate that seems to have benchmarked against basic Bourgogne Rouge rather than anything richer, riper, or more profound. | 12.5

MS | Depth of color here for this vintage, and good fruit on the palate with good overall balance. The alcohol is relatively low, which probably helps, so the Pinot character still has a chance to sing and the wine has the chance to refresh. There is grip and substance behind, so good development to follow, I suspect. This is a good result in quite a tricky vintage. | 15

Broadley Vineyards Estate Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2012 | 14
(13.9% ABV)

SB | Opaque red—where does all this color come from? Quite a dumb nose with a hint of cassis. Supple on the attack, concentrated and quite dense, with big ripe tannins lurking. An oaky, chocolaty style, and the winemaking obscures the fruit a little at present, but it seems balanced and has potential. Quite long on the finish. But it doesn't shout Pinot. | 16.5

AH | Despite a ridiculously saturated purple color and at just a year old, this wine already smells slightly faded and autumnal. The palate is dry, blustering, and hollow, notably herbal (thyme, mint), with little fruit or composure. I would struggle to identify this as Pinot or find any of that grape's peculiar charms here. Not even a caricature; this is exaggerated beyond recognition. | 13

MS | For an Oregon Pinot, this is a fairly massive color, even in a vintage that was more generous than most in that department. I would not in fact have guessed Oregon as a likely origin for this wine. The level of extraction is high, and the alcohol is a bit too prominent, while the tannin also seems a shade harsh. It gives the impression of a winemaker who is trying too hard and has not allowed the fruit to express itself properly. For an Oregon Pinot Noir it seems rather brutal. Will bottle age resolve the problems? I doubt it. The fruit seems to have been forced into a place from where I fear it will not recover. I can only hope that I am proved wrong and that bottle age will result in proper refinement. | 12

Erath Prince Hill Pommard Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Oregon 2010 | 14
(13% ABV)

SB | Sweet, leafy, oaky nose, showing some exquisite raspberry fruit. Quite soft on the attack, with considerable sweetness of fruit. Indeed, this lacks a little bite and severity despite some pronounced acidity. It is—dare I say it?—a touch obvious, with a slack and rather medicinal finish. A pity, as the nose is gorgeous. | 14.5

AH | Overtly cream/yogurt-scented, which makes me wonder what this leesy Pinot is hiding? Could it be a lack of fresh fruit, or a paucity of structural integrity, or a dearth of definition? Despite the marked acidity, the answer is yes. A slightly clumsy effort on this showing. | 13

MS | Good individual Pinot Noir fruit character evident here, and there is balance and the delicacy that I want to see from Oregon. The finish is possibly a little sweet and simple, but there is still much to like here. | 15

Flowers Sea View Ridge Estate Vineyard Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast California 2011 | 14
(13% ABV)

SB | Fairly deep red. Very shy strawberry nose, fragrant but not very expressive. Sweet attack, quite intense, with acidity carrying the wine through to the finish. But I don't find much nuance or complexity to modify its rather linear character. Pleasant and lightly tannic but not very individual. Quite long on the finish. | 14.5

AH | Pale red, and a light, quite superficial aroma of simple red fruit and vegetation. Lactic, leesy notes are not quite sufficiently masked. Cherries on the mid-palate become almonds on the finish. This comes across as a consciously new-wave, lighter-style effort, which is commendable, but it does taste a little incomplete. There's not a lot of intensity or drive here, though the structure is solid and balanced. | 14.5

MS | Relatively light in color, which is absolutely not a criticism, but there is a dearth of fruit character on the nose. The color is correct for a Pinot but where is the perfume? One looks for more, but the search seems to be in vain at the moment. I fear that it may not develop more character with age but hope that I am proved wrong. Nothing disagreeable about this wine, but it does not deliver a great deal. | 13

Walter Hansel Russian River Valley Pinot Noir Cuvée Alyce California 2010 | 14
(14.5% ABV)

SB | Very deep red, which raises some alarm signals for a Pinot Noir, especially from 2010. Forthright nose of boiled sweets, cherries, and beetroot—a bit overbearing. Super-ripe and close to jammy, but moderated by good acidity. It's very concentrated and has a sleek texture, but it does lack some freshness and delicacy. Impressive on the tasting bench, but how much of this would one want to drink? Rather sweet and hot on the finish. | 14.5

AH | Deep purple and richly, plummily Zin-like on the nose. Very satisfying, very Californian, but not very Pinot. The palate is absolutely, and commendably, equivalent to the nose. It's gorgeous, with a sweet fruit core lifted by really nice acidity and a plum-skin astringency that together sum to a harmonious whole. It really isn't very Pinot, but is much better than many Pinots *manqués*. | 16

MS | Strictly for those who like their red wines to taste of raisins or prunes. Amarone or Banyuls fans will get more pleasure from this than lovers of a more delicate approach to Pinot. I do not like Pinot grapes that get overripe personally, so I have a problem with this style myself. But if that is what you want, then this is a good example, I guess. It is a bit like drinking a fortified wine, though. I think that there are other grapes better suited to the style. | 12

THERE IS STILL SOME LIFE ON THE NOSE: AROMAS OF SEARED MEAT, DRIED THYME, BLACK OLIVES, ALL QUITE HARMONIOUS. A FASCINATING EXAMPLE OF HISTORIC CALIFORNIA PINOT

Montinore Estate Parson's Ridge Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2010 (13.3% ABV) | 14

SB | Closed nose, though with a whiff of laquer. Medium-bodied, sleek, and polished, this has sufficient but not excessive concentration and considerable lift and charm. There isn't huge depth of flavor but the balance is impeccable, and there's an appealing vivacity. Long, spicy finish. | 16.5

AH | An overtly juicy, fruit-pastille nose gives the impression of being forced, with a distinct smell of tar, and the antiseptic aroma of Islay malt. A very vegetal attack scarcely calms down through the mid-palate, which leaves an overwhelming impression of both cooked vegetables and raw broad beans. I don't know what market this is aiming for, but it will miss my dining table by a mile. | 12.5

MS | Astringency here rather than charm. I am not sure if this is due to less than perfect grapes or some insensitive *élevage*—most probably the former. It seems a little tired already, and the final effect is too sour for great satisfaction. | 12.5

Clos Pepe Estate Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir California 2009 (14.1% ABV) | 14

SB | Fairly deep to deep red. Reticent yet solid red fruits nose with none of the pruney character that can mark some Santa Rita Pinots. Very ripe, very concentrated, with some sweetness of fruit and alcohol that seems a little higher than the stated 14.1%. This strives to impress and the acidity is muted and perhaps relatively low. A sweet and rather tannic finish, and an overall lack of subtlety and finesse. | 15

AH | Unfortunately this seems slightly reduced, giving a celery sharpness to otherwise pleasant berry-jelly fruit characters. Quite slippery and unfocused in the mouth, despite bright acidity.

There is a gap here between flavor and structure; it just doesn't quite hang together, at least not at this stage. | 14

MS | This looks young enough but the aromas already seem a little tired. The flavors are somewhat dumb and there is a distinct lack of vitality on the finish, compounded by a sensation of alcohol more than fruit. The future does not promise a lot except greater disappointment. But for drinking in the near future it can still provide some pleasure. | 13

Trisaetum Pinot Noir Estates Reserve Willamette Valley Oregon 2012 (14.2% ABV) | 14

SB | Deep red. Very ripe nose, cherries and mocha, close to jammy and a muscular style for Oregon. Rather sweet and overripe on the palate, with obvious dark fruits and little Pinot finesse. For Oregon this is surprisingly heavy-handed. There's a trickle of acidity on the finish, but less than is needed to balance the wine. Still youthful, but can't see much subtlety emerging in time. Quite good length. | 14.5

AH | Saturated purple; dusty and rather confected on the nose. Very tannic, extracted like a Cabernet Sauvignon, without very much definable fruit character or nuance. Thick-textured, rather bitter, currently unrecognizable as Pinot. | 13.5

MS | Very youthful purple color. This seems rather more like Gamay more than Pinot Noir. It promises interesting future development to me, but perhaps it was bottled rather prematurely. Patience required then, and it almost certainly merits another look in a year or two when it has settled down. This vintage certainly seems to have color. Will it also develop finesse? | 14.5

Bachelor Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Oregon 2011 (13% ABV) | 13

SB | Muted red-fruits nose. Fresh and limpid, with fine-grained tannins, engaging red fruits, and considerable poise and charm. Perhaps it's rather simple and lacking in depth, but it's well made, with a long balanced finish. It just needs more personality to make it stand out from a large crowd. | 15

AH | Weird nose: overripe berries, alcohol (despite the 13% quoted), just-rancid cream, and dishwasher tablets—hardly inviting! Cream and acid dominate the palate, along with slightly spiky tannin. This feels like it's curdling as you drink it: very unsettling. | 12

MS | Rather sour, awkward aromas, with no true Pinot character. There is tannin rather than charm here. No fruit intensity and a lack of harmony and balance. Youthful Pinot should exhibit much more fruit, perfume, vitality. This is too coarse to give real pleasure. | 12

Hanzell Sonoma Valley Pinot Noir California 1981 (13.9% ABV) | 13

SB | Still very deep in color, though inevitably there are some russet tones to indicate the wine's age. Nonetheless, it seems visually in remarkable

shape for what is, in California terms, an antique. Brawny and savory on the nose, with slight oxidation as well as undergrowth aromas. Soft and slightly hollow, this doesn't have the concentration of a more modern Pinot, and the tannins are starting to dry out. In this tasting's context, *sui generis*, so hard to judge. I suspect this would have been better eight years ago but still has grip and hasn't given up the ghost. Hanzell, I expect. | 15

AH | The color, though of course developed, retains admirable intensity toward the rim. There is still some life on the nose: aromas of seared meat, dried thyme, black olives, all quite harmonious. The palate does betray some overextraction: there is a surprising amount of grippy tannin for a 32-year-old wine, and I suspect this may never quite resolve. The palate entry also seems a little musty. A fascinating example of historic California Pinot that just about still works. | 15.5

MS | This seems to have failed the test of time, for the color indicates oxidation and the aroma and flavor confirm that impression. We are left with some rather dry tannins and the final effect is rather reminiscent of a very old Médoc. | 8

Malivoire M2 Small Lot Pinot Noir Beamsville Bench VQA Ontario 2009 (12.5% ABV) | 12.5

SB | Quite deep in color for Pinot. Subdued nose of cherries and red fruits with a whiff of smoke and vanilla. Bottle age has softened the wine and given it an appealing velvety texture, without any loss of acidity or brightness. Indeed, the acidity is a touch too pronounced on the finish, though it does enliven the mid-palate. Evolved, but it still shows good length on the finish. | 15

AH | With notes of brown sugar and malt loaf, this is showing clear signs of oxidation. The structure is intact (if soft), but the flavors are markedly and prematurely advanced, and the aftertaste is one of decay. | 10

MS | Deeper in color than most in the flight, there is evidence of maturity probably at the expense of the fruit character, which suggests that it may be starting to fade and tire. Will it develop a second stage of development with a promise for the patient? I rather suspect not. | 13

The Eyrie Vineyards Willamette Valley Estate Grown Pinot Noir Oregon 2000 (13% ABV) | 11.5

SB | Fairly deep red, with some evolution though no browning. Reticent nose with a hint of undergrowth, developing secondary aromas while the primary fruit is in retreat. But there's no lack of freshness here, and the fruit is quite concentrated, and palate is not tiring. Not that complex, but hey! It's still very much alive. | 17

AH | This maderized, brown-sugary nose has, sadly, completely succumbed to oxidation. The palate now seems to me both unrecognizable and undrinkable. | 5

MS | This is showing some oxidation to the detriment of the fruit now, so it may be a less than perfect bottle or simply a vintage that has not stood the test of time. | 12 ■