

Is PINOT NOIR a *Pain* or a *Pleasure*?

Lim Hwee Peng shares his findings on this seemingly 'bitchy' grape.

Other than the Pinot Noir grape, no other grape varietal on the wine scene has posed as serious a challenge to winemakers both within and outside Burgundy. The Pinot Noir is often regarded as the Holy Grail and an ultimate test for any worthy winemaker. Despite such a seemingly insurmountable challenge, winemakers cannot help but long for a successful conquest of this particular grape.

The Pinot Noir grape is, first and foremost, fickle in nature; at times it can be erratic and whimsical, all contributing to its unmistakable trait – being capricious.

In the vineyard, this low-tannin, thin skin, low-pigment grape is extremely sensitive to its surroundings, and prefers a cooler growing condition as compared to one that veers towards the higher scales of a thermometer.

Pinot Noir's relatively thin skin grape is also a bane for many winemakers; it succumbs easily to diseases such as mildew and rot, and if the grape is not picked promptly at maturity, the tender berries shrivel and will dry-out rapidly. The early bud-break of Pinot Noir also makes it prone to spring frost and coulure (poor fruit set).

Close attention is therefore required throughout the growing season especially during critical periods such as the time leading up to harvest, where it is a make or break situation for the winemaker and winery.



Photography: Johan Lim

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Pinot Noir is also one of the most heavily mutated grapes. Just from this variety alone, a total of 46 clones have been identified, as compared to Cabernet Sauvignon's 12 known clones. Such diversity explains the huge variation in quality and performance of Pinot Noir wines.

Inevitably, clonal selection plays a major role in determining the quality of Pinot Noir in the New World wine producing areas. The Pommard clone is perhaps the most widely planted and accepted in these contemporary wine areas, but you would occasionally find some die-hard, burgundy-inspired New World winemakers using the Dijon clone such as 115 and 114 that were more commonly used in Burgundy.

The weather and soil are two other critical factors that influence the quality of Pinot Noir. The Pinot Noir in Burgundy thrives in limestone soil, which New World Pinot Noir-crazed winemakers

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attempted to seek out in their land. The New World winemakers settled for a cooler area near the coast, where the maritime climate cooling night breeze assisted in preserving the much needed acidity in Pinot Noir wines.

Over the years, winemakers from California, Australia and now New Zealand have improved their awareness of this grape variety and are slowly refining their skills in handling and managing this mysterious grape varietal.

Californian vintners have taken a big step forward in the improvement of their Pinot Noir qualities since the mid-80s. Better clonal with low-yield were introduced, and progressively shifting the vineyards to the more ideal cool sites such as Cameros, Russian River, Sonoma Coast. In the cellar, gentle skin extraction such as cap punch-down as opposed to pumping over were initiated; cold maceration and whole berry maceration were carried out to prevent the fragile Pinot Noir skins from breaking, which will aid in the better preservation of fruit freshness.

Native yeast, instead of previously cultivated yeast, was used for primary and secondary fermentation so as to add complexity. Other Burgundy vinification techniques such as barrel-fermentation and lees-aging were subsequently introduced to further strengthen the width and depth of Californian Pinot Noir.

Oregon is another US state that is creating waves with their Pinot Noir with a style that is close to the Burgundian, due in part to its climate. Joseph Drouhin, one of the long standing Burgundy wine family members, even established a winery at Oregon in the 1980s. This winery is now being managed by his daughter, Veronique. The grapes that were used to make its estate Pinot Noir were sourced from the famed Willamette Valley.

Australian winemakers have also been making Pinot Noir for decades, but the early day products were less exciting, offering fruits without freshness, and its fruity flavours leaned towards earthy, plum and foresty tastes. Much improvement and experimentation have led to a leap in the Pinot Noir quality, especially in the Victoria region, which has continued to produce some of the finest Pinot from Down Under.

Despite the rich fertile soil and high vigor vineyard in this area, the quality conscious Aussie Pinot makers intentionally keep production low through several canopy management techniques such as shoot thinning and green harvesting. Advanced irrigation system also helped to control stress level of the vine and further intensify the fruit concentration.

Over the years, winemakers from California, Australia and even New Zealand have been acknowledged as some of the few countries in the wine world to have successfully mastered this fickle, yet supremely aristocratic grape variety. The temperate climate and extended sunshine have been combined with the winemaker's passion and skill to produce world-class, highly sought-after Pinot Noir.

Since Pinot Noir relishes in cool temperatures and low rainfall areas, it therefore performs with distinction in the Wellington region and most South Island regions. Cooler, high-altitude sites in Hawkes

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Bay have also found success with this temperamental grape. Wines from Martinborough have also earned the highest international accolades and probably the loudest acclaim for Pinot Noir in New Zealand.

Soils here consist of deep, stony and silt loams over gravel, helping to produce Pinot Noir with strong, ripe plum flavours and great concentration. The silty alluvial soils and long, cool ripening conditions in the South Island regions of Marlborough and Nelson have produced vibrant, fruit-focused Pinot Noir with strong cherry and plum flavours.

In the Waipara, Canterbury region, chalky loam soils with limestone deposits, coupled with the cool, dry growing season are well suited for the production of high quality and vibrant Pinot Noir. The dry, sunny continental climate combined with the silt loam soils in Central Otago produce elegant, long-lived Pinot Noir which typically have strong black cherry flavours.

Canopy management techniques such as leaf plucking, trimming and new trellis designs help produce wines with deeper colours and more intense, ripe flavours. A wide range of winemaking techniques, including the pre- and post- fermentation maceration, partial whole berry fermentation, and various methods of tannin, colour and flavour extraction add further variation to regional differences in wine styles.

Since the early days of importing premium Pinot Noir clones into New Zealand, various clones were being used and tested, especially the Dijon clones 113, 114, 115, 667, 777 and 375 that were planted in the early 90s and are now beginning to produce exciting results.

It is an established fact that New World Pinot Noir offers early pleasures, exhibiting attractive and luxurious sweet berries with



Photography: Johan Lim

creamy palate. Wine lovers would have to fork out an arm and a leg to obtain similar mouth-feel and texture from a bottle of premium Burgundy rouge.

Nonetheless, all New World Pinot Noirs should best be consumed when their ripe fruits are vibrant and intact. Do not expect them to age the same way as Burgundies. This is because they are simply produced under different growing conditions such as climate, soil and vine age; and they are therefore an entirely different breed.

An insight of Pinot Noir's homeland, Burgundy, will be provided in the next issue of TimeCraft.