

# SNOW ON WINE

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## PINOT NOIR The Queen of Grapes No longer of France but of our World!



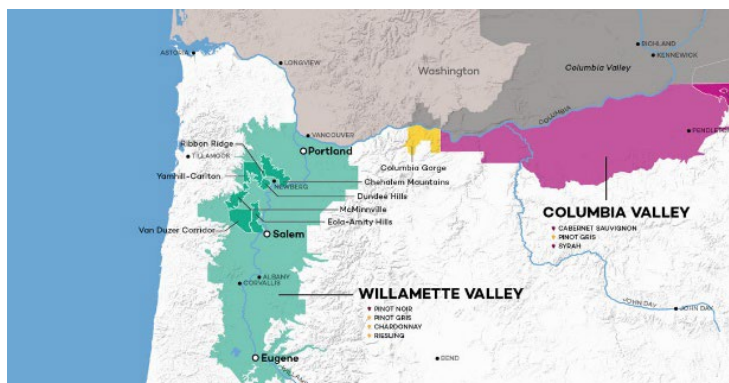
It may seem ancient history to many of my readers, but going back to the late 1960's and into the 80's, when I was cutting my wine chops, Cabernet s. and Pinot noir were the contenders for RED greatness and were frequently called the King and Queen of red wine. And in that less PC era, folks didn't object (out loud) to the gender comparison. A King's flashy accoutrements of power and his bold male dominance need little further explanation. But Queens, some said, were like a great Pinot; presentation with charm and often prettiness or even beauty and may, on first blush, seem soft and willing to please, not dominate. However, as familiarity grows there emerge layers of complexity, sophistication, and surprising power. Food for thought. And while today Pinot noir is produced, I think, on every continent where wine is made, back in the day it was almost totally France, and in France mostly in Burgundy. By law red Burgundy wine must essentially always be all and only Pinot noir.

In 1980 when Julie and I made our first wine exploration "deep dive" with a week in California's Napa & Sonoma, the only Oregon wineries with a track record in Pinot were Eyrie, and Knudsen-Erath, although 4 others had plantings and would soon have it for sale<sup>1</sup>. And Pinot noir, we discovered was finicky and considered a difficult and demanding grape to grow. It was said that **Robert Mondavi** proclaimed, "*Any fool can make decent Cabernet, but only a fool would try to make Pinot noir.*" Of course he was in the Rutherford area of Napa Valley where it is hot and dusty. While **Jansis Robinson** notes of Pinot noir, "*...only cooler regions can provide a long enough growing season to produce interesting wines, but many climates are too cool or too wet...*" and outside Burgundy "*.. need to be either continental, low latitude, high altitude, or cooled by maritime influence...*"<sup>2</sup> (as are all or West Coast Pinot areas). Sort of the Baby Bear of grapes (i.e. not too hot, not too cold, but juuust right).



To me understanding Pinot noir begins with understanding red Burgundy. Of young Burgundy the venerable British wine writer **Hugh Johnson** says, "*...it tastes very much as it smells: a little to astringent for pleasure but with none of the withering, impenetrable tannin of a great young Bordeaux. Good Burgundy tastes good from birth.*"<sup>3</sup> And I would agree that the best of Oregon, California, Australia and New Zealand, are like Burgundy in this way. But in no other way are they like Burgundy, or really like each other. This is because Pinot has perhaps the greatest ability to expresses terroir<sup>4</sup> in the flavor and aroma of it's wine of any grape. In Burgundy, even the slight variations in Terroir from one village to the next produce easily observable differences in taste and aroma (to those who drink it regularly). But throughout, even with its myriad variations it has a subtle savory nature rarely captured in regions outside of Burgundy. But everywhere Pinot has a varied but remarkable charm and an elusive delicacy. Tannins are softer and it is easy to drink after much shorter bottle aging than Cabernet or Syrah. Cherry is the most prominent fruit but that can be joined by other red fruits in interesting and subtle layers. It can be ebulliently fruity as in New Zealand, and like a less savory Burgundy with extra fruit as in Oregon and Australia. In Germany, where it is called **Spätburgunder**, it has achieved great popularity and plantings are exceeded only by France and California.

And speaking of California, the 2004 Hollywood movie “Sideways”, set in Santa Barbara County’s Santa Ynez Valley AVA, had great influence on increased Pinot planting there -- and well, everywhere they say! Along with the Santa Maria AVA, and Santa Rita AVA, it’s unique geography with West to East valleys (rather than North to South as typical of all surrounding hills and mountains) coming up from the Pacific Ocean which funnel the cool marine air to these valleys for a perfect Pinot terroir. A critical viewing of “Sideways” may be the second most important step to understand Pinot noir.



In Oregon the “Van Duzer” corridor through the coastal mountains similarly lets cool marine air blow into parts of the Willamette Valley. Wise Oregon wine tasters focus on these areas. Similar coastal effects occur in Sonoma’s Russian River Valley, and Carneros above San Pablo Bay. So Pinot is also like real estate; what matters location location location!

There are just a few other odds and ends about Pinot I’d like to pass on. You already know that it ripens early, and likes temperate climates, but won’t be surprised that it sunburns easily. It does best when yields are restricted requiring multiple vineyard passes by skilled workers to drop excess clusters – no contributor to bargain pricing. And those clusters are small and tight. Ancients thought they looked like pine cones, hence the name Pinot. Also, more Pinot is grown in Champagne today than the rest of France (but another day for sparkling wine please).

And the “Deliverance-like” entangled family structure of Malbec in last month’s “Snow on Wine” may seem mild compared to Pinot. With an unknown sire she produced daughter Savagnin who had multiple partners and sired daughter grapes including Chenin blanc and Colombard and about a dozen others unknown to me. The other parent of Chenin blanc and Colombard was Gouais blanc, another daughter of Pinot. Pinot then mounted with another unknown, the resulting “unknown” grape similarly mated, resulting in the obscure grape Duetza who mated with Manteuse blanc and produced Syrah (who knew). Mandeuse then with her other lover sired Viognier! There is more but I didn’t think it would be pertinent (except maybe to a pervert).



People often ask me which grape I like best and many of you have heard me say, “that is like asking if I love my sons or daughter more”. But it is a lie, as you may note. As you are all certifiable “Oenophiles”, you could say that I am a “Pinotphile”. When you stop gasping, chorkeling and choking there is a tale you may like. On a stop at winery “X” in the Russian River Valley in a totally empty tasting room the barista asked, would you like to start with Cab or Pinot? “I am a pinotphile I proclaimed,” and she nearly fell to the floor in uproarious uncontrollable laughter. Returning two years later, unannounced, she immediately looked me in the eye and said, “pinotphile returneth”. And truth be told, I hope you won’t like Pinot much. Limited quantity – laws of supply and demand -- all the more for me if you don’t.

So let’s show a little respect for this old grandparent and great-grandparent that helped create 21 known wine grape varieties, all of which occurred via spontaneous crossings that happened over time. **HAIL TO THE QUEEN!!**

References:

- 1) Charles Olken, Earl Singer, Norman Roby, The Connoisseurs’ Handbook of California Wines, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1983, Pp 160 – 181
- 2) Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding, Jose Vouillamoz, Wine Grapes, Harper Colling, 2012, Pp 805 – 815.
- 3) Hugh Johnson, Hugh Johnson’s Modern Encyclopedia of Wine, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1983, P 105.
- 4) Terroir: the expression of the physical factors affecting a grape vine and the grapes it produces including soil, slope, precipitation, wind and temperature.