

Lifestyle

[THE ENTHUSIAST]

A LOVER OF REDS

A California vintner wrestles with the toughest grape of them all

Pinot noir is one of the oldest recorded grape varieties. At its best, pinot noir is silky, subtle, light- to medium-bodied, perfumed with fruit, such as strawberries, or wild cherries, and is a joy to savor. At its worst, it is reedy, thin, and best forgotten.

Since the Middle Ages, pinot noir has been most identified with France's Burgundy region. For a time, French monks exclusively cultivated this finicky grape for sacramental wines. But the onset of the French Revolution in 1789 redistributed vineyards to regional families, which, subsequently, have been subdivided within families.

Today, this vineyard model remains and is the key to appreciating the region's wines. A single vineyard will produce multiple wines under different labels that, in theory, reflect a family tree.

Winemakers in Oregon and Northern California are producing fine pinot noir styles. Vision Cellars, a boutique winery in Windsor, California, produces more than 2,000 cases of award-winning pinot noir annually. Winemaker Edward Lee McDonald, known as Mac, likes to say his family has been in the business for generations. In the early 20th century, as the legend goes, his family produced Texas moonshine.

McDonald, 62, along with his wife, Lil, produces wines served in high-end restaurants such as San Francisco's Rubicon and New York's Jean George.

McDonald—a founding member of the Association of African American Vintners—says his nose is attuned to local styles. "I like pinot noir to pick up everything: blackberry, floral, wild cherries, wildflower honey, vanilla, and to finish with luscious tannins," he says. He encourages burgundy enthusiasts to explore pinot's wide range of styles: "A good pinot noir is a wine that is balanced all the way around with medium alcohol."

—Joseph Dumas

MORE INFORMATION

Burgundy wines:
www.burgundy-report.com

California wines:
www.winecountry.com

Oregon wines:
www.oregonwine.org

Vision Cellars winery:
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Association of African
American Vintners:
www.aaavintners.org