

ROBERSON WINE PRESENTS:

Pinot Noir

VARIETAL SERIES

THURSDAY NOVEMBER 5TH 2009

Pinot Noir

In the Pantheon of grape gods, Pinot Noir stands alongside Cabernet Sauvignon as perhaps the greatest variety on the planet. To many it hits highs to which no other grape can compare, producing wines of unparalleled complexity which provide the most memorable and profound of vinous experiences.

It is a variety that attracts wine's thinkers and romantics. They have long been seduced by the bewitching perfume, delicate flavours and the ability of Pinot to encapsulate the vineyard and terroir in the glass.

Now that might sound like a lot of hot air and pretentious wine speak, but Pinot is the grape that, more than any other, sets enthusiasts off on eulogy after eulogy. But there is something else to remember - it is not all plain sailing when it comes to buying, tasting and enjoying Pinot Noir. The highs maybe the highest (at least in my opinion!), but there are plenty of lows to contend with along the way, as Pinot Noir is one of the most temperamental, hard to cultivate and easy to ruin varieties there is.

Unlike many wine grapes, Pinot doesn't like the climate particularly hot. If it is too cold that is no good either. Growers in Pinot's home of Burgundy often gets things spot on, but just as often they don't and take Pinot Noir anywhere else and you will struggle to get excellent fruit. There are more clones/mutations than any other major variety (over 1000) and all of these are suitable for different styles of wine production and thrive in different types of soil or climate. The skin of the grape is very thin and a high skin to pulp ratio must be maintained if quality and ageworthiness are to be achieved. This means that yields must be kept very low (in order to get the right concentration), making it a very expensive grape to cultivate. The thin skin also makes it a delicate grape that is prone to rot and disease and particularly susceptible to damage from adverse weather conditions. It buds early, so winter frost can be a big problem and it ripens early making the picking date a dangerous and vital decision for all Pinot growers.

So why bother? Well, Pinot Noir is a variety that ages superbly and once mature can unveil mesmerising complexity. The great wines of Burgundy are prized around the world and the best have formed a template for perfection used by New World imitators from Argentina to Zaire. Well, not quite Zaire just yet, but the global fashion for Pinot Noir has reached almost everywhere else, resulting in wines that range from very promising to downright awful.

It is not just red wines that have made Pinot famous - it's easy to forget that, with Chardonnay, Pinot is the dominant force in Champagne, where it contributes to the richness and complexity of the world's best sparkling wines. This has led to plantings in many places around the world where winemakers aspire to make great fizz.

While Pinot Noir wouldn't claim to be the oldest of all grape varieties, it could be the one that has been using its current name for the longest period of time. The first written references to a grape called Pinot came way back in the first century AD, in Columella's *De Re Rustica* (although 'Pinot Noir' specifically, rather than just Pinot, is first found in 14th century documents) and by the early 7th century the monks of Citeaux had planted Pinot in Burgundy's 'Clos de Beze' vineyard. Since then it has gone on to mutate or give birth to a number of other varieties. Chardonnay was originally part of the family but has since developed its own distinct characteristics, but vineyards across the world are still awash with Pinots Blanc, Gris and Meunier. Each of these varieties have their own local variants that have adapted to their surroundings and there are also a myriad of crossings (like Pinotage, Aligoté and Zweigelt to name a few) that bear testament to the popularity to this most fickle but fantastic of grapes.

GERMANY

Germany has never been a country famed for its red wines, building a reputation instead for the great white wines of the Riesling grape.

In recent years however, Pinot Noir - or Spätburgunder as the Germans so romantically call it - has begun to attract attention for the soft and juicy reds that it makes in the Baden region.

Baden (in the South-West) is the warmest of all Germany's wine regions and 37% of the total vineyard area is planted to Pinot. A number of artisanal producers have emerged from obscurity in the past decade and, thanks to a growing export market for their best wines, they are beginning to attract international attention.

U.S.A

Anyone that has seen the movie 'Sideways' will know that Americans caught the Pinot-bug in a big way. A rash of plantings has taken place over the last couple of decades promising a glut of cheap and not so cheerful Pinot Noir for years to come. But if the USA has its share of the bad and the ugly, it is also blessed with some of the good. California has many sub-regions that boast ideal climatic conditions for cultivating Pinot such as Russian River Valley and Carneros in Sonoma County. Perhaps even more promising is the state of Oregon where the cooler climate and long growing season allow Pinot to reach excellent ripeness levels.

AUSTRALIA

Australia has been growing Pinot for many years, but there are only a few regions with a suitable enough climate to warrant extensive planting of a grape that reacts very badly to excessive heat.

The Yarra Valley in Victoria was, for a long time, the wine region that attracted most Australian attention for its Pinots. In more recent years a number of other promising areas in Victoria have emerged such as Geelong and the Mornington Peninsula. Tasmania has also been getting Australian Pinot-philosophers excited and has become a hotbed for producers of both red table wines and white sparkling wines made from Pinot Noir.

NEW ZEALAND

If there is one country in the New World that has Pinot drinkers excited, then it has to be New Zealand. Some of the very best proponents of the grape outside Burgundy are based in regions like Central Otago, Marlborough and Martinborough on the Southern Island of this country with a very cool climate.

One of the many conditions for producing profound Pinot is venerable old vines, with rootstocks and clones matched perfectly to the terroir in which they are planted. As New Zealand has only been planting Pinot seriously for about 20 years it will be many years before its potential will be fulfilled, but already there are signs that producers like Ata Rangi and Felton Rd are beginning to fashion wines of genuine complexity.

SOUTH AFRICA

Pinot has played a massive role in South African wine, by virtue of the fact that their national variety in Pinotage (a crossing of Pinot Noir and Cinsault). The quality of wines made from Pinotage is open to debate - at Roberson we don't stock a single one and never have - but serious producers like Hamilton Russell and Meerlust have ignored it in favour of Europe's most noble grapes and their Pinot Noirs are amongst the country's best.

The southern-most vineyard area is Walker Bay, a region that is perhaps the most exciting for Pinot Noir in the country thanks to the work of pioneers like Tim Hamilton-Russell.

FRANCE

Pinot Noir holds a special place in French wine thanks to its role in Champagne and Burgundy, but it features in other great wines regions across the country.

The light and juicy red and rosé wines of Alsace, Jura and the eastern Loire Valley are made predominantly from Pinot Noir and there are even isolated plantings in the Languedoc, where a few rogue winemakers make Vins de Pays wines from a grape that is at home in a far cooler climate than they can offer. Quality can be variable, especially in places like Alsace where the grapes can struggle to reach the correct ripeness levels. In some years the red wines could almost be mistaken for rosé thanks to their lack of colour!

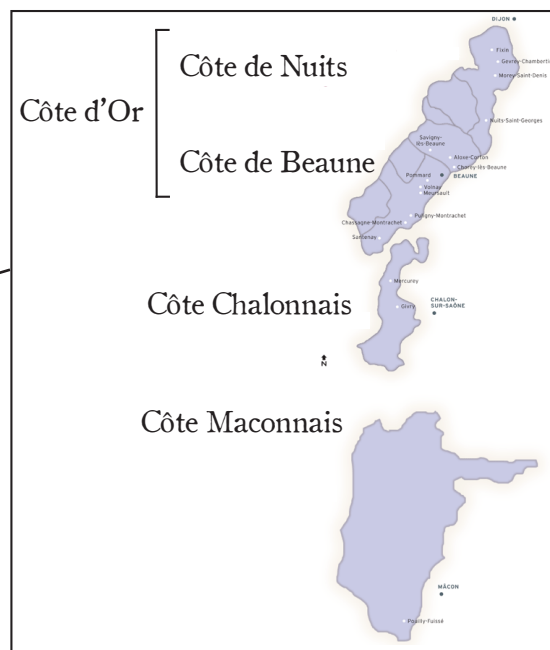
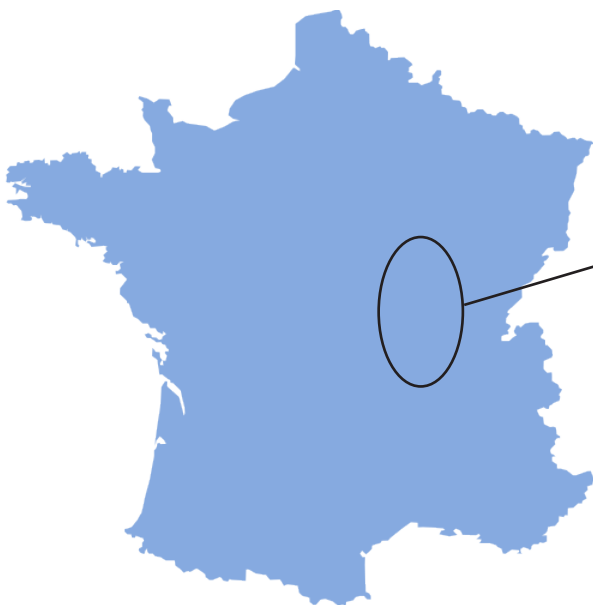
BURGUNDY

Despite its relatively wide reach throughout France and the New World, there is no place like home and, for Pinot Noir, home is most definitely Burgundy and more specifically the gentle slope of the world famous Côte d'Or.

To some extent it is a bit of a mystery as to why nowhere else in the world has been able to show Pinot Noir in the same light as Burgundy. This becomes more understandable when one considers that the grape has been cultivated here for over 1500 years and over time (and careful vine selection), Pinot has been perfectly adapted to its surrounds. There are also a high proportion of old vines, or 'Vielles Vignes' as the French refer to them once they get past approx 45 years of age. The depth and complexity of flavour that Pinot is capable of can only really been demonstrated by a mature wine from a mature vineyard and Burgundy is the only place in the world where these two factors come together.

Of course, Burgundy is not cheap. Production volumes for the best wines are miniscule and demand is insatiable. This creates a climate of speculation for many wines and the resulting bottle prices can be extreme. Even at lower quality levels quantities are relatively tiny compared to other regions thanks to the patchwork of small landholdings and the low volume production that is required in order to maintain any semblance of quality.

Pinot Noir is a unique grape and Burgundy is a unique wine region. Although infinitely complex to understand, a good grasp of the basics will help you to find Pinot Noir that offers good value for money and, with patience and time, may be a genuinely profound wine drinking experience.



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THE REGIONS

Côte d'Or Appellations 101

Generic & Regional: These AOCs represent the largest chunk of Pinot Noir (and Chardonnay) production in the Côte d'Or. Seldom seen in the UK, but propping up the rest of the pile are the AOCs Passe-Tout-Grains (a blend of Pinot and Gamay) and the not so grand AOC Bourgogne Grand Ordinaire. These wines will invariably be thin and acidic (especially in cooler vintages), although P-T-G is made by a small number of top producers and can be juicy and delicious in the best examples. Proceed, however, with caution.

The most common appellation is Bourgogne Rouge / Bourgogne Pinot Noir, which can be a blend of Pinot fruit from any combination of AOC vineyards in Greater Burgundy. In practice the fruit will normally come from a given locality rather than one parcel from the north being combined with one from the south, but the essence of this AOC is that the fruit has not been deemed worthy of a higher appellation because the vineyard site is on flat land in an inauspicious position. That doesn't mean that all Bourgogne Rouge is rubbish (the producer is of vital importance) but it does mean that *some* Bourgogne Rouge is rubbish.

Slightly higher up the Pinot chain come the regional appellations like Côte de Nuits Villages or Côte de Beaune Villages. The fruit for these wines must come from specified sites in a select number of villages that qualify for the appellation. Again the fruit can (and invariably will) be blended from a number of different sources, but in many examples these can be good wines that are a (small) step up from straight Bourgogne Rouge.

Regional wines from the 'Hautes-Côtes' (de Beaune and de Nuits) or 'high slopes' are variable in quality, but the best examples can be fresh and elegant. As most serious producers are based in the Côte d'Or proper (rather than up in the hills) there are few of these that punch above their weight.

Village: This is the level at which Burgundy starts to get serious, with many wines of genuine class and ageworthiness being produced under some very famous AOCs like Gevrey-Chambertin and Vosne-Romanée.

Fruit for village wines must come from village AOC vineyards within the specific commune, although the final blend may be from a number of different plots. In some cases, vineyard names are declared on the bottle (known as a *lieux-dit* in French) but all the fruit must be from that specific site.

There is a lot of rubbish peddled under these (and other) famous appellations, but things have improved massively in quality terms since the 70s and 80s. As with anything in Burgundy, the producer is all important. Large negociants are going to make a far more bland and industrial product than artisanal small producers.

In total there are 25 village appellations in the Côte d'Or, from Fixin in the north to Maranges in the south.

1er Cru: The total of 562 1er cru sites in Burgundy includes some in Chablis and the Côte Chalonnais, but the vast majority are in the Côte d'Or. They range from the mediocre to the exceptional and in some cases are every bit as good as most Grand Cru sites.

While it is possible to blend 1er Cru fruit from the same village together to make, for example, a plain 'Gevrey-Chambertin 1er Cru', most bottlings will feature the name of the specific vineyard. Each 1er Cru site has its own distinct appellation and this is reflective of the difference in terroir that makes wines at this level unique.

Grand Cru: The smallest percentage of production comes from the most exclusive and reputed vineyards - the Grand Crus. These are often sites of historical significance that have been identified for hundreds of years as the pinnacle of Burgundy terroir. Some of them are living on past glories, but many of them give fruit of such quality that in good vintages they make wines that will age and improve for decades.

All of the fruit must come from the specific vineyard site and the appellations themselves exist in isolation of the village that they come from. Wines from 'Clos des Lambrays Grand Cru' will not feature the village name of Morey-St-Denis on the label.

