



OREGON PINOT NOIR UPDATE

Josh Raynolds | Jul/Aug 2014

In the eyes of most Willamette Valley winemakers 2012 is a pinot vintage for the record books, and by all accounts the market is in agreement: the wines have sold swiftly and in many cases are all gone at the wineries and even at the wholesale and retail levels in many markets. A smaller than normal yield meant that the wines would be allocated, regardless, but as soon as word got out about the overall high quality of the wines all bets were off. A number of retailers I've spoken to reported that they're selling through their '12s, especially those from big-name wineries, as quickly as they can get them, and that they could easily sell twice as much. In a sense this is the same phenomenon that pinot producers in northern California are experiencing, the big difference being that the crop down south was usually huge.

The year started off slowly with budbreak occurring in the third week of April--a week later than normal--and there was scant rain through flowering, which resulted in a small fruit set. Clusters tended to be small and tight, with small berries, which ensured an overall low yield. The weather was dry and warm through July and August, meaning that there was no disease pressure. There was also plenty of sunshine with no real heat spikes, which kept the uptake of sugar in the grapes steady and skin tannins in check as well. Harvesting mostly took place between the end of September and the third week of October under picture-perfect conditions in which growers could harvest to suit their style, with no pressure from the weather to rush things or hang around waiting for something to happen, as in 2011.

Two thousand twelve was a much warmer and drier season than 2011--which was actually flat-out cold--and 2010 as well, so the wines of 2012 are markedly different in style from those earlier vintages. A nitpicker could point out that while acidity levels were definitely healthy in 2012, they could be a bit on the low side, especially if one is looking for wines that will age for a really long time. But how many people drink pinot noir, much less from the New World, with significant age, as in a decade or more, anyway? It could also be argued that alcohol levels can be high in 2012, but few of the wines that I tasted manifested their alcohol in an unfriendly manner, unless one's measuring stick is wine from Oregon's coldest, rainiest vintages.

Broadly speaking, the Willamette Valley's 2012 pinots are fleshy and fruit-dominated, with round tannins and forward personalities. The fruit tends to the darker side of the pinot spectrum--think cherry and blackberry rather than strawberry and raspberry, much less cranberry and redcurrant--and this gives the wines massive crowd appeal. The best wines also have the depth to age, so don't be fooled by their accessible nature in the early going. Still, I'd err on the young side with most '12s, if for no other reason than to enjoy their boisterous fruit and velvety textures.

With 2012 we see the converse to 2011: even entry-level wines display uncommon depth, richness and density, with darker fruit character and elevated alcohol levels; many producers whose wines are typically in the 12.5% to 13% range made wines that cruise up to or even beyond 14%. While the earlier vintage has a number of enthusiasts, I wonder how much of these drinkers' enthusiasm is at least partially a political, anti-ripeness statement, which I believe was often the case with the 2007s



and 2005s as well. It's fashionable in some wine circles to deride ripe, fruit-driven wines (like the Willamette Valley '12s), warm regions and warm vintages in general by extolling the virtues of growing regions and vintages that display traits that are the polar opposite, often emphatically so. While it's true that 2011 (and '07 and '05) made a number of pure, understated, lively and often intensely flavored pinots, there are also plenty that are shrill and pinched. That's just what the vineyards were dealt by nature, in the form of cold weather, rain and a lack of sunshine, with the predictable results. The best winemakers dealt with it and the results are often stunning. But undernourished doesn't necessarily translate to elegant, just as ripeness doesn't always mean clumsy and lacking in balance.

The best 2011s do indeed show very good delineation and site character, or at least regional specificity. But a high level of acidity is present in most of the wines, and a number of them come off as somewhat attenuated. Many pinot lovers view the high acidity as a positive quality and that includes me, but in reasonable doses. One also should be wary of the potential ageworthiness of wines that lack sufficient material, or concentration, to go along with their high acidity. While these wines may very well endure on that acidity, they may have little else going for them down the road. The same can be said for wines that have tannins too strong for their fruit--or, of course, loads of fruit but insufficient structure. Suffice it to say that if your tastes run away from pinot noir with sweet, plush fruit and seamless, velvety texture, plenty of 2011s will be more to your style, while the mostly fruit-driven, often Rubenesque '12s will likely leave you, if not your guests or customers, cold.

DOBBES FAMILY ESTATE

92pts 2012 Dobbes Family Estate Pinot Noir Patricia's Cuvee Willamette Valley

(\$55) Bright ruby. Deeply pitched aromas of dark berries, cola and smoky Indian spices, with a lively mineral quality adding lift. Sappy and expansive on the palate, offering sweet blackberry and cherry-vanilla flavors that are lifted and braced by tangy acidity. Closes smooth, smoky and very long, with supple tannins adding grip.

92pts 2012 Dobbes Family Estate Pinot Noir Symonette Vineyard Eola-Amity Hills

(\$65) Bright ruby. Exotic, expansive aromas of red and dark berries, sandalwood, cola and allspice, with a hint of licorice in the background. On the palate, fleshy blackberry and cherry-vanilla flavors gain flesh and spiciness with aeration. Shows excellent clarity and a seamless quality on the youthfully tannic finish, with the cola and spice notes repeating.

92pts 2012 Dobbes Family Estate Pinot Noir Quailhurst Vineyard Chehalem Mountains

(\$65) Brilliant red. Fresh raspberry and candied rose on the perfumed nose and in the mouth. Quite elegant and light on its feet for a pinot from this producer, offering finely etched red berry and spicecake flavors and a touch of blood orange. Finishes brisk and spicy, with very good clarity, silky tannins and building sweetness.

92pts 2012 Dobbes Family Estate Pinot Noir Meyer Vineyard Dundee Hills

(\$65) Bright ruby-red. Intense cherry and dark berry aromas show very good clarity, picking up notes of woodsmoke, anise and cola with air. Spicy, concentrated and focused on the palate, offering sweet black raspberry and mocha flavors underscored by juicy acidity. Closes spicy and very long, with supple tannins building slowly and folding into the wine's juicy fruit.

90pts 2012 Dobbes Family Estate Pinot Noir Amelia Rose Cuvee Rogue Valley

(\$45) Dark red. Smoky cherry and dark berries on the deeply perfumed nose and in the mouth. Fleshy and broad but lively as well, offering bitter cherry and blackberry flavors that pick up a peppery nuance with air. Closes spicy and long, with lingering blackberry and bitter cherry qualities and slow-building tannins.



90pts 2012 Dobbles Family Estate Pinot Noir Grande Assemblage Willamette Valley

(\$28) Bright ruby. Expressive raspberry and floral scents, with oak spice and smoke qualities building in the glass. Lively and seamless on the palate, offering gently sweet red berry and bitter cherry flavors and a bracing kick of orange pith. Closes on a juicy note, with very good clarity and fine-grained tannins adding grip.

JOVINO

88pts 2011 Jovino Pinot Noir Oregon

(\$15) Bright ruby. Smoky cherry and licorice aromas are lifted by a peppery note. Shows a slight jamminess on the palate, with plump red and dark berry and candied plum flavors spreading out on the back half. Closes supple and broad, with repeating red fruit character and good cling. I'd drink this fruit bomb now for, well, its fruitiness.

WINE BY JOE

87pts 2012 Wine by Joe Pinot Noir Oregon

(\$19) Bright violet color. Ripe cherry and plum scents show a slight jamminess and a hint of mocha. Supple and open-knit, offering smooth red fruit liqueur flavors that provide good straightforward appeal. Picks up a peppery nuance with air, which adds bite to the clean, focused finish. Very easy to drink, especially at a cool temperature.

MAISON L'ENVOYÉ

92pts 2012 Maison L'Envoye The Attache Pinot Noir Willamette Valley

(\$40) Bright ruby. Deeper and darker in character than the Two Messengers, with intense cherry and black raspberry aromas and notes of cola, violet and woodsmoke. Broad and fleshy on entry, then tighter in the middle, offering intense dark berry flavors lifted by juicy acidity. Shows very good energy and lift on the finish, leaving smoke and floral pastille notes behind.

91pts 2012 Maison L'Envoye Two Messengers Pinot Noir Willamette Valley

(\$30) Bright ruby. Sappy berries, Asian spices, minerals and fresh flowers on the fragrant nose. Then suave and juicy in the mouth, with excellent cut and purity to the tangy red berry and rose pastille flavors. Penetrating and powerful yet at the same time elegant and light on its feet. Finishes silky and very long, with resonating spiciness and no obvious tannins.