

The Persnickety Pinot

How Carneros has tamed one of the trickiest red wine grapes



It's been called the heartbreak grape, the varietal that many winemakers love most and have mastered least.

Pinot Noir, the grape in France's esteemed red Burgundies, manages to humble vintners year after year. In the wrong site, it yields insipid wine that lacks aroma, color and flavor. In the right site, it can make wine with the perfume of sun-warmed raspberries and a texture that at least one smitten wine writer likened to the baby Jesus in velvet pajamas.

Since at least the 1930s, winemakers have suspected that Carneros — a growing region that straddles southern Napa and Sonoma counties — might be one of those blessed sites. Today, the track record of such wineries as Acacia, Beaulieu Vineyard, Etude, Saintsbury, Sinskey and Truchard — all devotees of Carneros grapes — makes it clear that they're right. And winemakers who work with Carneros Pinot Noir say the wines will only get better as new and improved plantings begin to bear fruit.

"It's the place where you can do what you need to do with Pinot Noir," says Tony Soter, the owner and winemaker of Etude, a highly regarded Napa producer. "It needs to be in a cool climat  to preserve the color and fruity flavors that are compromised in high temperatures."

Thanks to the San Pablo Bay at its southern border,

Carneros is indeed much cooler than the northern reaches of the Sonoma and Napa valleys. The marine influence shows in the fog that lingers in Carneros on summer mornings when up-valley Calistoga is already baking. In the afternoon, an ocean breeze dries the dew on the thin-skinned Pinot grapes, preventing mildew, and the evening fog cools them quickly at night. Day in and day out, Carneros at its warmest will be 10 degrees cooler than northern Napa Valley, says Beaulieu Vineyard winemaker Joel Aiken.

Pinot Noir grown in a warm region ripens too fast and rarely develops the flavor or color intensity that connoisseurs want. Carneros' longer growing season allows the fruit to hang on the vine longer, typically until mid-September, until the grapes aren't just technically mature but are actually fully ripe.

Even the region's early settlers recognized its suitability for wine grapes. In addition to sheep ranches (*carneros* is Spanish for sheep), vineyards appeared on the area's rolling hills as early as the late 1830s. Phylloxera devastated most of them by the end of the century, and Prohibition dealt another blow, but winemakers began eyeing Carneros again soon after Repeal.

At least a few vineyards had survived the turmoil because Aiken says legendary Beaulieu Vineyard winemaker Andr  Tchelistcheff was buying Pinot Noir grapes from Carneros in the late 1930s. Tche-

What to pair with Pinot

"I think Pinot Noir is the world's best food wine," says Tony Soter, whose Etude Pinot Noir is a top-selling restaurant brand.

Not surprisingly, winemakers responsible for other top Carneros Pinot Noirs tend to agree. They believe it has more range than Cabernet Sauvignon, going beyond lamb and beef to complement chicken, duck and dark fish like salmon and tuna, especially when the fish are grilled.

Soter argues that Pinot Noir, which is typically less tannic than Cabernet Sauvignon, works better with the leaner cooking in vogue today. The old-style heavy French sauces might have needed a tannic wine to cut the richness, but today's lighter, spicier dishes welcome the fruitiness of a Pinot Noir.

David Graves likes his own Saintsbury Pinot Noir with tuna or king salmon off the grill.

"That, to me, is great flavor convergence," says the winemaker, who would also pour his wine with pasta in a braised meat sauce that has a hint of tomato. "Lots of tomato calls for Zinfandel," says Graves. "A little tomato works fine with Pinot Noir."

Soter says a good Carneros Pinot can stand up to some of the wine-challenging ethnic ingredients, including chiles, prevalent in modern American cuisine. Among his own favorite partners for his wine, Soter also lists grilled salmon "and anything from Chez Panisse."

—J.F.

Left: Etude Winery Cellar Master Vincente Garcia and Winemaker Tony Soter tasting. Right: Luz Maria Martinez pulls off weak clusters and leaves from around tiny pinot clusters at Hudson Vineyards in Carneros.



For that reason, growers in Carneros and elsewhere have turned to vertical trellising to keep more of the leaves in the sun. In the old days, the vines were allowed to sprawl more, creating an umbrella effect that shaded the fruit.

"We train the shoots to grow straight up and do hand work to get them vertical," Aiken says. "And we do a lot of pulling of leaves around the clusters, which wasn't typical in the 1980s."

Winemakers also say that the new clones planted in Carneros recently are a big improvement over the old clones, many of which were chosen with sparkling wine production in mind. The new clones are yielding more intense and deep-colored fruit, and growers are planting a greater variety to give winemakers more paints in their paintbox.

But perhaps the greatest advance in Carneros Pinot Noir, winemakers say, comes from the recent efforts to restrict yields. Vines that produce fewer grapes yield more intense wines, so paradoxically the best growers try to limit their crop. They have replanted their vineyards with low-vigor Pinot Noir clones grafted to growth-limiting rootstocks. They've planted the vines closer together so they compete more. And they repeatedly go through the vineyard during the growing season to cut away shoots and, later, whole clusters.

"The most consistent challenge is reducing the crop," confirms Soter. "More than anywhere else I've seen Pinot Noir grow, Carneros has a benign spring climate. Nine years out of 10, it sets a bountiful crop. If you want to make wines of concentration and length, you need to get the crop down. And you have to pay for the privilege with your growers to do that."

Since most growers are paid by the ton, they are understandably reluctant to leave fruit on the ground. Vintners who formerly battled growers on this issue now discuss crop-thinning regimens in advance and pay a premium for the grower's effort. Soter has begun paying for his grapes by the acre, so the grower has no incentive to maximize yield.

All these efforts have paid off, winemakers say, in wines that are darker, richer, more concentrated and longer-lasting than the Carneros Pinot Noirs of 15 years ago. Vintners compare them only reluctantly to Pinot Noirs from Burgundy, Oregon or Sonoma's Russian River Valley, arguing that the best wines from each of these prime areas are more alike than they are different.

"For me, Carneros Pinots can be as profound and satisfying as Pinot Noir from anywhere," says Soter. And as more new vineyards with improved clones come into production, the wines should only get better. The best wines in Carneros, he says, haven't even been made yet. ◉

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