

Celebrate Lunar New Year with this California Pinot Noir — and Ai Weiwei

By [Charles Passy](#)

Donum Estate, located in Sonoma County, has partnered with the famed Chinese artist and activist on special releases



The bottles

The Donum Estate's [Ai Weiwei Vertical Pinot Noir collection](#), \$390

The back story

We have often marked the Lunar New Year with a festive meal at a Chinese restaurant. But for the current 2021 celebration, heralding the start of the Year of the Ox, we're going a different route and turning our attention to Donum Estate, a winemaker in California's Sonoma County that is known for its Pinot Noir.

It may seem like a stretch, but there's a connection: Mei and Allan Warburg, owners of the 20-year-old winery, are avid art collectors who have showcased some of their acquisitions at Donum. One striking example is the Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei's "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads," a series of sculptures depicting the animals representing the 12 signs of the Chinese zodiac. Like much of Ai Weiwei's work, the series has a political undertone — the sculptures are interpretations of ones looted from China by British and French troops in 1860. As the artist has explained, "My work is always dealing with real or fake, authenticity, what the value is, and how the value relates to current political and social understandings and misunderstandings."

Donum has commissioned Ai Weiwei to design wine labels based on his zodiac heads and has gathered three of the bottles in a collection, timed for the 2021 Lunar New Year. The wines themselves are made from grapes sourced from different prime California locales such as the Anderson and Russian River valleys.

What we think about them

In contrast to Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir can be a softer, more delicate affair, with notes of fruit and spice. But the varietal doesn't necessarily lack in complexity, as exemplified by these Donum Estate offerings. Though pricey, these are deep, almost mysterious wines that command your attention with lots of intriguing flavors. For example, Donum's tasting notes for the 2016 Angel Camp Pinot Noir, part of the Ai Weiwei collection, say you should pick up everything from cherry pie to peppercorns to cola.

The label designs make for a subtle statement, incorporating just a small depiction of an animal head, nothing more or less. But that is perhaps in keeping with the quality of the wines, which aren't "big" but are nevertheless intriguing.

How to enjoy them

We like Pinot particularly for the fact it's a wine that pairs well with an extraordinary range of foods. That is true as well with these Donum wines. The winemaker suggests dishes ranging from stuffed mushrooms to a three-cheese peach-and-prosciutto pizza as options.