

In the Groove

California Pinot Noir gains momentum and builds on its strengths in 2014

By James Laube



Pisoni Vineyards in Monterey's Santa Lucia Highlands was first planted to Pinot Noir in 1982 and is now a leading site for the grape.

California Pinot Noir is enjoying a harmonic convergence. Everything seems to be going its way as it builds on a decade of consistent success.

"Pinot Noir has evolved well beyond the point of being a popular—or new or novelty—variety," says Jeff Pisoni, winemaker for his family's Santa Lucia Highlands winery. "It has identified itself as a variety that works remarkably well in several parts of the state. That being said, I don't foresee it growing or expanding into many new regions or with a lot of new plantings."

But he and others may be surprised. New start-ups are everywhere. Producers in Sonoma and Santa Barbara are inching ever closer to the Pacific, as well as venturing deeper inland into the smallest of parcels and unlikeliest of locales. Also in the mix are Napa Valley Cabernet producers, such as Carter's Ancillary label, Hall's Walt and Schrader's Boars' View, which have been among the most aggressive new players, armed with money and marketing

clout. All of this expansion is adding excitement to the Pinot scene, contributing layers of intrigue and creating a snowball effect.

What's becoming more apparent with each year is the high level of quality and the diversification of styles. This report includes reviews of more than 630 Pinots tasted since my last story ("The Art of Pinot," Sept. 30, 2015). During this period I blind-tasted around 240 2014s (with 96 rating outstanding), along with roughly 370 2013s (106 outstanding). My highest-scoring wine, the Marcassin Sonoma Coast Three Sisters Vineyard, comes from 2010 (96, \$75). (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/093016.)

The twin vintages of 2013 and 2014 overlap in the market, though they are more fraternal than identical. Both produced a bevy of exceptional wines. Four 2013s reached 95 points: Boars' View Sonoma Coast (\$125), Cirq Russian River Valley Bootleggers' Hill (\$125), Dehlinger Russian River Valley Altamont (\$60) and Donum

Carneros West Slope (\$90). When it comes to 2014s, seven earned 94-point ratings, including Arista's Longbow (\$60) and Monori Vineyard (\$75), both from Russian River Valley; Kosta Browne's California-designated 4-Barrel (\$125) and Santa Lucia Highlands Rosella's Vineyard (\$90); Rochioli's Russian River Valley River Block (\$86); Sojourn's Sonoma Coast Gap's Crown Vineyard (\$59); and Walt's Santa Lucia Highlands Sierra Mar (\$75).

The mix of years, vineyards and styles covered in this report offers consumers an enticing menu, with wines to cellar and drink now.

"I thought '13 was a wine you can hold on to, with firm tannins, really firm—almost too tannic to drink early," says Pisoni. "The '14s had a similar level of concentration but more development because [the grapes] had more development in the vineyard."

The 2013s "were a little slow to develop in barrel, not really showing how nice they were until later than usual," says Anne Moller-Racke of Donum. The 2014s are more accessible, rich and forward, precocious and charming, vintners say. Moller-Racke adds, "Don't underestimate the quiet beauty [of the '14s]. These wines have power and elegance, similar to 2004."

The differences between the two vintages are subtle. Yields in 2014 were higher than in 2013, vintners said, with larger berry size despite the drought.

"The wines from the vintage are strong, with a vibrant and intense character," says Eva Dehlinger, winemaker for her family's label. "In some ways the 2014s are more reminiscent of the 2012s in their suppleness. I think of the 2013s as being more textured than both the 2012 and 2011. At Dehlinger, the character of the vintage was strong enough that we created several special bottlings to showcase the year and our site."

The 2015 crop is a different story entirely. The most severe year of the long-term drought affecting California led to swings in vineyard health, tonnage and wine quality. In the end, vintners played the hands they were dealt: Though heat and rain were factors, site remained the

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Anne Moller-Racke's Donum Estate sources Pinot Noir from four vineyards spread across Carneros, Russian River Valley and Anderson Valley. A release from 2013 is one of this report's top wines.

most important determinant of success.

"Vintages are always very exciting," says Michael Browne of Kosta Browne and Cirq. "What you do in the winery means the hand can trump the land." Winemakers select clones and harvest dates and determine ripeness as well as cooperage. But the site dictates overall quality. It adjusts or compensates for variations in weather. In 2015, Browne says, the depth of the drought took hold. The berries looked like "Pinot Noir caviar," leading to wines that tasted "like a bowl of crushed berries."

After a decade of growth and the appearance of many new brands, a hierarchy of producers is emerging, most of them from Sonoma. They include Aubert, Dehlinger, Donum, Kosta Browne, Kistler, Marcassin, Rochioli, Peter Michael, Roar, Pisoni and Paul Hobbs. Other worthy mentions include A.P. Vin, Kanzler, Loring, Sojourn and Siduri.

Also of note are new arrivals and turnarounds, such as Arista, Domaine Della, Cirq, Ferren, Boars' View, Occidental (owned by Stephen Kistler), Walt and Wren Hop.

The best of these wines share not only a sense of place but also balance, even as some are richer and riper, others trimmer and more elegant, with nervy acidity. Still more rely on finesse and feature supple textures. The range of flavors extends from savory herb to ripe red and dark berry, often with floral arrangements and delicate oak.

California Pinot Noirs "are becoming more of their place," explains Browne. "There's a bubble, an upswing where you grow it, how you grow it. The vines are growing slowly and the vine age is also helping."

Vintners are putting a fine sheen on their wines, starting in the vineyard. Although most Pinot plantings are still rather new, a few are showing their age. Dehlinger is overhauling whole parcels, a sign that the Pinot industry continues to evolve. Eva Dehlinger, the daughter of founder Tom Dehlinger, has turned



over an original 40-year-old vineyard with a massive replanting. This rejuvenation sets the stage for a new tier of wines that will define the next generation for the producer.

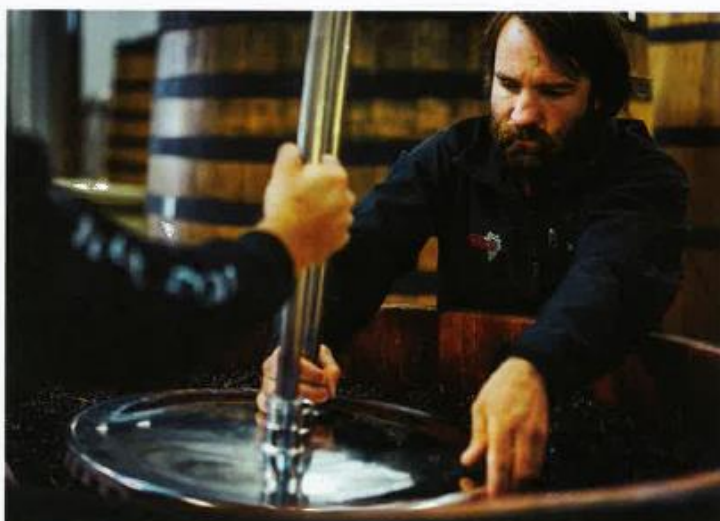
One new Dehlinger Pinot Noir, called Rénatus, is sourced from the sections of the ranch undergoing redevelopment. “The term is of Latin origin,” Eva Dehlinger says. “[It] refers to rebirth and renewal—obviously a meaningful concept for someone replanting vines put in by their father over 40 years ago.”

To prepare for the newer plantings, she plowed 4 feet deep, removing old roots and mixing the soil. “We followed the plowing with several years of fallow to rejuvenate the earth. The approach has been successful, and we have recently started to produce crops from these younger plantings. The young vines are making a very potent and powerful wine, with lots of density and personality. We couldn’t resist bottling some separately to showcase what distinctive wines are coming off these vines. So that’s something to look forward to, along with our established designates of Champ de Mars and High Plains.”

Looking at a map of California, the state’s diversity of coastal valleys and appellations offers a road map that leads from the past to the present. For years, irregular quality and odd clones held the wines back. Vineyards planted in what ended up being less desirable areas have been abandoned for more ideal venues. The move to more beneficent sites has proven pivotal.

Most California Pinot Noir production takes place in areas close to the coast. By means of comparison, Pinots from the state tend to be richer, fuller, fruitier and sometimes oakier than those grown in Oregon, Burgundy and New Zealand. But if you put Pinots from each region in a blind tasting you’ll be surprised by how comparable they are. With age, the differences become even more nuanced.

What sets California Pinot Noir apart from its peers is price.



Kosta Browne cellar master Julien Howseplan works with grapes drawn from Sonoma Coast, Russian River Valley and Santa Lucia Highlands. Two of the producer’s 2014 Pinots are among the elite in this report.

Burgundies of note are the most expensive, and Oregon’s top wines are inching ever higher. California, meanwhile, offers a slew of wines in the \$25-to-\$40 range—more in line with what you’ll pay for a New Zealand import.

Pinot Noir is famous for being difficult to grow and vinify, and volume for the best wines is usually in the range of 100 to 500 cases. That makes vintages important, as a string of superior years puts more wine in the market. Still, the very best wines are often sold directly from winery to consumer, limiting the supply.

The next test for California Pinot Noir will be in how it ages. Although the wines can begin bold and flashy, within a year or so they transform into elegant, delicate renditions. That this evolution is happening on such a large scale is cause for excitement.

Senior editor James Laube is Wine Spectator’s lead taster on California Pinot Noir.

Rating California Pinot Noir Vintages in Major Regions

	Anderson Valley	Carneros	Santa Barbara*	Santa Lucia Highlands	Sonoma**		
2014	88	88	89	93	92	Even higher yields than 2013, with fleshy, forward and showy wines; many approachable now	Drink or hold
2013	87	88	86	94	91	Another huge crop of generally high quality; slow to open and ageworthy	Drink or hold
2012	89	87	85	91	90	Record-size crop with atypically tannic wines; best in Santa Lucia Highlands	Drink or hold
2011	86	87	87	93	87	Rain wreaked havoc at harvest, resulting in lighter wines of uneven quality	Drink or hold
2010	88	88	94	92	94	Weather extremes tested growers, yet vintage is strong, with structured wines	Drink or hold
2009	92	91	90	94	97	Almost perfect, with scores of ripe, polished, deeply flavored wines	Drink
2008	80	90	89	90	89	Uneven year; top wines are complex and delicate	Drink

*Santa Barbara includes Santa Barbara, Sts. Rita Hills, Santa Maria Valley, Santa Ynez Valley and Edna Valley AVAs

**Sonoma includes Russian River Valley, Sonoma Coast, Sonoma Mountain, Sonoma Valley, Green Valley and the Fort Ross-Seaview AVAs

A score range indicates preliminary analysis based on a limited sampling; many wines of the vintage not yet reviewed.

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended; NR, not rated

Drinkability: “NYR” means most of the wines of the vintage are yet to be released; “drink” means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; “hold” means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature.

James Laube's Recommended California Pinot Noirs

More than 630 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/093016. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
MARCASSIN Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Three Sisters Vineyard 2010 Presents a rich, unctuous core of fresh earth and herbs, along with a strong dose of oak. Strikingly youthful and vibrant.	96	\$75
BOARS' VIEW Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 2013 Bold, rich and assertive, with lively acidity and a tight, dense core of raspberry and blackberry, revealing rose, anise and spice scents.	95	\$125
CIRQ Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Bootlegger's Hill 2013 A thrilling expression of charming elegance, this captures moderately ripe plum and blueberry flavors, with aromatic rose petal aromas.	95	\$125
DEHLINGER Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Altamont 2013 A seamless expression of juicy plum, cherry blossom and rose petal, with black cherry flavors at the core. Remarkably charming.	95	\$60
DONUM Pinot Noir Carneros West Slope 2013 Exhibits a gorgeous core of rich blackberry, wild berry, raspberry and cherry flavors, accented by heady floral rose petal scents.	95	\$90
ARISTA Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Longbow 2014 Impressive, with depth and purity of flavors built around blackberry, plum, raspberry and blueberry, shaded by smoky, toasty oak.	94	\$60
ARISTA Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Mononi Vineyard 2014 Exhibits dusty, savory herb details and cedar-laced tannins that give the plum, anise, black tea and wild berry flavors traction.	94	\$75
AUBERT Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast UV-SL Vineyard 2013 Offers a racy, zesty expression of spicy raspberry and wild berry fruit that's pleasantly ripe and juicy, offering depth and richness.	94	\$120
CIRQ Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Treehouse 2013 Combining power and finesse, this is rich and extracted, with a supple yet gutsy core of mineral-laced tannins.	94	\$125
FERREN Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Silver Eagle Vineyard 2013 Offers smoky, toasty oak, with touches of charcoal and vanilla bean, wrapped around a tight mix of raspberry, black cherry and wild berry.	94	\$75
PAUL HOBBS Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Cuvée Agustina Katherine Lindsay Estate 2013 Broad and rich, with a supple, silky texture amid gravelly earth details. An abundance of cherry fruit lends elegance and finesse.	94	\$135
KOSTA BROWNE Pinot Noir California 4-Barrel 2014 Offers amazing aromas of wild berry, spice, cedar, sage and underbrush, with a texture that highlights the strength of the tannins.	94	\$125
KOSTA BROWNE Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands Rosella's Vineyard 2014 A gorgeous version, ultrarich and graceful, with plump plum, black cherry and wild berry flavors imparting mouthwatering juiciness.	94	\$90
MARCASSIN Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Marcassin Vineyard 2010 Moderately rich and fleshy in texture, highlighted by blueberry, raspberry and blackberry flavors that gain depth and remain expansive.	94	\$150
ROCIOLI Pinot Noir Russian River Valley River Block 2014 Elegant and refined without sacrificing flavor, depth or persistence. The anise-laced cherry and raspberry notes are supple and caressing.	94	\$86
SOJOURN Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Gap's Crown Vineyard 2014 Lightly aromatic, but rich and layered, this offers excellent density and depth, with fine-grained tannic grip.	94	\$59

TOP WINES (continued)

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
WALT Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands Sierra Mar 2014 Maintains a graceful balance and presence, with detailed blackberry, raspberry, mocha, black licorice, smoke, nutmeg and cedar notes.	94	\$75
ASTON Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 2013 Well-proportioned, with a mix of herb- and cedar-laced dark berry, anise, and fresh, loamy earth, this could use a year or so to soften.	93	\$65
CALERA Pinot Noir Mount Harlan Jensen Vineyard 2013 Dense, with plum, blackberry and blueberry flavors, this firmly tannic version shows a sense of elegance and suppleness.	93	\$88
PETER MICHAEL Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands Le Moulin Rouge 2014 A graceful, refined style that captures suppleness and finesse. Charming, delivering elegant plum and wild berry flavors.	93	\$100
OCCIDENTAL Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Occidental Station Vineyard Cuvée Catherine 2012 Dense and structured, with tight acidity and firm focus, this gushes with zesty wild raspberry, blackberry and savory underbrush notes.	93	\$100
WREN HOP Pinot Noir Sta. Rita Hills Architects & Saboteurs 2013 Offers plum, wild berry, raspberry and boysenberry flavors, featuring touches of black licorice, anise and subtle earth.	93	\$78

TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
CHALONE Pinot Noir Chalone Gavián 2013 Strikingly rich and complex, with a dense core of dark berry, black licorice, earth and cedar flavors.	90	\$22
PALI WINE CO. Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Riviera 2013 Offering gorgeous floral scents of lavender, plum, smoke and raspberry, this casts a wide net of red and dark fruit.	90	\$22
RON RUBIN Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 2013 Clean, fresh and vibrant, with a firm yet delicate mix of spicy raspberry and red berry that is well-focused, persistent and lingering.	89	\$25
CASTLE ROCK Pinot Noir California California Cuvée 2013 Offers aromas of wilted rose, spice, raspberry and blackberry.	88	\$12
FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Director's 2014 Medium-weight cherry and berry flavors are spicy and enjoyable.	88	\$21
EDNA VALLEY Pinot Noir Central Coast 2014 Blueberry and spicy notes fold in amid the cherry, toasty oak.	88	\$17
HAHN Pinot Noir Monterey County 2014 Features earth- and herb-scented dried berry and cedar flavors.	88	\$14
LAETITIA Pinot Noir Arroyo Grande Valley 2014 Offers a mix of zesty red berry and creamy oak flavors.	88	\$25
MACMURRAY RANCH Pinot Noir Central Coast 2013 Fresh and vibrant, with tiers of blueberry, raspberry and strawberry.	88	\$23
MEIOMI Pinot Noir Monterey-Sonoma-Santa Barbara Counties 2014 Offers a rich candied-apple mix of red and dark berry fruit.	88	\$25