California Pinot Noir is enjoying a harmonious 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 Pinson, 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 650 Pinots tasted since my last story ("The Art of Pinot," Sept. 30, 2013). 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 in 2010 (96, $25). (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/093014.)

The twin vintages of 2013 and 2014 overlap in the market, though they are more internal than identical. Both produced a bevy of exceptional wines. Four 2013s received 95 points: Boars’ View Sonoma Coast ($125), Cîrcu Russian River Valley Bordeggio’s Hill ($125), Dehlinger Russian River Valley Altamont ($60) and Donum...
“Don’t underestimate the quiet beauty [of the ‘14s]. These wines have power and elegance, similar to 2004.”

—Anne Moller-Racke, Bichon

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, Rosé, Pisoni and Paul Hobé. Other worthy mentions include A.P. Vin, Kordaer, Loring, Sojourn and Siduri.

California Pinot Noirs “are becoming more of their place,” explains Browne. “There’s a bubble, an uprising where you are the new, the new thing. The wines are growing slowly and the vineyard 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

Carmenos West Slope ($90).
When it comes to 2014s, seven earned 94-point ratings, including Arista’s Longbow ($60) and Monorni Vineyard ($75), both from Russian River Valley. Kosta Browne’s California-designated 4-Barrel ($125) and Santa Lucia Highlands Resella’s Vineyard ($90); Rochioli’s Russian River Valley River Block ($96); 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.

“13 was a wine you could hold on to, with firm tannins, very firm—almost too tannic to drink early,” says Pisoni. “The ’14 was 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, sourdough and wine quality. In the end, vintners played the hands they were dealt: Though heat and rain were factors, site remained the most important determinant of success.

“Vintages are always very exciting,” says Michael Browne of Kosta Browne and Cinq. “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.”

California’s Major Pinot Noir Districts
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 Renatus, is sourced from the sections of the ranch undergoing redevelopment. “The term is of Latin origin,” Eva Dehlinger says, “[r]efers 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 new 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 wines. So that’s something to look forward to, along with our established designates of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.”

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 riper 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.

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.

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## Rating California Pinot Noir Vintages in Major Regions

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*Santa Barbara includes Santa Barbara, Sta. 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; 85-94: very good; 65-84: good; 25-74: ripen; 0-24: not recommended; NA, not rated

**Unrated:** NA 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 aged wines have yet to fully mature.
## TOP WINES

### WINE

**MARCASSIN** Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Three Sisters Vineyard 2010

96 | $75

- Presents a rich, unctuous core of fresh earth and herbs, along with a strong dose of oak. Strikingly youthful and vibrant.

**BOURGEOIS VIEW** Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 2013

95 | $125

- Bold, rich and assertive, with lively acidity and a tight, dense core of raspberry and blackberry, revealing rose, anise and spice scents.

**CIRCUIT** Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Bootlegger's Hill 2013

95 | $125

- A thrilling expression of charming elegance, this captures moderately ripe plum and blueberry flavors, with aromatic rose petal aromas.

**DEHLINGER** Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Allomont 2013

95 | $100

- A seamless expression of juicy plum, cherry blossom and rose petal, with black cherry flavors at the core. Remarkably charming.

**DONUM** Pinot Noir Carriage West Slope 2013

95 | $100

- Exhibits a gorgeous core of rich blackberry, wild berry, raspberry and cherry flavors, accented by leady floral rose petal scents.

**ARISTA** Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Longbow 2014

94 | $80

- Impressive, with purity and depth of flavors built around blackberry, plum, raspberry and blueberry, shaded by smoky, toasted oak.

**ARISTA** Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Morson Vineyard 2014

94 | $80

- Exhibits dusty, savory herb details and cedar-laced tannins that give the plum, anise, black tea and wild berry flavors traction.

**AUBERT** Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast UV-8L Vineyard 2013

94 | $120

- Offers a racy, zesty expression of spicy raspberry and wild berry fruit that’s plenty ripe and juicy, offering depth and richness.

**CIRCUIT** Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Treehouse 2013

94 | $125

- Combining power and finesse, this is rich and extracted, with a supple yet gutsy core of mineral-laced tannins.

**FERRER** Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Silver Eagle Vineyard 2013

94 | $75

- Offers smoky, toasted oak, with touches of charcuterie and vanilla bean, wrapped around a tight mix of raspberry, black cherry and wild berry.

**PAUL HOBBES** Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Cuvée Agustina Katherine Lindsey Estate 2013

94 | $135

- Bread and rich, with a supple, silky texture amid gravelly earth details. An abundance of cherry fruit lends elegance and finesse.

**KOSTA BROWNE** Pinot Noir California 4-Barrel 2014

94 | $125

- Offers amazing aromas of wild berry, spice, cedar sage and underbrush, with a texture that highlights the strength of the tannins.

**KOSTA BROWNE** Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands Rosella’s Vineyard 2014

94 | $90

- A gorgeous version, unctuous and graceful, with plump plum, black cherry and wild berry flavors imparting mouthwatering juiciness.

**MARCASSIN** Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Marcassin Vineyard 2010

94 | $150

- Moderately rich and fruity in texture, highlighted by blueberry, raspberry and blackberry flavors that gain depth and remain expansive.

**ROCHHOLZ** Pinot Noir Russian River Valley River Block 2014

94 | $86

- Elegant and refined without sacrificing power, depth or persistence. The anise-laced raspberry and raspberry notes are supple and caressing.

**SOJOURN** Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Gap’s Crown Vineyard 2014

94 | $59

- Lightly aromatic, but rich and layered this offers excellent density and depth, with fines-grained tannin grip.

## TOP WINES (continued)

### WINE

**WALT** Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands Sierra Mar 2014

94 | $75

- Maintains a graceful balance and presence, with detailed blackberry, raspberry, mocha, black licorice, smoke, nutmeg and cedar notes.

**ASTON** Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 2013

93 | $65

- Will-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.

**CALERA** Pinot Noir Mount Harlan Jensen Vineyard 2013

93 | $88

- Dense, with plum, blackberry and blueberry flavors, this firmly tannic version shows a sense of elegance and suppleness.

**PETER MICHAEL** Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands La Muela Rouge 2014

93 | $100

- A graceful, refined style that captures suppleness and finesse. Charming, delivering elegant plum and wild berry flavors.

** OCCIDENTAL** Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Occidental Station Vineyard Cuvée Catherine 2012

93 | $100

- Dense and structured, with tight acidity and firm focus, the gashes with zesty wild raspberry, blackberry and savoy underbrush notes.

**WREN HOP** Pinot Noir Sta. Rita Hills Architects & Saboteurs 2013

93 | $78

- Offers plum, wild berry, raspberry and boysenberry flavors, featuring touches of black licorice, anise and subtle earth.

## TOP VALUES

### WINE

**CHALONE** Pinot Noir Chalone Gaviilan 2013

90 | $22

- Strikingly rich and complex, with a dense core of dark berry, black licorice, earth and cedar flavors.

**PALI WINE CO.** Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Riviera 2013

90 | $22

- Offering gorgeous floral scents of lavender, plum, smoke and raspberry, this casts a wide net of red and dark fruit.

**RON RUBIN** Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 2013

89 | $25

- Clean, fresh and vibrant, with a firm yet delicate mix of spicy raspberry and red berry that is well-focused, persistent and lingering.

**CASTLE ROCK** Pinot Noir California California Cuvée 2013

88 | $12

- Offers aromas of wintery rose, spice, raspberry and blackberry.

**FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA** Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Director’s 2014

88 | $21

- Medium-weight cherry and berry flavors are spicy and enjoyable.

**EDNA VALLEY** Pinot Noir Central Coast 2014

88 | $17

- Blueberry and spicy notes fold in amid the cherry, toasty oak.

**MAHAN** Pinot Noir Monterey County 2014

88 | $14

- Features earthy and herb-scented dried berry and cedar flavors.

**LAETITIA** Pinot Noir Arroyo Grande Valley 2014

88 | $25

- Offers a mix of zesty red berry and creamy oak flavors.

**MACMURRAY RANCH** Pinot Noir Central Coast 2013

88 | $23

- Fresh and vivacious, with notes of blueberry, raspberry and strawberry.

**MEIONI** Pinot Noir Monterey-Santa Barbara Counties 2014

88 | $25

- Offers a rich candied-apple mix of red and dark berry fruit.