

THE STATE OF NORTH AMERICAN PINOT NOIR

It seems inevitable that any assessment of North American pinot noir in 2008 should begin with *The Movie*. *Sideways*, released in November 2004 by Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, is the story of two college buddies approaching middle age: one bitter, maladjusted, clinically depressed, and divorced; the other a failing actor, philistine, and lunk about to marry. The duo opt for a week of male bonding in Santa Barbara's wine country before the impending marriage. By Hollywood standards, it was a low-budget film, costing only about \$17 million to make, and based on a novel for which the author had, at the time, been unable to find a publisher. It was generously reviewed; was nominated for four Academy Awards, one of which it won; and was a box office triumph, promptly earning its studio more than nine times the cost of its production. But the movie's greatest impact was on wine. As one critic observed, "*Sideways* is drunk on wine." Wine-talk metaphors suffuse its dialog. Wines, grape varieties, *terroirs*, and vintages are the stuff of the main characters' conversations. Cabernet, usually accepted as the king of red wines, is dismissed as a "survivor" grape that can "withstand neglect." Merlot is cast as the villain variety, produced for mass consumption. Pinot noir emerges as the main metaphor for the film's only legitimate romance: "thin-skinned and temperamental," it "can only grow in specific little tucked away corners of the world"; it "has achingly beautiful qualities," but "can be coaxed into its fullest expression" only when "someone has taken the time to truly understand its potential."

Almost overnight, millions of Americans who had previously lived insular wine-drinking lives in bubbles of cabernet, merlot, and chardonnay—who had often been barely aware that a variety called pinot noir existed—began asking for it by the glass in bars and restaurants, and scrabbling it up from the shelves of wine shops. The business of restaurants and winery tasting rooms in Santa Barbara County exploded.

Buellton's Hitching Post II restaurant, where the character played by *Sideways's* female lead waitressed, tore through its remaining stock of Highliner, the prestige cuvée of its eponymous brand of pinot. At the Los Olivos Café, where the movie's lead characters dined together in an early scene, the telephone rang off the hook with requests for lunch and dinner reservations—specifically for the exact table where the scene had been filmed—and with requests for pinot by the glass and bottle when the guests arrived. Wineries throughout California and Oregon specializing in pinot found themselves overwhelmed by demand and scrambled to increase their production.

To understand how a movie with this kind of relationship to wine was made and how pinot noir, among varietal wines, came to play in its starring role, it is necessary to flash back, very briefly, to the very beginnings of American interest in European wine grape varieties, in the 1850s. Before then, the California wine “industry” was not interested in grape varieties for the simple reason that the entire landscape consisted of a *single* European variety, known in California as “mission.” (We know now that mission was actually a Spanish variety also known as listan prieto and palomino negro, but at the time, no one knew or cared.) East of the Mississippi, American winegrowing depended almost exclusively on the grapes of American vine species and on hybrids bred from American and European species. Vulnerable to phylloxera, a small, root-feeding aphid native to eastern North America, European varieties perished whenever they were planted in the country's eastern third.

Beginning around 1850, in the wake of revolutions across Europe after 1848, the lure of the California Gold Rush, and a population shift from southern to northern California, the American wine scene changed fundamentally. Much of California's North Coast was settled by European immigrants. More than a few of these set themselves up as farmers and nursery operators. They imported a range of alimentary and ornamental plants from their homelands, including a large assortment of European wine grape varieties. Although zinfandel, whose European pedigree was very imperfectly understood and sometimes denied, quickly emerged as the most popular of the “new” European grape varieties by far, many of the varieties we know today—grenache, cabernet, riesling, and pinot noir, among others—gained significant toeholds. And in the second half of the century, European varieties became the basis for the first signal successes in American wine.

By the time the Columbian Exposition was held at Chicago in 1893, varietal American riesling, semillon, cabernet, malbec, and barbera were all on display, along with a so-called Chambertin produced by J. Gundlach and Company, a Sonoma- and San Francisco-based wine business, which was probably pinot noir, in whole or in part. Phylloxera, which moved west in the 1870s, and Prohibition, which began in 1919 with the adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, set the industry back, but these events did not entirely disrupt its interest in dry table wines based on European varieties. After the amendment's repeal in 1933, business picked

up more or less where it had left off, gradually laying the foundation for the dry, blend-averse, variety-based, ultra-premium business that dominates the entirety of the New World today. Pinot noir was an unhandicapped object of attention in this evolution, attracting notice from all the key players, including BEAULIEU VINEYARD, Inglenook, Paul Masson, Louis M. Martini, and Wente Brothers, as well as some of the state's first boutique vintners. Pinot noir made by Beaulieu and Fountaingrove, a Sonoma producer that disappeared in 1953, was served at Wine and Food Society tastings in New York immediately after World War II. Tom Marvel and Frank Schoonmaker, writing their post-Prohibition assessment of American wines in 1941, called pinot "the one serious rival to cabernet sauvignon in Napa, Sonoma, and the Santa Cruz Mountains," where it yielded "as good wines as it yields in general in France."

So far, so good—and not really the stuff of which movies are made. But late in the 1960s, quite suddenly and within the space of less than a decade, pinot's good reputation as a fine European variety, capable of being made into wines that could rival European benchmarks, disintegrated. Pinot began to disappoint seriously, repeatedly, and systematically. No longer a rival to cabernet sauvignon, which got steadily better, pinot became a combination of wayward child and black sheep: a persistent underperformer that drove producers crazy. It was termed "hard to grow and hard to make," was viewed as "temperamental" in the cellar, and was said to give plainly flawed wines. There were frequent reports of browning colors, "thin edges," "volatile off-odors," and "dirty" flavors.

This abrupt reversal of pinot's fortunes was a mystery to all concerned. Winemakers who had just "made it" a decade earlier, now debated *how* to make it and how to "solve its problems." Ferment the grapes with stems attached, perhaps, or without any stems at all, or ferment it very cold or very hot, or blend in some zinfandel or petite sirah at the end to replace the color that mysteriously disappeared? Confusion reigned. Even André Tchelistcheff, the Russian immigrant who was Beaulieu Vineyard's longtime winemaker and the godfather of the "modern" California wine industry, who had made perfectly good pinots himself in the 1950s, gave his fellow winemakers terrible advice. Some winemakers rushed off to Europe seeking a silver bullet for their troubles in Burgundy's hallowed cellars, but found none. Burgundy's winemakers were just plugging away as usual, although the state of their vineyards was deplorable following two decades' use of chemical fertilizers and herbicides.

In retrospect, the problem was clear enough: American winemaking had changed in the 1960s as new technology, processes, and equipment were adopted without much reflection simply because they were new, available, and affordable. The classic recipe for red wine had been replaced with an entirely new one that relied on industrial processes, heavy-handed intervention, risk minimization, and fault correction. It involved pumps, destemmer-crushers, harsh presses, and heavily toasted French oak

barrels. Cabernet, zinfandel, and various red field blends tolerated these treatments fairly well; but pinot, possessed of much lesser concentrations of tannins and anthocyanins, and differently structured chemically, was almost destroyed. When vintners tried to rescue their hollow shells of browning pinot by blending in substantial percentages of other sturdier, deeper-colored varieties, they simply compounded one error with another and ended up with wines that had no varietal character at all. Before this catastrophe could be understood or rectified, a long list of benchmark producers, including Louis Martini, Sterling, Caymus, Freemark Abbey, and Heitz Cellars, had abandoned pinot to its fate and formed a chorus of nay-sayers who intoned, over and over, that pinot noir could not be made well in the New World. They forgot that it *had been made well* a generation earlier.

Pinot's renaissance after this debacle is the prologue to *Sideways* and to the real-life wine-world story behind its script. For the most part, the actors in the real renaissance were small producers who turned to pinot or persevered with it when industry stalwarts abandoned it, who turned their backs on the new universal red wine recipe introduced in the 1960s, and who applied considerable energy and dedication to succeeding where others had failed. Most of the names are with us still: HANZELL VINEYARDS near Sonoma, purpose-focused on pinot from the outset; CHALONE, near Pinnacles National Monument, where pinot noir had been planted (quite unaccountably) on the eve of Prohibition; MOUNT EDEN in the hills overlooking Saratoga, which assumed the mantle of Paul Masson and Martin Ray; Carneros Creek, where Francis Mahoney tried to sort out the special mysteries associated with pinot's subtypes, called clones; JOSEPH SWAN VINEYARDS, where a commercial airline pilot fascinated with wine planted pinot in 1970 near Forestville in the heart of what is now the Russian River Valley AVA; and CALERA, where Josh Jensen, who had discovered the charms of fine Burgundy when he read anthropology at Oxford found his grail for California pinot on a remote and unlikely hilltop in San Benito County. There were also Coury, Lett, Erath, and Ponzi, who studied climate data, concluded that all of California was too warm for pinot, and moved north to Oregon's Willamette Valley.

Since none of the pioneers save Hanzell founder James Zellerbach had significant financial resources, they kept their winemaking simple and low tech by necessity, which miraculously eliminated the technology-related problems that had ruined pinot's reputation a decade earlier. It also helped (though it was not crucial) that many of the new environments staked out by the pioneers were, in fact, cooler than mid-valley Napa. The pioneers' story as they planted vines in sometimes inhospitable sites and crushed grapes by hand in repurposed dairy tanks was a counterpoint of epic strife and operatic drama. Many of them self-described as members of a lunatic fringe. Many admitted to pursuing a holy grail of wine. And pinot, the object of their attention, because it had behaved so badly before they began to tame it,

was pronounced quixotic, capricious, petulant, and tantalizing. It was the stuff of epics, or opera, or something, just waiting for the right artist. And it could certainly become metaphor for a gentle, timid romance.

First, however, pinot's good name had to be partially redeemed. Some remarkably good wines were made in the 1970s: Joseph Swan's 1973, THE EYRIE VINEYARDS'S 1975 South Block Reserve, and the inaugural vintage from Sanford & Benedict in 1976. But pinot's reputation took time to reestablish among the cognoscenti, as well as among disappointed consumers, who had fled when it underperformed at the end of the 1960s. Many observers argue that the consumer tide did not begin to turn until the end of the 1980s. One milestone was set when WILLIAMS SELYEM'S 1985 Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir was named sweepstakes winner among *all* wines judged at the 1987 California State Fair, and Williams Selyem, hitherto unknown and operating from a garage like any good *garagiste*, was chosen as winery of the year. Larry Brooks, who had been making pinot at ACACIA since 1979, remembers 1988 as the first vintage "of low supply and great demand," and the first to create a "feeding frenzy" when it hit the market in 1990. During the 1990s, vineyard acres dedicated to pinot noir quintupled in Oregon, exploding from about 1,000 to more than 5,000; in California pinot acreage more than doubled. The price charged and paid per ton of grapes rose too, soaring (in California) from \$804 a ton in 1991 to \$1,849 in 2001. Cabernet specialists like W. H. SMITH (of La Jota Vineyard on Howell Mountain), Joseph Phelps, and Steve Girard birthed pinot noir projects, and producers like Louis Martini and Caymus, who had abandoned pinot in the 1970s, sought reentry paths. There had been only a few dozen pinot producers in California and Oregon combined in 1990; there were several hundred by the turn of the new millennium.

In the same sense that social revolutions arise not from starvation and repression but from rising expectations, *Sideways* would have been written differently—and might not have featured pinot at all—if it were not for the quantum leap in enthusiasm about pinot that swept across the American wine scene in the 1990s. Cloaked in the imagery of David-sized producers growing pinot outside of mainstream wine regions like Napa Valley and succeeding where Goliaths had failed, and wrapped in a producer vocabulary of gentle treatment and minimalist winemaking suffused with requirements for consumer sensitivity as the prerequisite for vinous epiphanies, pinot became a perfect metaphor for the fragile, unlikely love story *Sideways*'s author wanted to tell and wanted his audiences to remember, in spite of the comic debauchery with which he surrounded it. In the end, *Sideways* owes its charm and coherence to pinot's special story; just as pinot owes *Sideways* for its spurt of double-digit growth.

In the movie's wake, people who care about wine trends and about pinot tend to ask four questions: first, is the so-called "*Sideways* effect" real; second, is it durable; third, has the boom, such as it is, been good *qualitatively* for the variety; and fourth,

is pinot noir disproportionately affected by the general industry tension, involving producers, critics, and consumers, between elegant wines on the one hand and massive wines on the other. The short answers to these questions are, respectively, yes; probably; it-is-much-too-soon-to-tell; and it-depends-on-whom-you-ask. The somewhat longer answers go like this:

The *Sideways* effect is a statistical reality as far as wine sales are concerned. The A. C. Nielsen Company, the same firm that produces the audience share ratings for television programs, compiles data that tracks so-called “supermarket sales” of all products identified with “universal” bar codes. For the thirteen-week period ending in early June of 2005, compared with the same period a year earlier, Nielsen found that “supermarket” sales of pinot noir had risen 83 percent in dollar terms and 77 percent by volume—one of the largest year-on-year increases in the history of wine-sales data. Double-digit increases persisted, year-on-year, from 2005 to 2006 and from 2006 to 2007, although the slope of the curve flattened. Given that a large percentage of high-priced wine is not sold through outlets tracked in supermarket-scan data, Nielsen’s calculations probably *understate* the real increase, especially in dollar terms. Industry sources report that 93 percent of online wine sales involve wines priced higher than \$20 per bottle. In restaurants, wine sales are tracked by *Wine & Spirits* magazine’s annual poll, which gathers data from about 300 restaurants in major markets throughout the country and specifically documents sales in the last calendar quarter of each year. *Wine & Spirits* found that pinot, as a percentage of top selling wines overall, increased from 10 to more than 13 percent from 2004 to 2005—a more than 30 percent increase—and by almost another 2 percent from 2005 to 2006, with almost 90 percent of the action having been associated with American pinot—not with red Burgundy or other imports. Sommeliers told *Wine & Spirits* early in 2007 that pinot noir was “still hot,” with sales so intense that maintaining inventory was a growing struggle. One Los Angeles restaurant reported a decline in the number of pinots on offer from four pages on the restaurant’s list to three, only because the wines sold out faster than they could be replaced. Prices rose, too. A number of producers who had compensated for the overall market downturn after 9/11 by introducing “entry-level” pinots priced to sell for around \$15 a bottle, raised the price point for these wines to \$18, \$20, or even \$22 without encountering any resistance from the market. Increases of 10 or 15 percent in the prices asked for high-end bottlings were also typical. On restaurant lists, these hikes were reflected in a 21 percent average increase, from \$53.66 to \$64.20, between 2004 and 2006. At the same time—and offering an interesting commentary on wine price behaviors, especially in restaurants—the average price for merlot, *Sideways*’s villain, also rose from 2004 to 2006, though by only 12 percent.

Unhappily for producers, the vintage on offer when the movie appeared—2003—was based on a very small crop in California’s pinot-friendly regions. In Sonoma,

the state's largest pinot-producing county, the crop was the smallest in seven years. Oregon had been plagued with pathological heat, which gave rise to many wines that were no one's favorites. The 2004 vintage was not much better. The crop was once again smaller than average, and hot weather was again problematic, although this time in many parts of California, and especially along the southern Central Coast, rather than in Oregon. In 2005, the first growing season in which the industry could truly react to *Sideways*, yield (expressed as tons per acre) still lagged behind historical averages, but a very large increase in the amount of bearing acreage (the result of new plantings coming into production) more than compensated, resulting in bumper quantities when the 2005 vintage was released to the market late in 2006. In 2005 California crushed almost 25,000 more tons of pinot than it had in 2004, an increase of almost 36 percent; Oregon producers crushed almost 3,000 additional tons, for an increase of 30 percent. Existing producers bought as much fruit as they could find, and the number of producers exploded.

Although there is no reliable data on the number of wineries making pinot noir, I estimate that the number of commercially visible producers grew from between 400 and 450 in 2003 to between 950 and 1,000 by the end of 2006—an approximation which includes neither the dozens, perhaps hundreds, of vanity brands made in tiny quantities, nor the hundreds of home winemakers operating without a bond. With more producers scrambling for more fruit, the overall grape surplus that began in 2001 and touched pinot noir briefly in 2003 was completely absorbed before the 2005 crop was picked. The buyer's market for pinot grapes that had existed briefly in 2003 was turned upside down, and the average price per ton set a new record in 2006. Non-estate producers without firm, long-term contracts reported stiff competition for fruit, and many saw coveted sources disappear. In Oregon, one independent vineyard with a stellar reputation for good pinot placed its entire crop under contract to a restaurant consortium for fifteen years, beginning with the 2007 harvest, thus shutting out a large number of small producers who had been regular fruit clients for two decades or more.

The longer answer to the second question—whether the *Sideways*-induced boom and the renaissance of consumer interest that followed it can persist—is necessarily speculative. There are many reasons to predict that continuing double-digit increases beyond 2008 are unlikely. The American wine consumer, aided and abetted by wine publications' appetite for new news, has always displayed a persistent affinity for novelty, and today's novelty is tomorrow's boredom. In New World wine, because of varietal labeling, the sensations of novelty and boredom are easily attached to grape varieties. Sales of chardonnay, once so much the darling of the California wine industry that it was proclaimed synonymous with white wine, have plummeted by half in the last twelve years, as consumers say they will drink “any white wine but chardonnay.” Now riesling, which had almost been displaced entirely by chardonnay

when the latter boomed in the 1970s, shows signs of revival. Merlot, the fastest-growing variety in the 1980s, has lost ground steadily since 2000 and has plunged in popularity since being reviled in *Sideways*. In Oregon, one very good pinot-maker told his customers in 2007 that “those fickle American wine consumers will eventually latch on to ‘the next big thing.’” He is almost certainly right to assume that pinot’s current popularity will have no greater staying power than other varieties had commanded before it. In fact, it may have less for two reasons: First, it is intrinsically expensive. Supply and demand aside, pinot is expensive to produce simply because it is a shy-bearing variety. The corollary of this proposition is that it is hard to be successful economically with inexpensive pinot, so the large brands that sustain profitability in the wine business are difficult to build. Second, pinot makes a wine, as Dorothy Gaiter and John Brecher explained in the *Wall Street Journal* (September 8, 2006), “that you have to go to, because it won’t come to you.” As the *Sideways* script expresses the same observation, pinot is not “bold” or “proud,” but “nuanced” and “restrained.” Since this portrait, like Rembrandt drawings and art-house movies, demands effort and investment from the consumer, pinot seems an unlikely candidate for universal appeal, except perhaps in Burgundy, where everyone grows up with it. Many palates accustomed to lustier reds will find pinot insufficiently expressive or just plain lightweight, thin, and underwhelming. However, pinot’s slim chance for continued double-digit growth does not mean it cannot grow a bit more, slowly, for at least the immediate future, or that the gains of the last three years will disappear as consumers flee to “the next big thing.” It is reasonable to argue that pinot is at least a bit insulated from downturn by the sheer smallness of its total market share even after three years of double-digit growth. American consumers may have spent \$132 million on pinot noir in 2005, and this may have represented a 60 percent increase over the previous year, but it is still only about half of what was spent on pinot grigio, a quarter of what was spent on merlot, and 13 percent of what was spent on chardonnay. Unless the current perception that pinot noir actually represents good value plus hedonistic pleasure, despite its relatively high price point, is undone, it is reasonable to imagine that pinot could hold onto its slightly improved share of the total wine market for a considerable time. It is in fact possible to argue that pinot’s truly minuscule market share in absolute terms (it accounts for only about 2 percent of worldwide wine-grape acreage and barely more than 1 percent of worldwide wine production) makes the recent mini-boom more of a correction than an unsustainable advance, bringing actual consumption rates closer to the levels reasonably associated with its international reputation for excellence.

On the production side of the ledger, there is little reason to foresee an excess of supply in the immediate future, although a glut is not impossible to imagine over the longer term. Despite a more than threefold increase in planted acreage devoted to pinot noir in both California and Oregon since 1990, planted but non-bearing

acreage, which is usually taken as an excellent predictor of future production since grapevines must be planted at least two years before they produce a commercially viable crop, is near an all-time low. In Oregon only 14 percent of planted pinot acreage was non-bearing in 2005, down from a high of 30 percent in 2000. California's circumstances were similar, with 8 percent of planted pinot acreage being non-bearing in 2005, down from almost 20 percent in 2000.

The longer answer to the third question—whether the spotlight, booming sales, increased production, and lengthening list of players has been genuinely good for the product—is almost impossible to address objectively or conclusively. Everyone asks whether there are better pinots now—or perhaps individual wines that are more consistently successful from year to year—or whether there are simply more of them. Or, conversely, they wonder whether pinot has actually suffered a qualitative decline as more wines from more producers and more young vineyards have come to market. A proper answer would require consistent diachronic data, adjusted to eliminate the idiosyncrasies associated with individual palates and tastes, compiled across multiyear period before *Sideways* and after with each period long enough to eliminate the potentially skewing effect of better and lesser vintages. But the growing list of players and increasing number of wines produced has had such a dramatic impact on the number of wines critics are reviewing that two samples taken, say, from 1998 to 2003 and 2005 to 2010 might lack comparability based simply on sample size.

But here is what we can say, based on data that we do have: First, snapshots of American pinot noir taken by various observers since *Sideways* are generally consistent with standard bell-shaped-curve distributions of wine quality: a few top-quality wines are produced, a much larger number of “good” wines stack up beside them, quite a few average efforts occur, and a small number of underperformers trail down the other end of the curve. Evaluating North American pinots in April of 2006 with a Master-of-Wine–studded panel of professionals, Britain's much-respected *Decanter* magazine tasted through 197 wines, rated 2 as “outstanding,” 13 as “very good to excellent,” 106 as “good,” and 14 as “poor,” suggesting to the editors that the scene was characterized by a “preponderance of very attractive, well-made and competent wines,” and “relatively few duds.” *Wine & Spirits's* scening panels, composed of sommeliers, retailers, winemakers, and other wine professionals, picked 50 recommendable pinots from a field of 167 tasted early in 2007, and awarded 90 or more points to 28 of the 50. The world's largest-circulation wine magazine, *Wine Spectator*, awarded 90 or more points to 18 percent of the 472 California pinots it reviewed during 2005 (results reported in 2006), and another 42 percent scored between 85 and 89 points. Such distributions are quite similar to those seen for other varieties. For example, *Wine Spectator's* 2005 results for pinot were mirrored almost perfectly by its analogous results for syrah.

Second, it may be significant that new producers do not seem to operate at any disadvantage. Indeed, producers entirely new to the wine scene since 2000 took some of the top honors for pinot when the 2005 and 2006 vintages were reviewed in the *Wine Advocate* and the *Wine Spectator*, with first, second, or third releases often outshining wines made by producers with much longer track records. Although this data is not statistically significant, it does not suggest any *prima facie* correlation, or inverse correlation, between length of track record (aka “experience”) and quality of wine. It must be observed, however, that newly-minted producers are not always novice winemakers. In some instances, very experienced winemakers create new brands; in other cases, experienced and talented viticulturists and winemakers provide back-up for new labels, sometimes serving as contracted winemakers or consultants, or as winemakers-in-fact at custom-crush operations. It is probably also relevant that a growing number of producers means the arrival of a critical mass of human talent in most pinot-friendly regions—a raft of informal advisors freely available and close at hand—and the development of institutionalized information- and experience-sharing venues like the Steamboat Conference held annually in Oregon. Indeed this bit of sociology may turn out to explain how growing interest and an increasing population of players, far from threatening wine quality, actually improves it across the board, as the proverbial rising tide lifts all boats.

In addition, both experienced producers and new producers seem to do well with fruit from young vineyards, challenging the conventional wisdom that the best wines come from old vines in great sites. Here the offset probably has to do with critical and consumer acceptance of wine styles that are ripe and fruit-forward, and therefore tend not to discriminate between young vines and old. But it is probably also relevant that expensive precision farming, once reserved for fine, proven, and mature vineyards, is now lavished on young vineyards as well, as new winery business plans require that expensive wines be made from young vines virtually from the outset. It is also the case that new plantings tend to be concentrated cheek-by-jowl with vineyards that have already proven their potential, tempering the risk of failure or irretrievable mediocrity. Consider the venerable Sanford & Benedict Vineyard at the west end of the Santa Ynez Valley, now surrounded by an entire appellation of young pinot plantings. Consider Joseph Rochioli’s and Charles Bacigalupi’s first efforts with pinot in the Russian River Valley, which have been stretched into a virtual carpet of vines extending almost 10 miles along Westside Road between Healdsburg and Guerneville. Note the first plantings in Oregon’s Dundee Hills, which have been transformed into the state’s densest concentration of pinot noir. Even David Hirsch’s near-pioneer planting on the True Sonoma Coast north of the Russian River has attracted neighbors.

The longer answer to the fourth question is long indeed. Debate has swirled for some years about the tendency of New World wines to be made generally “bigger,”

with higher finished alcohol and from fruit picked when it has accumulated more sugar—than “classically proportioned” wines from Bordeaux, Burgundy, Barolo, and elsewhere in Europe. Sometimes this debate is restated not as a contrast between the New World and the Old, but as an evolution within both worlds, between wines made thirty years ago and those being made today. Insofar as this issue concerns pinot, I explored many of its parameters in *North American Pinot Noir*. I add here that the debate demands restatement as an inquiry into the permissible boundaries of wine style.

In its simplest form, as it affects pinot, the question regards the aromatic, flavor, and textural bandwidth in which pinot can be expressed without losing its quality or essence: how full-bodied, rich, warm, lush, dense, or dark can a pinot be before it has become caricatured, untrue to variety, or qualitatively flawed? Or, conversely, how much subtlety and understatement can it embrace before it underperforms and disappoints? Is an utterly transparent, lightly tinted pinot with intense floral and spice flavors a triumph, or (as one American winemaker has argued publicly) is it a marketplace liability? All other things being equal, is a pinot that looks and tastes like a syrah, or that leaves a burning sensation on the consumer’s lips after the wine is swallowed, still qualitatively praiseworthy as a pinot?

If these hypothetical situations are extreme, there are a host of slightly less extreme formulations encountered constantly, by professionals and ordinary consumer alike, at tastings held in wine shops and at pinot-centric events around the country, month in and month out. If there are overriding differences in shape, weight, flavor, and structure between two wines made from the same variety, is that difference rooted in fundamental differences between sites (i.e., is it a matter of *terroir*), or is it deliberately and specifically stylistic? Finally, and perhaps most important, are there properties of pinot noir, compared to other red grape varieties, that argue for defining the bandwidth of permissible style more broadly, or more narrowly, than the analogous ideal bandwidth for other varieties?

Understanding style, and its legitimate limits, means first unscrambling *terroir* and winemaking. In its simplest form (although the matter is anything but simple), *terroir* is the idea that site makes and marks wine, or at least that this is the case with unblended wines made from grapes grown in a single, specific place. Dedicated *terroirists* believe that, as long as the grapes are well farmed, various properties of site, most of them physical, will be expressed in well-made wines. This is the perspective behind assertions like “wine is made in the vineyard,” “winemakers are intermediaries between *terroir* and wine,” and “winemakers are passive actors in the transformation of grapes into wine.” There is huge truth behind this perspective, which now has considerable currency on both sides of the Atlantic, as tastings of different wines from the same or almost the same site often attest. It is not the whole picture, however. Despite periodic assertions to the contrary, fine wine does *not* make

itself. Each instance of fine wine is the product of an enormous matrix of individual artisan choices, some philosophical; some environmental; some truly independent; and some conditioned heavily by the circumstances of farming, weather, fermentation chemistries, and cellar logistics. Winemakers differ, even when they are using essentially the same grapes from the same place, in their tolerance for risk and in their image of the wine they want to make. Even two dedicated *terroirists* may differ in their judgments about the various properties of site that should be expressed in its wines. This space is the province of wine style, and the territory is vast. As Remington Norman makes clear in *The Great Domaines of Burgundy* (New York, 1992) the debate over *terroir* and style, midwifery and cooking, passive winemaking and style-driven intervention, is alive and well even among Burgundian *vignerons*, who are often seen as the purest *terroirists* anywhere, and stylistic variations among Burgundians are ubiquitous. Anyone who has compared Clos de la Roche made by Hubert Lignier with Clos de la Roche made by Pierre Amiot, to cite just one example, has seen style at work.

But in Burgundy the province of style is often constrained by the marginality of the mesoclimates, except in pathological vintages like 2003. On this side of the Atlantic, wine style is a vaster territory, simply because, in many vintages, choices are possible in pinot-friendly regions of North America—including Oregon—that are usually impossible in the higher-latitude regions where pinot is grown in Europe. We often say the difference is about very ripe flavors and elevated alcohol levels, but we could better say that it is about the balance between primary flavors and aromas such as fruit, flowers, and earth, and secondary properties, which can include a wide array of animal, vegetal, bacterial, and process-derived indicators. Many winemakers profess “zero tolerance” for *brettanomyces*, a yeast associated with volatile phenols that tend to smell either like animal skins or like cloves; others think small concentrations of “*brett*” improve the complexity of pinot. Style is involved when winemakers decide how hot to ferment and how much to manipulate the cap of skins and seeds that fermentation pushes to the top of each fermentor. It is involved when they decide whether to press new wine off the skins before all the grapes’ sugar has been converted into alcohol, or to keep the new wine in contact with the exhausted skins for a week longer, or for two or three. It continues through the choice of barrels, which have a huge impact on the aromatic properties of young wines, and the decision of how long the wine is kept in barrels before being bottled, which impacts the color and how “primary” the wine tastes when it is released. Quite a few of these choices also impact texture, palate length, and the taste of the wine after five, ten, or twenty years of bottle age.

A good case can be made that all stylistic choices are more consequential with pinot than with other red varieties because pinot is typically less generously endowed with the customary stuff of red wines—especially tannins and

anthocyanins. Just as it is uncommonly transparent to *terroir*, it also shows more vividly (for better or worse) the marks of stylistic choices and interventions. For two generations at least, this has translated into a sizeable bandwidth for style-driven variations among pinots, Old World and New, as well as to more disagreement (or perhaps just more confusion) about the properties of good pinot than we see with any other variety. As early as the 1980s, when veteran wine writer Norm Roby convened variety-specific tasting panels for *Vintage* magazine, he cited major intra-panel rifts over acceptable tannin levels, body style, and volatility in pinot noir, with some panelists preferring light and delicate styles and others privileging intensity of flavor. “For many pinots,” Roby wrote, “two tasters loved it, two hated it, and two felt it was just average in quality.”

This sort of disagreement is still with us a quarter century later. I taste often with winemakers who comment critically if a given wine seems substantially marked (with smoky and vanilla-based flavors) by the barrels in which it was raised. Diametrically opposite comments on the same wines can be found in some mainstream critical reviews. Very fruit-forward wines can seem underwhelmingly simple to some tasters, whereas to others, making wines in this style can seem a totally apposite choice. DAVID BRUCE, the Santa Cruz Mountains producer who has now made forty-seven vintages of American pinot noir, wrote to me recently that he has “learned to exaggerate fruit-forwardness” because “this is our palate.” Others are far less accepting. The concentration of ripe-picked, high-alcohol wines among the wines scored highest by national publications and nationally influential critics has led to criticism that critics are driving a perceived trend to bigger wines. Bigger wines do appeal to critics and consumers alike for reasons of lushness, voluptuousness, substantial mouthweight, and dark, impressive flavors. Opposers of this style accuse winemakers of crafting wines that are cynically designed to grab points. When winemakers respond, they often refuse to admit that their style was the consequence of choice—in the vineyard and in the winery—alleging instead that they were constrained by circumstance. Relatively warm climates, young vines, clean clones, and other viticultural circumstances, they say, caused sugars to accumulate faster than the grapes could ripen physiologically. To get physiologically ripe grapes, they claim, they were forced to accept very ripe flavors and alcohol levels that were not seen any place in the wine world until relatively recently.

In truth, as far as pinot noir is concerned, it probably has not helped that most new plantings in California and Oregon have been done with clonal material from France selected specifically to privilege early ripening; or that a large percentage of American vineyards are still planted, as they have been for more than a century, in sites where the soils are too high in nitrogen to favor fruit development over canes and leaves; or that there is now enough money in the wine industry to use vine-by-vine farming, which ensures that the slightly underripe clusters that used to be

picked and fermented along with the ripe ones are now eliminated before harvest. There is also growing evidence to suggest that various cultivation practices, sometimes including irrigation, may be exacerbating the disconnect between sugar ripeness and physiological ripeness, making long “hang times” self-defeating. But it is time to admit that, nine times out of ten, *very ripe picking is a matter of choice and not of necessity*. Grapes are being picked very ripe because, in the Indian summer conditions that prevail in most California regions for early-ripening varieties like pinot noir, and in most recent Oregon vintages, there is no compelling reason to pick earlier, so winegrowers are free to *choose* riper picking. Since it is almost always equally possible to pick earlier—the proof of which is that some vintners do and are able to make excellent wines—it is fair to conclude that most of the time, very ripe picking is a stylistic choice. The question for American pinot is this: when the choice to pick very ripe is exercised, and winemaking is adapted to deal with all the consequences of very ripe picking, and when the wine emerges with saturated color, a lush mouthfeel, a huge structure, great density, and finished alcohol somewhere between 15 and 16 percent—or when at least some of these stylistic parameters prevail, or the wine is de-alcoholized before it is finished to “fix” the alcoholic excess but leave the rest in place—is pinot any more affected than other varieties?

This is a fair question, and it deserves thoughtful reflection. On one hand, our time and place is not the first to impose a new style on pinot noir. It happened at the end of the nineteenth century, when Burgundians routinely blended headier reds from the French south into their pinots to make the results attractive to export markets in northern Europe whose buyers had developed a taste for bigger wines. On the other hand, it is impossible not to wonder, if beefy style is the goal, whether pinot noir is the best place to start, and whether a very broad spectrum of styles for pinot noir plays to the special strengths and accounts for the particular liabilities of this old variety.

With allowance made for the unfinished debate over style, the state of North American pinot noir in 2008, overall, seems good. There are more varietally correct and appealing pinots, made by more talented and motivated winemakers, from more well-farmed vineyards, in more pinot-friendly regions (including quite a few outside California and Oregon) than ever before. The best of the bunch, some of which it has been my privilege and pleasure to taste for this book, compare without handicap with the best pinots grown and made anywhere. On the other hand, it remains true, as I wrote in *North American Pinot Noir*, that too much American wine, pinot included, is being grown in soils that are too deep and too high in nitrogen to produce really good wine without extensive intervention in the form of aggressive crop-thinning or canopy management or both, and that the huge investments now required to plant a vineyard make it difficult to abandon choices that prove suboptimal after the initial fact. And nothing differentiates North American