

## Oregon Pinot Noir: The Chronicle recommends

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For all the Jerry Bruckheimer luck in the world, it's virtually impossible to have a successful sequel to a blockbuster.

After Oregon's amazing 2008 vintage (more on that at [sfg.ly/c5gmQz](http://sfg.ly/c5gmQz)), the prospects, and expectations, for 2009 were high indeed - doubly so because after a light 2007 crop, Oregon's vintners were a bit touchy about their fate. Would nature deliver once again?

What nature delivered was a puzzlement of a year - one described as either warm or cool, or perhaps both; a growing season either long or short, perhaps depending on how long anyone waited to pick.

There were some summer heat spikes that brought talk of big, ripe fruit, and indeed there is a lot of ripe, dark fruit found in the 2009 wines - along with alcohol levels that have crept north, often above 14 percent. It's a year that also brought a large bounty of fruit to make vintners (and their accountants) happy. Compare that to 2008, when ripe and gorgeous wines were in abundance in the mid-13s, more typical for Oregon's northern climes.

But there was also cool, calm harvest weather, which pushed many picking dates well into October, a time when the Willamette Valley is typically fretting about rain. Perhaps longtime winemaker Luisa Ponzi summed it up best when she termed 2009 a "schizophrenic" vintage.

That's not a bad description of our tasting results, either. For a look at more than 50 Pinots, I was joined by Clay Reynolds, wine buyer for Cocolo and the Moss Room, and Bryan Brick, a wine buyer for K&L Wine Merchants who handles Oregon.

We found many Pinots to enjoy, but we also found quite a few to be atypical in their flavors: more weight and extract where we expected less. In many cases, we detected a seeming struggle to find balance in the wines - acidity out of place, a mix of flavors that didn't quite come into line.

It was a reminder that Oregon's view of winemaking is perhaps less intrusive than California's; the prospect of tweaking a wine to fit a desired chemistry is still a bit more unusual there, if by no means unheard of. For better or worse, that allowed the beauties and rough edges of 2009 to show through.

Despite the recent fretting that Oregon is abandoning its longtime role as the small-scale counterpoint to California's Pinot largesse, this vintage shows otherwise. Indeed, it is a reminder that in its inconsistencies, Oregon shows its true potential for greatness in Pinot Noir.

That so much of it can be had for under \$40 is testament to both Oregon's more modest [real estate](#) and its

ability to evade the allure of new French oak. Even most high-end bottles received no more than about 30 percent new wood.

The wines from 2009 show that potential. They are not a uniformly great lot. But if they aren't blockbusters, they are distinctive. Plus, they show the virtues of experience - and transparency - in letting a vintage unfold in all its unpredictability.

**2009 Arterberry Maresh Dundee Hills Pinot Noir** (\$25, 13% alcohol): Jim Maresh shows off the best of both his family's Maresh vineyard and the Dundee Hills' red soils. This basic bottle is rewarding, with a stellar polish to its texture. A delicacy is at work for fruit that shows off a subtler side of the vintage. Slightly spicy, revealing a soy and tangerine edge to rich cherry flavors.

**2009 Evening Land Vineyards Seven Springs Vineyard Estate Eola-Amity Hills Pinot Noir** (\$42, 13.75%): Mark Tarlov's ascendant project has hit its stride with this stellar volcanic-soil site. His Oregon winemaker, Isabelle Meunier, found tremendous nuance in 2009, with an estate bottling that's perhaps two years shy of drinking age. A steely edge gains flesh as the wine opens, showing off mineral and iris accents to rich fruit. Evening Land's accessible 2009 Blue Label (\$25, 13.5%) is nearly as good, full of dried mushroom accents.

**2009 Anam Cara Nicholas Estate Chehalem Mountains Pinot Noir** (\$32, 13.6%): Sheila and Nick Nicholas faithfully maintain the Oregon vision of small-scale charm with their estate near Newberg. This bottling, from all five estate blocks, offers a classic profile aged in mostly older oak that hints at a lighter style for the vintage. Minty, cool and shady, with camphor and bayberry, and a wonderful floral accent. Almost ethereal in its subtle red fruit, but still built to age.

**2009 JK Carriere Provocateur Willamette Valley Pinot Noir** (\$24, 13.5%): Oregon native Jim Prosser found impressive tension and freshness in this early-drinking blend aged mostly in old oak. A coppery mineral accent to tannic plum skin and watermelon flavors. Remarkably well done for the money, and more approachable right now than Carriere's herb-tinged Vespidae (\$42, 13.75%).

**2009 Domaine Drouhin Oregon Willamette Valley Pinot Noir** (\$40, 14.1%): This was the sort of year that highlighted Veronique Drouhin-Boss' skills as a Burgundy winemaker. With just 20 percent new oak, DDO's mainline effort shows a remarkable depth of fruit flavor: polished red fruit on top and a darker, loam-edged plum below, with a sanguine, savory edge. Dense and properly tannic, befitting its typical ability to age well.

**2009 Stoller JV Estate Dundee Hills Pinot Noir** (\$25, 14.5%): Leave it to winemaker Melissa Burr to find a mellow expression that deftly frames the year's ripeness in a younger-vines bottling from this famed Oregon site. Full of soy and warm spice, with rich, expressive, oak-tinged fruit - roasted raspberry and rhubarb, with a foresty note for depth, all matched by terrific acidity.

**2009 Chehalem 3 Vineyard Willamette Valley Pinot Noir** (\$27, 14.5%): Harry Pedersen-Nedry and his team showed a heftier, tannic style for the vintage. Oak-driven, but its firm structure and the bark- and iodine-edged cherry fruit are classic Oregon. Give it another year to mellow. That style is

echoed in Chehalem's 2009 Ridgecrest 25th Anniversary Ribbon Ridge Pinot Noir (\$48, 14.2%), with its roasted black fruit and chestnut flavors.

**2009 Bergstrom Cumberland Reserve Willamette Valley Pinot Noir** (\$38, 14.1%): If some of Josh Bergstrom's 2009 single-vineyard efforts were tough to parse, this perennially deft blend shows off a racy, foresty side: dried roses and cranberry, with sandalwood and bramble fruit. A delicious high-wire act.

**2009 Penner-Ash Dussin Vineyard Willamette Valley Pinot Noir** (\$60, 14.5%): Lynn Penner-Ash has been making Oregon wine for 23 years, and again here's to experience. Her oak-inflected style in this estate bottling is balanced by savory underbrush aromas, and a juicy strawberry flavor to freshen deep black fruit, with what we called a "charming quality" to its texture.

**2009 Beaux Freres Vineyard Ribbon Ridge Pinot Noir** (\$80, 14.2%): Michael Etzel's Beaux Freres has long earned its reputation of being among the most polished and, dare we say, the most Californian among Oregon's roster. So it's no surprise that heady notes of roasted fruit and cola, bright cranberry to balance, and ample oak frame masterful winemaking applied to this nonpareil estate parcel near Newberg. Debate the style if you like (we did), but the skill is evident.

**2009 WillaKenzie Estate Estate Cuvee Willamette Valley Pinot Noir** (\$28, 14.4%): Bernard Lacroute's longtime property near Yamhill turned out an unrepentantly weightier, firm effort in its estate blend. It exults in big, rich fruit, with kirsch, chalk and forest floor accents to robust cherry flavors.

**2009 Soter North Valley Willamette Valley Pinot Noir** (\$30, 13.8%): While Tony Soter's work can be lost in the Oregon fray, it's no surprise that the talented founder of Carneros' Etude, with the aid of winemaker James Cahill, would navigate skillfully through a tricky year. Robust and mouthwatering - imagine black cherry juice tinged with fenugreek and burnt sage. A darker, structural wine with gorgeous, chewy flavors.

**2009 Adelsheim Willamette Valley Pinot Noir** (\$32, 13.9%): This defining Oregon property has been on an upswing, and if its latest larger-production blend has sharp edges at moments, the subtle tannins and loamy accents punctuate a raft of tart wild raspberry and cranberry. Delicate, high-wire Oregon Pinot, a benevolent creature of this tricky vintage.

**2009 Brooks Janus Willamette Valley Pinot Noir** (\$35, 13.8%): Brooks' best-known bottling, primarily from its Amity estate, is still gaining its footing in 2009, but when accessible, it exudes autumnal, dry-leaf aromas and rich black cherry. Complex and pleasantly musky.

**2009 Ponzi Willamette Valley Pinot Noir** (\$35, 13.8%): Another score for experience in this vintage. Luisa Ponzi found a quintessential Willamette expression in this firm, mineral-driven bottle, made from a blend of 10 sites. Dusky cherry and bright cranberry fruit that all comes together with forest-floor scents.

**2009 Winderlea Dundee Hills Vineyards Dundee Hills Pinot Noir** (\$38, 14.5%): Bill Sweat and Donna Morris acquired the esteemed Goldschmidt vineyard, and renamed it. A creamy cocoa note in this ambitious new winery's Dundee-focused blend doesn't diminish the robust cherry fruit and accents of loam and dried thyme. Texturally this is magnificent and rich, showing an age-worthy structure without

being overly tannic.

**2009 Erath Oregon Pinot Noir** (\$20, 13.5%): This longtime label, now owned by Washington's Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, dialed in a solid, enjoyable basic effort. A distinctive woodland fern character, plus solid strawberry and tree-bark notes. Fresh and well structured for the price, with spicy intrigue.

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