



Russian River Valley Pinot Noir

By Gerald D. Boyd

Ask any Pinot lover where the best California Pinot Noir is made and the Russian River Valley will be at the top of the list. Compared with Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir has a short track record in California. Not long ago when the call went out for an American Pinot Noir, Oregon got the nod. Today, Pinot lovers turn to the Russian River Valley and its sub region Green Valley for exciting, juicy wines.

The Russian River Valley AVA is a Sonoma County region situated mainly to the west of the city of Santa Rosa. The boundaries are loosely defined as the eastern limits of Chalk Hill to just north of Healdsburg, then following a line south of Healdsburg, turning southwest to the west side of Guerneville, along the western boundary south to the Bodega Highway, northeast through Sebastopol to Fulton Road, then to a point just north of Piner Road and east to Highway 101. Expansion plans, drawn to follow "the fog line," are set that will include the Sebastopol Hills and the city of Santa Rosa to a point south of the city at Todd Road.

Within this region are the conditions deemed ideal for growing Pinot Noir grapes: cool climate and soils that are mainly Goldridge and Franciscan. The supple black cherry flavors and lush texture, supported by crisp acidity and substantial tannins, can't be found in warmer areas, like Chalk Hill, the other sub-region in the Russian River Valley, which is more suited to that "CS" grape. Early morning fog, warm days, afternoon sea breeze and cool nights are the ingredients delivered in the western part of the Russian River appellation, and the Pinot grapes just love it.

Last June, the Russian River Valley Winegrowers mounted a tasting of 2003 Pinot Noirs at De Loach Vineyard on the eastern part of the appellation. Prior to the tasting, members of RRVW commented on growing Pinot Noir in the region, winemaking and the 2003 harvest.

Hector Bedolla, vineyard manager for La Crema, Kendall-Jackson Wine Estates and Vineyards of North Coast had this to say about the Russian River Valley soil composition and maritime climate: "What is unique about this area is the soil diversity and the maritime influence. Together, they mean more intense farming, especially in the sandy hillside soils." He described the 2003 vintage in the Russian River Valley as one of extreme temperatures, with alternating periods of warm and cold, finally ending with a long warm period at harvest allowing for an extended hang time, yet producing low yields.

Merry Edwards, owner and winemaker for Merry Edwards Wines, said that whereas the Russian River Valley was once known for Chardonnay, its fame now rests on Pinot Noir. "We have been working to eliminate poor clones from the area and for the past ten years we've been experimenting with Dijon clones, but now we're taking a new look at old treasures. We realize now that it's important to have both old and new clones." The making of Pinot Noir wines prompted strong opinions from the winemakers at the tasting, especially on the role of acidity in the wines. "I personally acidify my wines and make no bones," says Edwards. "It's important to acidulate early," says Greg La Folette, winemaker for De Loach. "Those who did late made wines that tend to stand out." Hugh Chappelle, director of winemaking for Lynmar agreed, adding that Pinot Noirs "tend to have a higher acidity, with a different acid profile than Cabernet Saivignon."

The 30 wines were divided into three flights, each with a different focus: Flight One featured regional wines, while Flights Two and Three were a mixture of estate wines, (some with a designated vineyard) and reserve blends. The wines were submitted by 30 of the 74 winery and 200 grower members of RRVW. Some of the wines are currently in the market, while others will be released later this year. Prices for those released wines are suggested national retail. What follows are my tasting notes, flight-by-flight. I prefer to summarize my reviews with word ratings rather than points, but those wishing to see the point ranges to which my word ratings correspond may consult the following table:

Good = 80-84
 Very Good = 85-89
 Outstanding = 90-94
 Superb = 95-100

Flight One - Regional Appellation

Alderbrook Winery, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir 2003 (\$24): Deep ruby color; forward aromas of dark fruits and spice; medium flavors, hints of spice and black cherry; medium supple finish. **Outstanding (90-94)**

Davis Family Vineyards, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir 2003 (\$35): Medium

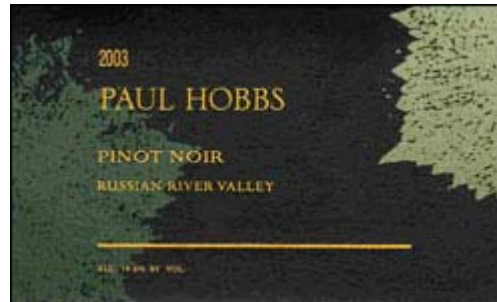
ruby-garnet color; up-front cherry-berry aroma; exotic spice and cherry flavors; long lingering finish with smooth texture and length. **Superb (95-100)**

Joseph Swan, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir "Cuvee de Trois" 2003 (\$22): Brilliant deep ruby color; deep black cherry-berry nose, leather and spice accents; rich texture, full fruit; good length and structure. **Superb (95-100)**

La Crema, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir 2003 (\$24): Deep ruby color; ripe berry nose, earthy notes; medium fruit, good chewy texture, soft tannins; touch of heat in the finish. **Very Good (85-89)**

Orogeny, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir 2003 (\$30): Deep, almost inky color; ripe berry aroma, orange blossom notes; bright berry flavors, rich texture, earthy notes through the finish. **Very Good (85-89)**

Paul Hobbs, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir 2003 (\$40): Bright medium ruby color; slightly candied Pinot aroma, toasted oak backnote; forward ripe berry flavors, good texture and structure, balanced finish with sweet fruit. **Outstanding (90-94)**



Flight Two - Mostly Single Vineyard

De La Montanya, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir Tina's Vineyard 2003 (\$30): Deep ruby-purple color; warm toasted oak nose, ripe berry accents with underlying mineral notes; ripe berry flavors, rich texture, big tannins; long dry finish. **Outstanding (90-94)**

Dutch Bill Creek Winery, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir Heintz Ranch 2003 (\$22): Medium ruby color; medium berry aroma, leafy backnote, crisp acidity; finishes a little short. **Good (80-84)**

Dutton Estate Winery, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir Jewel Block 2003 (\$50): Brilliant medium ruby color; up-front berry nose, hints of boiled beets; medium texture and length, forward berry flavors, beets and spice; long balanced finish. **Outstanding (90-94)**

Lynmar, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir "Quail Cuvee" 2003 (\$45): Bright medium ruby color; forward rose petal and black cherry aromas; forward textured Pinot flavors, rose petal notes, brisk acidity, firm tannins; good length. **Outstanding (90-94)**

Lost Canyon Winery, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir Saralee's Vineyard 2003 (\$38): Medium-deep ruby color; deep complex aromas, ripe berry with leathery accents; supple rich flavors, good length across the palate, spicy notes; long finish. **Outstanding (90-94)**

Sapphire Hill, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir Sapphire Hill Vineyard 2003 (\$38): Medium-deep ruby color; medium berry aromas, hint of cloves; medium texture, soft tannins; quick finish. **Good (80-84)**

Sunce Winery & Vineyard, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir Rodella Vineyard 2003 (\$34): Medium ruby color; forward cherry cola nose, hint of cloves; medium flavors, subtle berry notes; good texture; short finish with light-medium fruit. **Good (80-84)**

Flight Three - Single Vineyard



De Loach, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir "OFS" 2003 (\$30): Medium ruby color; medium berry nose, spice accents; medium-full ripe berry flavors and texture; medium finish with plump fruit. **Very Good (85-89)**

Dutton Goldfield, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir Sanchietti Vineyard 2003 (\$50): Very deep inky color; floral, rose petal nose, hints of spicy oak, earthy back notes; very good texture, fruit and balance; touch of



alcohol in finish. Very **Good (85-89)**

Gary Farrell, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir Starr Ridge Vineyard 2003 (\$45): Medium-deep ruby color; deep black cherry aroma, spicy notes; smooth and supple, ripe cherry-berry flavors, good acidity; long

finish with layered fruit. **Outstanding (90-94)**

Hartford Court, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir Arrendell Vineyard 2003 (\$65): Deep inky color; forward complex layered ripe berry, spice and roasted coffee; great texture, balanced throughout, supple and silky flavors; long finish. **Superb (95-100)**

Kosta Browne, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir Kopen Vineyard 2003 (\$38): Brilliant deep ruby color, violet edge; lovely ripe berry nose, spice and rose petal notes; richly textured black cherry flavors, brisk acidity, firm but not intrusive tannins; long finish with structure and fruit. **Superb (95-100)**

Marimar Estate, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir Don Miguel Vineyard-Earthquake Block 2003 (\$42): Deep ruby color; black cherry, with leathery/earthy notes; medium fruit, big tannins; long chewy finish. **Outstanding (90-94)**

Merry Edwards, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir "30" 2003 (\$90): Medium-deep ruby color; fragrant rose petal, ripe berry nose, black tea accents; big rich texture, medium-full fruit, lush; medium finish. **Outstanding (90-94)**

Williams Selyem, Russian River Valley (California) Pinot Noir Bucher Vineyard 2003 (\$49): Deep inky color with ruby edge; inviting perfumed spicy-berry nose; richly textured flavors, good depth, firm tannins; long supple finish. **Outstanding (90-94)**

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