



NEW WORLD PINOT NOIR SEEKING THE HOLY GRAIL

Jasper Morris MW introduces the results of an inconclusive but interesting and wide-ranging tasting, of wines from California, Oregon, and New Zealand, which he shared with **Stephen Brook** and **Mark Savage MW**

It is important to come to such a tasting with mind closed and taste buds open. Objectivity is lost as soon as one tries to guess where a particular wine might come from (ah, we must have reached Martinborough now...). We were not in fact told which country was which, though the preponderance of Stelvin closures for the Antipodean samples was a bit of a giveaway. The division of the tasting into flights by region was a rational decision, but who knows how the results might have changed if wines from all areas had been intermingled at random?

Growers of New World Pinot have zeal, technical competence (usually), and a blessed lack of the furniture of the past that Burgundians need to surmount. Yet the scales remain tipped against these New Seekers of the Holy Grail,

now and for some time to come, until certain inequalities are worked out of the system. The Pinot industries of New Zealand, Oregon, and California are only in their second generation. To some extent, the siting of the vineyards has thus far been, inevitably, trial and error. Original plantings tend to be for social reasons (near the weekend abodes of the enophile doctors and lawyers of this world), and it takes time to work out the combination of climate, soil, and topography where Pinot can thrive.

The first bout of serious modern Pinot production in the USA developed during the 1970s, both in California—where cooler sites, such as Carneros and the Santa Ynez Valley, were selected—and in Oregon, after David Lett's migration north, founding the Eyrie vineyard in 1966. The

story is a little more recent in New Zealand, with pioneers in Canterbury and Martinborough starting up at the very end of the '70s or early '80s. Plantings in Marlborough were initially more designed for sparkling wines, while Central Otago was developed from the late 1980s. It takes at least a generation before it really becomes clear which are the ideal sites to plant.

Then, the vine-stock material can be problematic—there are no favorite old vines that can be used for *sélection massale*. The first options in the new Pinot countries were usually clones suited to sparkling-wine production—high in yield and light in color. Thereafter, the various UC Davis and Dijon clones were developed, but only recently has a grower had a wide selection from which to choose. Equally significant is the absence of old vines. Many of the first plantings had to be replaced after phylloxera problems, so few producers can point to anything like a mature vineyard, and certainly not the 40 years old that a conscientious Burgundian would consider the starting point for *vieilles vignes*.

What are the winemakers trying to achieve? I hear mixed messages when I travel to the various epicenters of Pinot, be it the International Pinot Noir Celebration in Oregon, the World of Pinot Noir in the Central Coast, or the triennial Wellington Pinot Noir Conference in New Zealand. If only I had a bottle of grand cru Burgundy in my cellar for every time a New World Pinot-maker has told me that they make their wine in a Burgundian style... as if there were not almost as many Burgundian styles of making Pinot as there are vigneron. It is a love/hate relationship, though: On the one hand, the vineyards of Burgundy are seen as the ultimate reference point; on the other, the wines that come therefrom are often decried (“I tasted my wines blind against the DRC wines and mine won...”).

It would be hard to derive any clear statistical weighting from the results of our tasting. New Zealand (excluding the probably faulty bottle of Ara Resolute) pipped California by an irrelevant fraction, though Oregon trailed in a clear third—perhaps because of too many wines that, though competent, lacked enough character to enthuse the judges. Nor were there clear results between different districts, with Russian River/Sonoma barely clear of the Central Coast and results inconclusive from New Zealand, where Marlborough produced both the top two and the bottom two wines, with Martinborough performing consistently between 15 and 15.5 and Central Otago not far behind.

The majority of the wines from all areas were from 2006, with not enough examples from other years to suggest any vintage pattern. Indeed there are as many instances of tasters commenting on a tired aspect to 2006 as for the older Pinots. For the most part, the wines were holding up well, and low marks were as often given for stylistic reasons as for specific faults in a wine.

The fascination of Pinot Noir affects us all differently. One striking point about this tasting is how little agreement there was between the three tasters when scoring the wines, even though tasting notes might be quite similar. Stephen Brook and I both picked out rose petals in the Eyrie Pinot Meunier 2001 (included as a ringer), yet I loved the wine and he did not. Mark Savage was also a fan, though none of us liked the 2002 version of the same wine—a year younger on the label but seemingly older in the bottle.

Some readers might be puzzled by phrases such as Savage's “nice touch of austerity,” and it would be true to say that none of the tasters is noted for a predilection toward high-octane, deep-colored, noticeably oaked wines. But since the producer's intentions are usually clear from the first sight and smell of the wine, the key is to judge whether or not the wine is a success in its intended style. We did not always agree: Savage and I have relatively similar descriptors for Brooks Janus 2005 (Willamette Valley), but my conclusion was more positive than his. I remain unconvinced that there is a single definition of “Pinosity”—the charm is that the grape can wear so many different clothes, and sometimes none at all.

We all came away from the tasting curiously unmoved. Acidity and complexity were two words rarely in use in our descriptions; oak and alcohol occasionally intruded, though rarely in glaring fashion. Few sighs of exasperation were to be heard, but rare, too, were the squeaks of pleasure.

Average and range of scores

	Average	Range
Stephen Brook	15	11–17.5
Jasper Morris MW	15	12.5–17.5
Mark Savage MW	14	11–17
All wines	13.5	

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2006 Fromm Clayvin Vineyard Marlborough - 16.5

SB: Fairly deep garnet. Slightly cooked nose, a good deal of oak, but bright cherry fruit comes shining through. Svelte, luscious, concentrated; has weight and some depth; impressive in being fairly extracted but not coarse or rustic. Some coffee tones on the finish, which is long and spicy. A complete wine; harmonious. **17.5**

JM: Fine mid-purple color. Hard to coax out a nose at first. It remains subdued, though there is no shortage of full, strawberry fruit on the palate. Perhaps an upgrade of complexity is needed to compete at the highest level, but this is certainly very enjoyable. **15**

MS: A nice rose-petal delicacy here is most attractive. Who knows what will happen next, but this is pretty good, and it achieves an original personality without being too "in your face." **17**

2006 Cloudy Bay Marlborough - 16

SB: Fairly deep red. Ripe, slightly confected nose with a tomato tone. Soft, silky, quite seductive fruit; has intensity and acidity; lean and understated and has finesse. It's one-dimensional but clean and bright and enjoyable. Good length. **15.5**

JM: Pure brisk purple in color. Fine, energetic Pinot nose perhaps a point off full ripeness. It shows class and an appealing delicacy, though. Beautifully stylish on the palate, with an appealing red-cherry and light strawberry aftertaste that lingers. **17**

MS: Nice Pinot perfume here, with good fruit flavors and balance, too. This works fine for me. No need to keep it, though. **16**

2004 Cristom Jessie Vineyard Willamette Valley - 16

SB: Fairly deep to deep garnet. Oaky nose, and rather cooked fruit, a lot of vanilla. Sleek, quite concentrated, fresher than the nose suggests; has vigor and bite. The alcohol is a tad above my comfort zone, but not too obtrusive. Ripe and lusty, if far from elegant, with plenty of drive from the attack to the finish. Quite good length. **16**

JM: Palish color with a light rim. Gently fragrant, almost *fraises des bois*, though with a sweeter aspect. On the palate it is delicious and harmonious with maybe just a touch of alcohol showing through. Nonetheless, the balance of sweet and

savory is well judged, and the length of finish proves the class. **17.5**

MS: Rich, but lacks a bit of freshness in the fruit now, and I cannot see that it will go anywhere very interesting. Sound but unexciting. **14**

2006 Dutton Goldfield Dutton Ranch Freestone Hill Vineyard Russian River Valley - 16

SB: Fairly deep red. Sweet, intense, oaky nose; raspberries; has purity. Rich, sumptuous, concentrated, big but ripe tannins, quite muscular for Pinot but not out of balance, even if the acidity is modest. Plenty of spice and vigor on the finish. Quite long. **17**

JM: Full color. Sweetly scented nose, with some oil of cloves. The palate delivers fresher fruit, with some welcome acidity that beds in very well with the brisk red-cherry and raspberry fruit. A dusting of oak at the back is not too obtrusive. Already enjoyable. **16.5**

MS: Correct as an example of ripe, well-balanced fruit, but what happens next to make it out of the ordinary? The vineyard manager and the winemaker have proved themselves competent, but the vineyard has yet to prove that it is exceptional, and that is what makes the final difference between good and great. This remains good. **15**



2004 Hirsch Vineyards Sonoma Coast - 16

SB: Deep red. Firm, toasty nose; raspberry coulis. Lush, broad, opulent, full-bodied; massive fruit here, so not very elegant, but it has some acidity and vigor to keep it assertive. Long, spicy finish. **16**

JM: Fine, bright, youthful purple. Heady and agreeable, ripe raspberry on the nose, with some darker fruit notes; the sort of bouquet that is worth a second and third sniff. Full again on the palate, and on the sweeter side of Pinot, but there is enough variation of fruit poised on the cusp of red and black for this to work. The oak is in the background. Good finish. Purists might want more austerity, though. **17**

MS: There is no shortage of ripe and charming fruit here. The color is deep and appealing, and the commercial appeal must be obvious. Whether it has the capacity to become original and really interesting is not so clear. I suspect it may remain in the ranks of the relatively facile. It is a bit of a fruit bomb. If the vineyard is really good, then it will become much more than that. **15**

2006 Kosta Browne Keefer Ranch Russian River Valley - 16

SB: Fairly deep red, quite bright. Lively, crushed-berry nose; has vigor and a delicate use of oak. Sleek, svelte, concentrated, bright, and intense, quite peppery; a touch of alcohol on the finish but not enough to wreck the wine. Has persistence and poise. **17**

JM: Medium depth of color. Quite a light but fresh Pinot nose. Well balanced on the palate with a savory aspect, though also a little bit of heat. Beginning to drink well. **16**

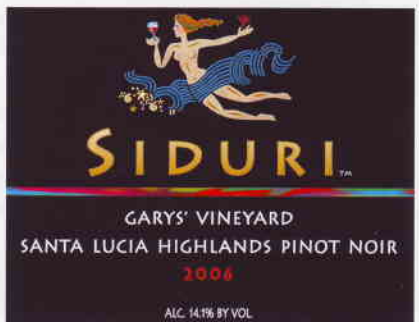
MS: Refreshing, sweet, ripe fruit with a hint of cool mint. Plenty of alcohol, but it remains balanced. Nothing very original, perhaps, but good fleshy charm. **15**

2004 Marimar Estate Don Miguel Vineyard Russian River Valley - 16

SB: Fairly deep to deep garnet-red. Heavily oaked nose, some coffee aromas. Soft but concentrated, distinct torrefaction flavors, spicy, grippy, vigorous. Not an elegant style, but virile and packed with fruit. Long, chewy finish. **17**

JM: Fine full purple. The nose has a slightly soupy aspect detracting from the purity of the Pinot. There is both ripe fruit and a little strain of herbaceousness, while the finish is a little more tannic than most wines. Slightly contradictory today, but I like the length and weight of fruit on the aftertaste. **16**

MS: The fruit here has presence all right, but I am a little worried by the extraction. The tannin and the alcohol are perhaps just a shade obvious, but it is a nice wine that will give much pleasure. **15**



2006 Siduri Garys' Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands - 16

SB: Fairly deep red. Oaky red-fruit nose, a touch overripe. Soft, rounded, rather slack, lacks some drive; but there are some tannins here to sustain and lift the wine on the finish. Has rude vigor and reasonable length of flavor. **15**

JM: Not quite so much purple in the red here. The nose is quite exotic yet with some complexity, perhaps the faint smokiness that comes with some whole-cluster fermentation. There is generous fruit behind, prevented from any undue heaviness by the finely delineated tannic structure. A very well-made, well-balanced wine that should continue to age well. **17.5**

MS: There is something more Burgundian