

Pinot Noir and Thanksgiving Turkey: *Excellent Bedfellows*

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This is the first of a few posts around wines to serve at Thanksgiving. It is on Pinot Noir, and why it is such a good all-round partner for the turkey and all the trimmings.

Why Pinot Noir works so well with turkey & Thanksgiving

There is nothing novel or trailblazing about recommending Pinot Noir with turkey. They have been happy partners for a very long time. What is interesting though, is understanding why Pinot Noir remains such a firm favorite and staple at the Thanksgiving table.



In my opinion, there are a number of factors about Pinot that render it such a good turkey and thanksgiving partner. These include:

- **Pinot Noir wines are generally light to medium bodied in weight.**

This can be a very important factor to consider. Powerful full-bodied wines such as Cabernet Sauvignon (especially if young and New World) can easily overpower a turkey-centered meal. Additionally, because the Thanksgiving meal usually lasts several hours, it is best to avoid big, powerful wines, which can make you and your guests tired and sleepy more quickly.

- **Pinot Noir exudes vibrant red and black fruit.**

Pinot wines are characterized by their delightfully vibrant palette of juicy red and black cherry and berry fruit. This liveliness and juiciness will enliven and enhance the succulence of any turkey or stuffing (even if it they seem a bit dry when cooked).

- **Pinot Noir has an elegant flavor profile.**

Gentle aromas and flavors of red and black fruit, layered with subtle savory and earthy notes, spice and often a distinct floral or gamey note make it a very versatile wine to pair with the many different turkey preparations, the stuffing as well as a spectrum of different side dishes.

- **Pinot Noir has bright acidity and gentle tannins.**

These two aspects of Pinot Noir are important. The bright acidity brings out the juiciness in the turkey as well as the flavor in the sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce, mushroom dishes etc.. The gentle tannins marry well with all the green vegetables such Brussels sprouts, leafy greens such as kale, chard or spinach, as well as the proverbial dish of green beans.

Choosing American Pinot Noir for Thanksgiving

In our house we only serve American wines at Thanksgiving. Thankfully there are quite a few American wine regions making excellent Pinot Noir.

California

In California, think Carneros (a region that spans both Napa and Sonoma counties), Russian River Valley (Sonoma), Sonoma Coast (especially from the most westerly vineyards), Anderson Valley (Mendocino County) as well as the Central Coast (Santa Rita Hills, Santa Barbara, Santa Maria Valley).

If possible I try to avoid wines with the simple, generic California designation on the label. Pinot Noir is a fickle, fussy grape and expensive grape to cultivate. So be wary of offers that seem too good to be true. They probably are! While generalizations can be dangerous, this is my quick summary of California Pinot Noir styles.

Carneros - Juicy, wild red fruit and lighter in body

Russian River Valley - Weightier, fuller-bodied and darker fruit flavors

Sonoma Coast - Quite deeply colored and noticeable bright fruit and acidity

Central Coast - varied but usually weightier, complex, dark fruit and fuller in body

Oregon

Oregon has a long and well-deserved reputation for high quality Pinot Noir. The Willamette Valley is the most important area in Oregon for Pinot Noir. So look for that on a wine label.

Within this designated area there are six sub-regions worth seeking out. These are Chehalem Mountains, Dundee Hills, Eola-Amity Hills, McMinnville, Ribbon Ridge and Yamhill-Carlton. In general, Oregon Pinot wines are very well-structured, focused and capable of long ageing.

New York State

Fingerlakes, New York - Unless you live in or around New York, it is unlikely that you will see much of the Pinot offerings from the Fingerlakes. But they are starting to emerge. Given its cool and more challenging climate, the wines tend to be on the more lighter-bodied side with wonderful, crisp acidity and lively bright fruit.

Serving Pinot Noir at Thanksgiving

With such an array of styles within the American Pinot Noir category, there is something to suit not just any Thanksgiving turkey menu but also to satisfy a variety of personal tastes. Choose a few different origins and styles to mix and match. One piece of advice is to chill the wine a little before serving. Room temperature does not mean the average temperature of our generally over-heated living or dining rooms. It means 60 - 65 degrees. Pinot Noir slightly chilled brings out the vibrancy of the fruit.

Working with a budget

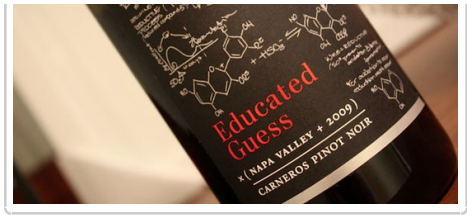
As indicated above Pinot Noir is an incredibly fussy grape to grow well. Expensive to produce, Pinot wines do not come cheap. That said there are many delightful examples under \$25. Pinot Noir wines are also great to gift. For those of you being treated to Thanksgiving this year, maybe a gift for your hosts of some special Pinot Noir is in order?

Mary's Recent Pinot Noir Tastings and Recommendations



\$25 & Under

• **2009 Sebastiani Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, \$18** - Inviting aromas of wild, ripe black cherries (think black forest gateau), wild strawberry, caramel cream, sweet spice and a touch of bitter chocolate. Vibrant, juicy flavors are refreshing. Smooth tannins and texture. Easy drinking yet focused and true to both variety and place.



• **2010 Garnet Pinot Noir, Carneros, \$20** - Juicy, savory, brimming with bright red berries and cherries, wild strawberry. Nice earthy, spice and savory leather notes. Silky tannins. It shows off the finesse of Pinot Noir. Nice layers of flavor in the glass show some complexity. Will be a sure winner with the turkey.

• **2009 Educated Guess Pinot Noir, Carneros, \$20** - Shows lots of lively, bright red fruit aroma and flavor - strawberry, cranberry, wild cherry. It has velvety tannins and a smooth texture. Hints of spice. Fairly straightforward and fruity, but versatile, easy drinking and sure to please around the thanksgiving table

• **2009 La Crema Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, \$25** - Rich, almost plush texture, yet shows finesse. Ample aromas and flavors of wild black plums, cherry compote, strawberry with hints of dried herbs, jasmine te, vanilla and clove. Refreshing, juicy fruit flavors. Warm but not hot, smooth finish.

\$25 to \$40

• **2010 Robert Mondavi Carneros Pinot Noir, \$27** - Juicy, showing lots of vibrant fresh and dried red cherry fruit, strawberry, spice. Smooth tannins and texture. Slightly warm but not invasive. A good all-rounder Pinot Noir. It won't bowl you over but refreshing and true to style

• **2009 Willakenzie Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley \$30** - Pretty, perfumed nose showing lots of ripe, vibrant red fruit, Hints of pepper and spice. Refined on the palate, elegant with ample bright fruit flavor. Supple, well-structured tannins. Silky texture. Long finish.

• **2008 Migration Pinot Noir, Anderson Valley, \$34** - A long time favorite in our household. Gorgeous nose of subtle flowers, raspberry, wild strawberry and cherry. Notes of leather, exotic spice, savory herbs and pepper. Velvety tannins, firm structure and smooth texture. Lively and refreshing with lovely concentration of flavor that persists across the whole palate. Long, lingering, smooth, layered, mineral finish.

• **2009 Patricia Green Cellars Four Winds Pinot Noir, \$30** - I fell for Patty Green's wines, the first time I visited her property and met the great lady. Focused, defined with a very strong sense of place. Appealing layered nose slowly draws you in. Wild dark fruit, aromas and flavors. Exuberant and refreshing with every taste. Smooth tannins and velour texture. Lively, long finish with a savory kick.

\$40 & Above

• **2008 Gary Farrell Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, \$41** - Vibrant, rich, with an enticing floral note. This wine has presence. Very good concentration of ripe, dark fruit flavors on the palate, which are ripe but not jammy. Velvety tannins and richly textured. Almost full-bodied, yet retains elegance. Long finish.

• **2008 Goldeneye Pinot Noir, Anderson Valley, \$55** - There is something quite unique about this wine that manages to combine the definition of a cooler climate with opulent ripeness. This wine is refreshing and

lively, yet serious and weighty. Wonderful complexity of aromas and flavors - ripe black berried fruit, plums, wild cherry, with nuances of cinnamon, anise, vanilla and a savory gamey earthiness. Very long, persistent finish.

• **2009 Patz & Hall Hyde Vineyard Pinot Noir, Carneros, \$65** - A beautiful, focused, structured single vineyard Pinot Noir. Patz & Hall specializes in single vineyard Pinots and Chardonnay wines that truly do express the distinct nuances of the different terroirs. I love them all but if forced to pick a favorite it has to be Hyde Vineyard. This wine sings minerality from start to finish. Vibrant and packed with layers of bright fresh fruit - red berries and cherries, chocolate, exotic spice, savory notes. Velvety tannins and a rich, smooth texture. Seamlessly combines ripeness with precision and poise. Very long mineral finish.

I would love to hear whether Pinot Noir is your 'go-to' Thanksgiving wine and why you like it?

Until next week, enjoy!

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