

AND THE OSCAR GOES TO...PINOT NOIR!

by Hanna Lee, Women for WineSense (www.womenforwinesense.org)

No, *Sideways* didn't sweep the Oscar Awards, but the comedy about two buddies traveling in Santa Barbara's wine country created a lot of buzz around one of the movie's "stars," pinot noir. Indeed, Wine International reported a 22 percent increase in pinot noir sales in the United States from mid-December to mid-January. While *Sideways* might not be the sole cause of the increase, the movie has certainly brought this grape to the attention of millions of movie viewers.

What is Pinot Noir?

Pinot noir is one of the oldest grape varieties. It is known as difficult to grow because it requires both warm days and consistently cool nights. Pinot noir first achieved greatness in the Burgundy region of France, where it dominates red wine production. Today, pinot noir is also produced in regions around the world including Oregon, California, New Zealand, Australia and Italy. At its best, this velvety and seductive wine evokes red berries, cherries, plums, mushrooms, cedar, chocolate, old leather and dry leaves.

Pinot Noir Food Pairing Ideas:

Because it is light in body, pinot noir is versatile and complements poultry, ham, lamb, pork, beef and even seafood, especially when grilled, as well as pasta and vegetables. Michael Bonadies of the Myriad Restaurant Group (Montrachet,

Tribeca Grill, Nobu, etc.) notes, "Pinot noir seduces and delights with an incredibly wide range of aromas, flavors and textures. It's a wine that consistently delivers hedonistic pleasures and tremendous food pairing ability — in short, the perfect restaurant wine."

Eric Asimov on Pinot Noir

I interviewed Eric Asimov, Chief Wine Critic, *New York Times*, to get his professional opinion on the pinot noir trend. Asimov created the "\$25 and Under" restaurant reviews in 1992 and wrote them through 2004. He is a co-author of "The *New York Times* Guide to Restaurants 2004," the fifth edition of the guide and has offered commentary on WQXR-FM radio since 1999.

HL: Are you a fan of pinot noir?

EA: How could anyone not love pinot noir? Pinot noir is nowadays made around the world [and varies] considerably depending on where they are grown. That means when made well, they distinctly express the sense of where the grapes were grown. The styles can differ from lean yet powerful Burgundies to round and fruity California, with lots in between.

HL: In your Feb. 16 *New York Times* article, you wrote that pinot noir is a wine that could make a person cry. Is this varietal really so moving and poetic?

EA: Few other grapes have this emotional component. It's often said that Bordeaux appeals to the intellect and Burgundy to the soul.

HL: In the same article, you compared the different characteristics between California pinot noirs and those from New Zealand. What other regions are famous for pinot noir? What are their characteristics?

EA: In general, Burgundy has more earthy, mine rally components than California pinots. Like many French wines, great Burgundies can be both powerful and graceful. California tends toward.

EA: In general, Burgundy has more earthy, mine rally components than California pinots. Like many French wines, great Burgundies can be both powerful and graceful. California tends toward power at the expense of subtlety. Oregon and New Zealand fall roughly somewhere in the middle.

HL: In *Sideways*, the main character Miles says, "If you are drinking merlot, I am leaving." Is there anything to this criticism or is it unfair to ban an entire varietal?

EA: It's not entirely unfair. The popularity of California merlot is entirely unrelated to the quality of the wine. In Bordeaux, where merlot comes from, it is often a mixing grape. It only is dominant in Pomerol and St. Emilion. Here in the U.S., it is too often a weedy, unbalanced, oaky, uninteresting wine. I often feel the same way as Miles, though I'm more polite about it.

HL: Do you think that pinot noir's popularity will continue to grow?

EA: Yes, if people are exposed to deli-

cious pinot noirs. The danger is that, sensing a new popularity of pinot noir, winemakers will start flooding the market with indifferent, lackluster versions, and then, five or ten years from now, you'll have a character in a movie threatening to leave if anybody orders pinot noir.

PINOT NOIR FROM SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

- Sanford Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$18)
- Sea Smoke BOTELLA Pinot Noir (\$30)
- Hitching Post Santa Barbara Pinot Noir (\$27)
- Au Bon Climat Pinot Noir, Santa Maria (\$20)
- Cambria Julia's Pinot Noir (\$19)

TWO WINE EVENTS

"Pinot Noir from Around the World," Monday, May 16. For more information visit www.womenforwinesense.org

Manhattan Chamber of Commerce to host its first wine tasting with the *New York Times*' Eric Asimov on June 8th at Club 101. For more information visit www.manhattancc.org.

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