



California Central Coast Wine Tour

Class IV – Pinot Noir

The fourth leg of our journey through California's Central Coast took us south from Paso Robles. We paid visits to Wolff Vineyards and Domaine Alfred Winery, both located in the Edna Valley, southeast of San Luis Obispo. Between these visits, we stopped by Windward Vineyard in Paso Robles, a small operation dedicated only to Pinot Noir. Everyone we spoke to had a lot to say about Pinot Noir, the prized red grape of Burgundy.

Wolff Vineyards

Jean-Pierre Wolff, the owner and winemaker at Wolff Vineyards, was eager to talk to us about Pinot Noir. He began by explaining why Pinot Noir tends to be lighter in color than other red varieties. Since the skin of Pinot Noir is so thin, less pigment is extracted as the juice sits on the skins, which results in a lighter wine. Jean-Pierre warned us not to draw too many conclusions from the color. He explained that even extremely light Pinot Noir can "have every bit of perfume, nose and friendliness in mid palate as you would have with a darker color."

We learned that more than other red varieties, Pinot Noir is identifiable immediately by its aromas. Jean-Pierre described the nose as "delicate" with "raspberry and strawberry notes." The mouth feel, he explained, is usually softer and more velvety than other red wines, and it is usually not as heavy as wines like Cabernet Sauvignon. He noted, however, that many winemakers in California have felt the need to darken and intensify Pinot Noir. When this is done too much, Jean-Pierre refers to the wine as "Pinot Gravy." "I like Pinot Gravy," joked Jean Pierre, "but on my turkey, not in my wine glass."

Pinot Noir is known to be a difficult grape to grow. Jean-Pierre explained that because of the thin skins, the grapes are more susceptible to disease, and can bruise if they get too much (or too little) sun, rain or cold weather. He also recommended drinking Pinot Noir out of special Burgundy glasses, which are rounded and more balloon-like than other wine glasses. These help trap Pinot Noir's aromatic elements.

Before we left Wolff Vineyards, we saw the view from the family style tasting room. In France, the line between the winery and home is often blurry, and Jean-Pierre has successfully created this atmosphere in his own tasting room. Before heading to our next stop, we learned that Pinot Noir tends to grow well in cool climates, like Burgundy or the Edna Valley. We also reviewed the term "tannin," which is a compound found

naturally in the skins, seeds and stems of grapes that makes for an astringent finish in some wines.

Windward Vineyard

Marc Goldberg, the owner and winemaker at Windward Vineyard, has dedicated his life to making quality Pinot Noir. He and his wife Maggie D'Ambrosia make their Pinot Noir in a traditional Burgundian style using grapes from their 17-year-old vineyard. Marc explained that his Pinot Noir, like old style Pinot Noir in Burgundy, has the "goût de terroir" or "taste of the terroir," referring to the soil, climate and growing conditions in his vineyard. Minimizing interference with the natural flavors of the grapes is important to Marc, and he said that he considers himself a wine shepherd more than a winemaker. "I follow these grapes to harvest and make sure nothing bad happens to them," he explained.

We also spoke with Solène Christophe, a visitor from France who spent the season working in Windward's tasting room. She agreed that the Pinot Noir at Windward is very similar to French Burgundy - very food friendly, with a good bouquet. Marc also mentioned his Pinot Noir's "incredible bouquet of wild strawberry" and the complex, long finish. Marc uses 100% French oak barrels for aging Pinot Noir – traditional Burgundy barrels cost 800 dollars each, and Marc replaces each one after three years. Normal aging time for Windward Pinot Noir is about 12 months.

Marc recognizes the important role small vineyards have played over the course of winemaking history, and he emphasized that until recently, wine had always been a product of regional diversity. "In Burgundy," he explained, "there are literally thousands of little Pinot Noir vineyards, and each one has a little bit of a different flavor, not based so much on the style of the winemaker, but based on the soil." In the past few decades, advances in winemaking technology have allowed people all over the world to make drinkable wine. Large wine producers can now easily make, distribute and sell their wine at low prices – but wine aficionados like Marc warn us that this wine is mediocre. Marc left us with some questions to consider: Is the world going to move toward global mediocrity, where the wines we drink are nice but nothing special? Or can we retain the regional diversity that has helped produce great wine for hundreds of years? The choice, it seems, is ours to make.

Domaine Alfred Winery

At Domaine Alfred Winery, winemaker Fintan du Fresne led us through the tasting room and gave us some tips on wine tasting. Fin explained that as a winemaker, he tends to break down wine tasting structurally, into the forward palate, the mid-palate, and the finish. The forward palate refers to the initial flavors, usually fruit, that come as soon as the wine hits the taste buds. In Pinot Noir, this is usually bright red fruit like cherry and strawberry. The mid-palate, he explained, "is the backbone of the

wine, which should be nice and broad and mouth filling.” Here, according to Fin, is where the complexity of Pinot Noir shines. “We can get from a vegetative tomato leaf character through to a very ripe red plum through to black plum and black cherry,” he explained. “Another typical characteristic is a slightly earthy or almost barnyard flavor.” The finish of the wine usually refers to tannins, but in Pinot Noir it should never be too harsh or astringent. Instead, the finish should be smooth, long and lingering.

Will Cavanagh, the manager at Domaine Alfred, joined our conversation to talk about food pairings for Pinot Noir. He told us that roasted salmon is a popular choice, as well as other steak fishes, duck and quail. “The nice thing about Pinot Noir is that it doesn’t challenge big flavors,” he explained. “It just sort of works with them.” Fin continued by talking about Pinot Noir’s potential to age. He advised us that Pinot Noir from California, due to its higher pH, is not likely to age as well as some French Burgundies, some of which can age up to 30 years.

After our visit in the tasting room, we headed down to the brand new winery, where Fin told us about the production process for Pinot Noir. At Domaine Alfred, Pinot Noir grapes are picked before sunrise, when they are at their coolest. Once inside the winery, they are de-stemmed and put into fermentors, which keep the grapes at a cool temperature for 7-10 days before fermentation begins. Fin explained that delaying the fermentation process helps extract color and flavor from the grapes without extracting too much tannin.

Pinot Noir is a versatile wine, and its popularity continues to increase. Wolff, Windward and Domaine Alfred are just three of the many wineries that are producing this famous Burgundian varietal in California’s Central Coast. There are dozens of small wineries to visit in both the Edna Valley and the Paso Robles area – the best way to find your favorite is to try them all!

Fun Facts about Pinot Noir:

The hills of Côte d’Or produce some of the most famous French Burgundies.

Pinot Noir ripens early and is among the first grapes to be harvested.

Pinot Noir is one of the grapes that is used in the production of sparkling wine and Champagne.

A sparkling wine made from 100% Pinot Noir grapes is usually labeled as “Blanc de Noirs.”

Pinot Noir became more popular in California, Australia and New Zealand after the release of the film *Sideways* in 2004.