

# Forbes

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## California Pinot Noir - A Regional Overview

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Etude Estate Vineyard, Carneros

Photo courtesy Etude Vineyards

Pinot Noir, wherever it is grown, is a challenging variety. It's been called "the heartbreak grape," and the efforts undertaken by winemakers have been called the "quest for the Holy Grail," at least in viticultural terms.

Producers in California are as passionate about making the perfect Pinot Noir – or at least one as good as possible - and it's a mission that has been going on for over 50 years. Today, there are wineries in many parts of the state that have taken Pinot Noir by the horns, so to speak, and have come up with some very impressive results.

How have they done it? Is it soil, climate, when the grapes are harvested, the type of barrels used? As with any wine, it's a combination of all of these, but perhaps no other grape is as dissected as much

as Pinot Noir.

I asked Jon Priest, senior winemaker for Etude, located in Carneros (where Napa and Sonoma County meet at the southern border of Napa), about this. What is the single most important thing in the production of Pinot Noir? He was firm in his response. “Absolutely the site. Pinot Noir expresses the peculiarities of a site (*terroir*) more than most varieties. The potential for quality and individuality only comes from the place in which the vines are grown.”

That being the case, let’s examine some of the major growing zones in California from Pinot Noir, from north to south.

### **Anderson Valley, Mendocino County**

As an early ripening variety, Pinot Noir needs to be grown in a cool climate, and the Anderson Valley of Mendocino, north of Sonoma and Napa, is just that. Katey Larwood, winemaker at Goldeneye, notes that there are two main forces that make Anderson Valley such a special place to grow Pinot Noir. “The first is our proximity to the Pacific Ocean. The second is our extreme diurnal temperature shift, which can be up to 50 degrees between day and night. Because we are a valley, warm air accumulates during the day resulting in moderate-to-high daytime temperatures, but as soon as the sun goes down the temperature drops rapidly ... Pinot excels in these conditions.” For Larwood, “the Anderson Valley tends to yield Pinot Noirs with a signature wild, rustic edge.”

### **Russian River Valley, Sonoma County**

One of the most famous territories for California Pinot Noir is the Russian River Valley, named for the east-west river that flows into the Pacific. The names of the local producers read like a who’s who in California Pinot Noir: Rochioli; Gary Farrell; Joseph Swan; Dehlinger; Dutton Estate Winery; Dutton Goldfield; Kistler; Merry Edwards; William Selyem and several others.

As many vineyards are close to the river (and the ocean) fog plays its part here, limiting sunshine hours per day, and ensuring a long growing season that results in expressive aromatics (floral – roses and carnations – as well as intriguing notes of cola) and lively acidity. The best examples combine beautiful structure with subdued spice notes; the best examples also have a sense of minerality.

### **Sonoma Coast / Fort Ross-Seaview**

The Sonoma Coast is a large appellation, encompassing much of Sonoma County, inland as well as the coast. Thus it is difficult to define the style of a Pinot Noir labeled with the Sonoma Coast AVA designation, which is why some producers speak of the “true Sonoma Coast,” this being a small area near the towns of Fort Ross and Cazadero. This small area is now a separate appellation known as Fort Ross-Seaview (unofficially known as the “Extreme Sonoma Coast”); vineyards here are between 900 and 1100 feet above sea level, and are strongly affected by early morning fog as well as coastal breezes. Pinot Noirs from Fort Ross are deeply colored, intensely flavored and structured for several years of aging.

### **Carneros**

Carneros – aka Los Carneros - is one of the most famous Pinot Noir districts in California; it was the first wine region in the state to be defined on climate and not on political boundaries. Situated just north

of the San Pablo Bay (an extension of the San Francisco Bay), it is located some 70 miles north of San Francisco, where Napa and Sonoma Counties meet, south of the town of Napa. Vineyards are low lying and morning and afternoon fog play an important part in the climate.

Top Pinot Noir producers here include Etude, Cuvaision and Saintsbury; several Napa wineries not situated in Carneros, such as Robert Mondavi and Clos du Val, have vineyards here or purchase Carneros fruit.

### **Santa Lucia Highlands, Monterey County**

The Santa Lucia Highlands has become a vital area for California Pinot Noir, thanks to its distinctive features. Stacy Vogel, winemaker for Miner Family Vineyards in Napa Valley, who produces several examples of Pinot Noir from the Santa Lucia Highlands, notes that a main thoroughfare here known as River Road divides the flat lands where lettuce and other vegetables are grown in hot conditions (this is Steinbeck country) from the slopes of the Santa Lucia Highlands where fog envelops the vineyards; temperatures here are often in the 60s.

According to Vogel, “The wines from the SLH all have both a delicacy of fruit characters, along with an earthiness that is usually only found in Pinot Noir with denser, plummy fruit characters.” These wines have great complexity and truly stand out in comparative tastings of the state’s Pinot Noirs, especially for their spicy, earthy characteristics. Area producers include Belle Glos, McIntyre and Siduri, while producers from outside the region, such as Miner and Mark West produce Pinot Noirs from this area’s plantings.

### **Sta. Rita Hills, Santa Barbara County**

This growing district has become arguably the finest for Pinot Noir in the state; I have come to this opinion based on comparative tastings over the past few years. This is a small zone, with most vineyards situated only 10 miles from the Pacific Ocean.

Victor Gallegos, General Manager and Director of Winemaking for Sea Smoke, a celebrated area producer, comments on this territory. “Sta. Rita Hills is the southernmost Region 1 microclimate (Region 1 equates to the coolest temperatures for a wine region) to be found in the Northern Hemisphere. The solar intensity found at our southern latitude and the daily fog (Sea Smoke) influence here create wines that are lush, but with great freshness and acidity.”

I love the varietal purity as well as the complexity and structure of the Pinot Noirs from the Sta. Rita Hills; the finest examples offer appealing drinkability upon release, yet display great complexity after several years in the bottle. Great area producers include Fiddlehead Cellars (their Fiddlestix Vineyard is one of the most renowned plots here), Babcock and Sanford. This last producer releases as many as four offerings of Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir, with the most famous being from the Sanford & Benedict Vineyard, planted in 1971; these are mouth-filling wines of impressive complexity.

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Reviews on recommended current releases of California Pinot Noir

**Cakebread "Two Creeks Vineyards" 2016** (Anderson Valley) - Aromas of red cherry, cardamom and oregano. Medium-full with good acidity and persistence; notes of roast coffee and brown herbs in the finish. Medium-weight tannins, good balance. A bit of time will help; best in 3-5 years. **Very Good**

**Fel "Savoy Vineyard" 2015** (Anderson Valley) - Aromas of morel cherry, cola and purple orchid. Medium-full, this has beautifully ripe fruit, nicely integrated wood notes, supple tannins, very good acidity and impressive harmony. Lovely varietal purity and impressive harmony from start to finish. Enjoy over the next 5-7 years. **Excellent**

**Goldeneye "Gowan Vineyard" 2015** (Anderson Valley) - Aromas of maraschino cherry, cola and sassafras. Medium-full with excellent concentration. Rich mid-palate and a powerful finish with excellent persistence, very good acidity and medium-full tannins. Very appealing now, this is preferable served with food, and will improve for 5-7 years, though there is a touch too much wood. Otherwise, this is a deeply concentrated Pinot Noir with excellent cool climate character. **Outstanding**

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**Lombardi 2016** (Sonoma Coast) - Aromas of cola, mace and roast coffee. Medium-full, this has good concentration and acidity, with medium-weight tannins. The finish offers good persistence and notable brown spice that somewhat dominates the fruit. Nicely structured, but fruit notes are muted. 3-5 years **Very Good**

**J Pinot Noir 2016** (Russian River Valley) - Aromas of morel cherry, iodine and wood notes. Medium-full with very good varietal character, good acidity, medium-weight tannins and ample oak. A bit rough as of now, time will help. Best in 3-5 years. **Very Good**

**Fort Ross Winery "Sea Slopes" 2016** (Sonoma Coast) - Aromas of morel cherry, cardamom and nutmeg. Medium-bodied, this has very good ripeness and varietal character, very good acidity, moderate tannins and pleasing notes of brown spice and herbs in the finish. Approachable and very drinkable now, this will drink nicely over the next 3-5 years. **Very Good**

**Fort Ross "FRV Fort Ross Vineyard" 2013** (Fort Ross-Seaview, Sonoma Coast) - aromas of cherry compote, red currant and a hint of tobacco seed. Medium-full with excellent concentration. Ample oak, good acidity, medium-weight tannins. Earthy Pinot Noir with a delicate herbal note in the finish (cumin, sage). Beautiful complexity. Approachable now, best in 3-5 years. **Excellent**

**Sonoma-Loeb "Sangiaco Vineyard Fedrick Ranch" 2016** (Sonoma Coast) - Aromas of cherry jam, red plum and espresso. Medium-full, this is tightly packed with a rich, layered mid-palate, very good persistence, good acidity and rich, young tannins. Rich extract and very good varietal character. This shows promise and needs 3-5 years to round out and display its best qualities, with peak in 7 or 8 years. **Excellent**

**Sonoma-Cutrer 2016** (Russian River Valley) - You probably think more about Chardonnay from this producer, but their Pinot Noir is also notable. Aromas of red cherry, smoked meat, hint of bacon and plum preserves. Medium-full with very good concentration. Beautiful, spicy, earthy character, medium-

weight tannins, very good acidity, this has distinctive notes of charred meat and mace in the finish and displays excellent harmony. Quite stylish, this is not a powerhouse Pinot Noir, but instead a well crafted version with lovely complexity. Enjoy now and over the next 3-5 years. **Excellent**

**Donum 2016** (Russian River Valley) - Deep garnet; aromas of cola, soy and red berry fruits. Medium-full with very good concentration. Good acidity, ripe fruit, excellent persistence. Excellent complexity, this is slightly forward, but with its structure, this should develop extremely well over the next 5-7 years and may drink well for longer than that. Very impressive wine! **Outstanding**

**Macrostie "Thale's Vineyard" 2015** (Russian River Valley) - Deep garnet; aromas of morel cherry, cardamom and juniper. Medium-full, this has impressive varietal character, medium-weight tannins, very good acidity and notable persistence. The wood notes are subdued and there are notes of subtle brown spice in the finish. Nice harmony throughout. 5-7 years. **Excellent**

**Macrostie "Hellenthal Vineyard" 2015** (Fort Ross-Seaview) - Beautiful young garnet; aromas of bing cherry, cardamom and a hint of pepper flakes. Medium-full with very good concentration. Very seductive style of Pinot Noir in which the oak adds a sensual touch. Very good acidity, medium-weight tannins and impressive persistence. Light herbal character in the finish; notes of sandalwood. Best in 5-7 years. **Superb**

**Gary Farrell "Hallberg Vineyard - Dijon Clones" 2016** - Aromas of red and black plum, wild strawberry, cherry jam and a hint of red poppies. Medium-full, with good concentration, ample wood notes, good acidity and medium-weight tannins that are nicely balanced. Impressive varietal character, this is ripe, with a tart finish; fine structure for aging for 5-7 years. **Excellent**

**Gary Farrell "Rochioli Vineyard" 2016** (Rochioli Vineyard) - The Rochioli vineyard in Russian River Valley, owned by the eponymous family, is one of the great Pinot Noir sites in all of California. Besides Gary Farrell, only Willams-Selyem and the Rochioli Winery use the Pinot Noir fruit from this vineyard. Deep young garnet; aromas of carnation, red roses, morel cherry and tar. Medium-full with excellent concentration and persistence. Very good acidity, medium-weight tannins and excellent complexity with notes of red and brown spice in the finish (cardamom, herbal tea). Outstanding varietal purity and complexity. Great finesse and sense of place! Approachable now- peak in 7-10 years. If Pinot Noir is poured by the glass in heaven when I get there, I hope it's from the Rochioli Vineyard! **Superb**

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**Robert Mondavi 2015** (Carneros) - Aromas of wild cherry, cardamom and nutmeg. Medium-bodied, this is an approachable and tasty Pinot Noir with impressive varietal character, good acidity, moderate tannins and good persistence. Nicely done for the price. **Very Good**

**Etude "Grace Benoist Ranch" 2016** (Carneros)- Aromas of maraschino cherry, red poppy and a hint of nutmeg. Medium-full with very good concentration. Impressive persistence, very good varietal character and excellent balance with good acidity. Enjoy over the next 5-7 years. **Excellent**

**Cuvaison "Mariafeld" 2016** (Carneros) - Aromas of bing cherry, cola and strawberry jam. Medium-full with a rich mid-palate, lovely varietal purity, youthful, mid-weight tannins and good acidity. Very good persistence, and overall harmony, as the oak notes are nicely integrated. There is a slight bitterness, but this is to be expected for such a rich, young wine, and it is not oppressive. The elegance and purity

of this wine are appreciated. This should round out into a lovely wine in another 2-3 years with peak drinking in 5-7 years. **Outstanding**

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Garys' Vineyard, Santa Lucia Highlands  
Photo courtesy Miner Family Winery

**Miner Family Winery "Garys' Vineyard 2016** (Santa Lucia Highlands) - Yes, the apostrophe is in the correct place here, as the vineyards is named for two Garys that planted it - Gary Pisoni and Gary Francioni. Aromas of strawberry, marjoram and a hint of allspice. Medium-full with impressive richness on the palate. Very good acidity, excellent persistence, very good varietal purity; notes of red and brown spice in the finish. Medium-weight tannins, overall very good harmony. Best in 7-10 years. **Outstanding**

**Miner Family Winery "Rosella's 777" 2016** - (Santa Lucia Highlands) - This Pinot Noir is from the Rosella's vineyard in the Santa Lucia Highlands; this wine is made from a selection of vines that are planted solely to the French 777 clone of Pinot Noir. Aromas of wild strawberry, hint of bacon, cardamom and tea leaf. Medium-full with excellent depth of fruit; excellent persistence, nicely integrated wood notes, and a lengthy finish with rich, young tannins that are nicely balanced. Outstanding complexity and interweaving of varietal character and subtle spice notes (turmeric and cumin). Enjoy over the next 7-10 years. **Superb**

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Pinot Noir Vineyard in Santa Barbara County  
Photo courtesy Etude Wines

**Sea Smoke "Southing" 2016** (Sta. Rita Hills) - Aromas of maraschino cherry; wood notes and coriander. Full-bodied with deeply extracted fruit, a rich mid-palate, rich tannins, very good acidity and excellent persistence. This is a powerful Pinot Noir that has some meaty characteristics in the finish, along with ample wood notes. Just a baby- best in 7-10 years, could hold longer. **Outstanding**

**Sanford 2015** (Sta. Rita Hills) - Generous aromas of ripe red cherry, cardamom and a touch of nutmeg. Medium-bodied, with a rich mid-palate, good acidity, excellent varietal character, medium-weight tannins and nicely integrated wood notes. Very good overall harmony, and impressive persistence, this speaks well of its origins (51% Sanford & Benedict Vineyard, 49% La Rinconada.) Now or over the next 5-7 years. Very good value. **Excellent**

**Sanford "Sanford & Benedict Vineyard" 2014** (Sta. Rita Hills) - Expressive aromas of red cherry, mace and sage. Medium-full, this has excellent ripeness, impressive persistence, medium-weight tannins, good acidity, excellent complexity and a well structured finish with notes of black spice. The Sanford & Benedict Vineyard is one of the most famous Pinot Noir vineyards in all of California; this 2014 beautifully displays its character. Best in 5-7 years. **Outstanding**

**Babcock "Ocean's Ghost" 2016** (Sta. Rita Hills) - Red cherry, red rose and black spice aromas. Medium-full, this has a rich mid-palate, excellent varietal character and rich, young tannins that are nicely integrated. The wood notes are a bit strong, but otherwise, this is a well made and well structured Pinot Noir with lots of promise. Best in 7-10 years. **Excellent**

**Babcock "Deja Vu - Bentrack Vineyard" 2016** (Sta. Rita Hills) - Inviting aromas of red cherry, paprika, red poppies and a hint of tobacco. Medium-full, this offers excellent depth of fruit, very good acidity, rich tannins and excellent structure. Very pretty in its floral character, this should reveal a lot more beauty over the next few years and will be at its best in 10-12 years. **Outstanding**

**Etude "Fiddlestix Vineyard" 2016** (Sta. Rita Hills) - Deep garnet; beautiful aromas of ripe black cherry, boysenberry and purple orchid. Medium-full with a beautifully structured mid-palate, beautiful texture, excellent persistence, very good acidity and rich, young tannins that are perfectly suited to the overall balance of the wine. Superb varietal character, well integrated oak and excellent complexity. Appealing now for its lush fruitiness, this should be at peak in 7-10 years. **Superb**

**Fiddlehead "Fiddlestix Vineyard - Seven Twenty Eight" 2014** (Sta. Rita Hills) - Delicate garnet; aromas of stewed cherries, mint, and red poppies. Medium-full, this is a rich, restrained Pinot Noir with nicely integrated wood notes, medium-weight tannins and very good persistence. Nice harmony-beautiful varietal character with a distinct sense of place. Now-5 years. **Excellent**

**Fiddlehead "Lollapalooza" 2012** (Sta. Rita Hills) - Red cherry and strawberry aromas with subdued wood notes. Medium-full with excellent depth of fruit; very good acidity, notable complexity, excellent persistence. Flavorful and rich, with a beautiful sense of finesse and subtlety. Just lovely! Enjoy over the next 5-7 years. **Superb**

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomhyland/2018/12/17/california-pinot-noir-a-regional-overview/#1dc3d22c3fe3>