



What Makes Pinot Noir...

From fresh and fruity to deep and broody—this noble grape wears many crowns.

The relationship between a grape grower and Pinot Noir may feel like a bit of unrequited love. The “heartbreak grape” has certainly earned its nickname. As a thin-skinned, early ripener, it thrives in cool climates. But as an early budder, it’s highly susceptible to spring frost. Give it too much heat, the berries will ripen too fast, knocking acid-sugar balance out of whack. In super sunny locales, those thin skins will sunburn. You get the idea.

But given the right environment, the care and attention of the viticulturist and conscientious wine-making of the producer, Pinot Noir can yield some of the most refined, terroir-focused and ageworthy wines you’ll find.

Pinot Noir may be a heartbreaker, but there’s a reason we keep crawling back.

PINOT NOIR

BY
STACY BRISCOE

ILLUSTRATION BY
LINDA BARITSKI

PRIMARY CHARACTERISTICS

Aromas and flavors derived from the grape itself

Red Fruits—Most think of Pinot Noir as classically red-fruited with fragrant aromas of wild strawberry, red currant and Bing cherries. Indeed, these are common markers for Pinot Noirs hailing from regions like Burgundy—Chambolle-Musigny, Beaune and the prestigious Aloxé-Corton in particular. In the New World, coastal climes like California's Anderson Valley and Sta. Rita Hills, South Africa's Elgin and Australia's Yarra Valley and Mornington Peninsula can have equally light, crisp, even tart red-fruit characteristics.

Black Fruits—Pinot Noir is a product of its environment and primary characteristics are highly dependent on growing location. So don't be surprised to find deeper notes of black cherry, boysenberry and even blackberry from places like Burgundy's Gevrey-Chambertin or Nuits-Saint-Georges—both of which can have a firmer, tighter tannic texture to match. Find these broodier expressions outside the motherland on the Napa side of Carneros, Sonoma's wind-whipped Petaluma Gap, some German Spätburgunders and New Zealand's Central Otago.

Flowers—Some of the most elegant and refined expressions of Pinot Noir around the world have a gentle, floral perfume. This can range from delicate scents reminiscent of rosebush through to a deeper violet note.

Earth—Part of the joy of more delicate wine grapes is that they have a tendency to impart a sense of—to use a played-out term—terroir. This can be seen in the gravelly, stony minerality of Burgundy through to the sea-salt salinity running through the Pinot Noirs of the Mendocino Coast.

SECONDARY CHARACTERISTICS

Aromas and flavors derived from winemaking decisions

Black Tea—There's a common winemaking technique among many Pinot Noir producers—whole-cluster fermentation. Berries stay intact—stems and all. During this process, the berries will go through an intracellular fermentation (think mini-ferment inside the individual berries). This process not only helps the primary fruits 'pop,' but the inclusion of stems adds a kind of herba-ceous note, often equated with black tea.

Vanilla—Fermentation or maturation in oak barrel is a common winemaking technique with Pinot Noir. As is the use of oak chips or staves for large-volume production. This can give off a vanilla essence, particularly when a significant portion of new wood is used. Conscientious producers—of any size—will be careful not to overwhelm the grape's delicate primary characteristics.

Toasted Wood—Winemakers who seek to preserve Pinot Noir's primary fruits but want to reap the benefits of the slow oxygen integration may opt to mature their wines in old wood. Older barrels are considered neutral vessels, meaning they don't impart flavor (like vanilla), but one can usually find a subtle note akin to dried tree bark.

TERTIARY CHARACTERISTICS

Aromas and flavors derived through maturation

Damp Forest Floor/Mushroom—Not all Pinot Noir is suitable for long-term cellaring, but the best can age for decades. As Pinot Noir matures, some of those fresher, fruitier components will slowly dissipate as deeper, earthier tones, reminiscent of walking through a forest after a gentle rain, emerge.

Potpourri—That rosebush essence from Pinot Noir's youth can transform into a bouquet of dried floral aromas. Don't think grandma's perfume, here. Think more naturally—like rose petals crisped in the autumn sun.

