25 Outstanding California Pinot Noirs

New reviews of stunning wines from Carneros and the Russian River Valley

MaryAnn Worobiec
Posted: June 18, 2012

Tasting Highlights bring the best wines from our editors’ most recent tastings to WineSpectator.com members.

Impressive California Pinot Noirs have shown up in recent blind tastings in our Napa office. The focus of this report is not only outstanding wines—though there are 25 to choose from—but also the regions of Carneros and Russian River Valley, which are known as some of the top spots to grow Pinot Noir in the Golden State.

Pinot Noir thrives in cool climates, which allow the grapes to get ripe while still maintaining its delicacy and retaining some acidity. Both Russian River Valley (located in Sonoma County) and Carneros (overlapping the southern boundaries of Napa and Sonoma) are known for their cool climates, cooled by fog and breezes, resulting in fresh, complex flavors and supple textures.

Donum is a top scorer this week—twice—with a pair of Pinot Noirs that demonstrate the talents of grapegrower Anne Moller-Racke and winemaker Kenneth Juhasz. Pinot lovers will recognize the names Freeman, Williams Selyem, Papapietro Perry, Rochioli and Chasseur in this week’s selections. Worth noting is the first time we’ve ever seen a Pinot Noir bottling from Carol Shelton. Typically a Zin specialist, she proves she can also make a lovely, refined Pinot Noir.

**DONUM Pinot Noir Carneros 2009** Score: 94 | $65
A pleasant earthy, loamy quality gives way to plush plum and black cherry flavors, with wonderful finesse and generosity. Aromatic, floral notes are seductive, and the finish goes on forever. Drink now through 2022. 400 cases made. —M.W.

**DONUM Pinot Noir Carneros Thomas 2009** Score: 94 | $100
Offers a wonderful mix of fresh, vivid raspberry and framboise notes, with floral details. The core of plush, juicy and ripe raspberry character is undeniable, giving the wine both a sense of power and elegance, with details of dried lavender and spice crescendoing on the finish. Drink now through 2021. 80 cases made. —M.W.

**FREEMAN Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Keefer Ranch 2010** Score: 93 | $48
Ripe, supple, deceptively complex and detailed, with vivid raspberry, black cherry and wild berry fruit that's long and persistent. Drink now through 2023. 320 cases made. —J.L.

**PAPAPIETRO PERRY Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Nunes Vineyard 2010** Score: 93 | $54
Delightfully fresh, ripe and juicy, with vivid, snappy raspberry, blueberry and black cherry flavors that are tight and focused, long and persistent. Drink now through 2023. 570 cases made. —J.L.

**CHASSEUR Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 2010** Score: 92 | $40
Generous supple plum, raspberry and wild berry flavors are fresh and snappy, with wilted rose and floral scents and fine depth and richness on the finish, where the flavors are pure and persistent. Best from 2013 through 2023. 392 cases made. —J.L.

**CHASSEUR Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Blank 2010** Score: 92 | $60
Elegant and delicate like a ballerina, with fresh, snappy watermelon and raspberry flavors that show spicy, floral scents. Gains depth on the finish. Best from 2013 through 2023. 118 cases made. —J.L.

**CHASSEUR Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Freestone Station 2010** Score: 92 | $60
Delivers a pure, rich, supple mix of blueberry, wild berry and raspberry, with touches of anise, cedar and floral scents. Ends with an elegant lift and vibrancy that’s very enticing. Drink now through 2023. 177 cases made. —J.L.
FREEMAN Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 2010 Score: 92 | $44
Delivers a pure, ripe beam of black cherry, raspberry and plum flavors, both layered and focused. Supple in texture, ending with a long, persistent finish. Drink now through 2023. 1,421 cases made. —J.L.

J Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Freestone Hill Vineyard 2010 Score: 92 | $60
Pleasantly supple and elegant, offering complex tiers of ripe cherry, wild berry and raspberry, with a underlying minerality and spiciness that’s compelling. Drink now through 2023. 145 cases made. —J.L.

LYNMAR Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Freestone 2010 Score: 92 | $60
Combines subtle flavors with finesse and dimension, with fruit-forward black cherry, wild berry, anise, earth and spice flavors. Gains velocity and focus, with a long, lingering finish. Drink now through 2022. 519 cases made. —J.L.

MUELLER Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Emily's Cuvée 2010 Score: 92 | $48
Ripe and generous, with a complex mix of dark berry fruit that’s intense and savory, supported by ripe, chewy tannins and ending with alluring floral scents that fan out nicely. Drink now through 2022. 450 cases made. —J.L.

PATZ & HALL Pinot Noir Carneros Moses-Hall Vineyard 2009 Score: 92 | $70
Wonderful aromas of fresh loamy earth, rich dark berry and black cherry lead to roasted herb, black licorice and dried flowers on the palate. Pure and persistent, this is long on the finish. Drink now through 2021. 147 cases made. —J.L.

VENGE Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Bacigalupi Vineyard 2010 Score: 92 | $58
Offers an impressive laser beam of vivid raspberry and blackberry, with touches of floral and spice. Long and persistent, with a delicate, snappy aftertaste. Best from 2013 through 2023. 3,641 cases made. —J.L.

COHO Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 2009 Score: 91 | $45
There’s enough dense savory berry and spice to hold your interest, ending with an intriguing exotic Asian spice note that grows on you. Explores the loamy clay earthiness of the Russian River Valley. Drink now through 2020. 292 cases made. —J.L.

PAUL HOBBS Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 2010 Score: 91 | $50
Perfumed and supple, with rich black cherry, blackberry, floral and spice, gaining depth and nuance. Ends with tight, chewy tannins. Best to cellar. Best from 2013 through 2022. 3,641 cases made. —J.L.

LARRY HYDE & SONS Pinot Noir Carneros 2010 Score: 91 | $65
Supple, graceful and polished, with pure ripe wild berry and blueberry fruit that’s elegant and refined. Long on the finish. Succeeds where other Carneros Pinots didn’t in 2010. Drink now through 2020. 100 cases made. —J.L.

ROCHIOLI Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Sweetwater Vineyard 2010 Score: 91 | $72
Offers a savory, herbal underbrush side to the ripe plum and wild berry flavors, firming midpalate and ending with tighter tannins. Drink now through 2022. 351 cases made. —J.L.

CAROL SHELTON Pinot Noir Sonoma County Carneros Larson Vineyard 2010 Score: 91 | $38
Sleek and refined, featuring lively black cherry, wild berry and red plum flavors that are pure and focused. Drink now through 2020. 218 cases made. —J.L.

WILLIAMS SELYEM Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Westside Road Neighbors 2010 Score: 91 | $69
Intense and well-focused on vivid wild berry and raspberry flavors, with a wild, racy edge that’s expansive and gains depth and nuance. Best from 2013 through 2023. 933 cases made. —J.L.

AUGUST WEST Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Graham Family Vineyard 2010 Score: 90 | $45
Tight and snappy, with fresh, vibrant blackberry and wild berry flavors that end with a mouthwatering minerality. Drink now through 2022. 164 cases made. —J.L.

BEAULIEU VINEYARD Pinot Noir Napa Valley Carneros Reserve 2010 Score: 90 | $45
Offers generous plum and berry jam in spades. Focused, pure and persistent, gaining depth and detail. Firms nicely on the finish. Drink now through 2020. 750 cases made. —J.L.

DUTTON-GOLDFIELD Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Dutton Ranch 2010 Score: 90 | $38
Pure, ripe, fleshy cranberry, wild berry and subtle floral, spicy notes give this a range of complexity and subtlety. Drink now through 2018. 2,598 cases made. —J.L.

**WALTER HANSEL Pinot Noir Russian River Valley The North Slope Vineyard 2009 Score: 90 | $39**

Complex and well-built, with tight red berry, plum and savory herb notes. Full-bodied, with ripe tannins and a long, pure finish, ending with crushed rock. Drink now through 2022. 1,087 cases made. —J.L.

**RAM'S GATE Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Bush-Crispo Vineyards 2010 Score: 90 | $70**

Aromas of mint and bay leaf fold in nicely with the supple plum and blackberry fruit. Graceful, elegant and spicy, ending with firming tannins. Drink now through 2019. 174 cases made. —J.L.

**SAINTSBURY Pinot Noir Carneros Lee Vineyard 2010 Score: 90 | $45**

 Strikes a nice balance between ripe, fresh cherry-berry fruit and minerally fresh earth touches, keeping its focus on the berry themes. The tannins are integrated. Drink now through 2020. 651 cases made. —J.L.