

EATS+DRINKS

THE 15 BEST PINOT NOIR WINES FROM CALIFORNIA

By MATTHEW ANKENY Photo by HENRY PHILLIPS

Wine is meant to be enjoyed, and enjoyment does not mean sitting at a table stiff-backed, sniffing, sipping and slurping, then analyzing color, flavor, viscosity and mouthfeel, and then spitting the liquid into a dump bucket. Enjoyment means opening a bottle with friends, sitting comfortably, sharing stories and communing. It is the sacrament, after all.

So this beginner's list doesn't address taste or flavor or technical bits like ABV, clone strand or soil composition; it addresses the region the wines were grown in, and the winemakers who wrote the "recipes" for each. It also, hopefully, tells a short story about the bottle, which you can share when opening it among friends. Because identifying notes of honeycomb or stable hay doesn't matter as much as engaging with wine's more magical components — namely, the commitment to sit and talk awhile, at least until the end of the bottle.

Criteria for Selection: All of these grapes and wines are grown, aged and bottled in California, one of the few pinot noir growing regions in the world (other major regions include Burgundy, Oregon, New Zealand). These wines were selected as a sampling of wines I tasted while traveling through California, meeting and drinking with the winemakers and vineyard managers who grew this local, craft beverage. I tried to keep the list to people I had met, because I can best share their stories. That said, I do think this list stands up as a comprehensive, though not exhaustive, sampling of California pinot noir, and the bottles selected are demonstrative of each winery's style.

I also considered availability. All the bottles listed here are available for purchase online or by joining the respective vineyard's wine club. Of course, you can visit a local wine shop and inquire about sourcing bottles from there. I've found that befriending a wine shop owner is one of the better investments one can make in life.

**Calera Jensen Vineyard Pinot Noir**

Full disclosure: I didn't visit Josh Jensen's labor of love in the mountainous Mt. Harlan AVA. But Calera is one of the iconic California pinot noir makers, and I've since consumed a few bottles and read the book, *The Heartbreak Grape*, about Jensen's winemaking. Wine from his namesake plot makes his most notable wine, but the whole collection is worthy of a glass (or two).