



CHARLES OLKEN

Connoisseur's Corner

Youth not wasted on pinot noir

THERE HAS BEEN a tendency in this country to judge our local wines by their longevity. The longer they last, the better they must be. Back about 30 years, when California cabernets began their climb out of mediocrity and into world-class quality, there was a segment of the wine-drinking populace who could not accept that our riper, richer wines were the stuff of greatness.

Today, it is pinot noir that is emerging into world-class wine, and once again, questions are being raised about ageworthiness.

Longevity is certainly one measure of potential greatness, but so, too, is pure drinking pleasure. And because pinot is such a different grape from cabernet, one needs to be sure that the parameters of greatness are appropriate. There are those who argue that pinot noir is never better than when it is put in the bottle, and, for the record, that argument was first made about red Burgundies. One wag even went so far as to say that pinot is never better than on the day it is crushed.

Pinot noir, for all of the hedonistic pleasure it deliv-

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ers, does not age as long as cabernet sauvignon. It may have been a bit of a "wise-guy" crack to suggest that pinot should be drunk fresh from the fermenter, but it is not that far wrong.

*** **2002 Adelaida, HMR Reserve, Paso Robles, \$25.** There is, on the west side of the Paso Robles area, a section of hillside vineyards that have yielded rich, fruity pinot noirs. This wine comes from one of those special places and is an impeccably balanced bottling focusing on varietal fruit smells and flavors of ripe cherries seasoned with hints of vanilla. It is delicious now or can age for a couple of years.

*** **2002 Domaine Serene, Yamhill Cuvée, Willamette Valley, \$33.** This winery is rapidly establishing itself as one of my favorite Oregon producers. The wine is a little lighter than the typical California version, and while it has some of the velvety texture and rich flavor of pinot even now, it will grow better over the next five years.

*** **2003 Kenwood, Russian River Valley, \$17.** Bright and fruity in a somewhat light, zesty manner, this youngster is squeaky clean and perhaps a little bit suggestive of rich Beaujolais in its somewhat forward and agreeably juicy style. Low on tannin and open on the palate with a supple, smooth feel, it invites early drinking with simple stools.

SYMBOLS

*** A world-class wine judged by any measure, the top 1% to 2% of all wines tasted.

** An exceptional wine, well worth the effort to find, 10% to 12% of wines tasted.

* An admirable wine - truly focused, attractive, about 25% of wines tasted.

NO RATING: The best are quite pleasant and can be good buys when moderately priced.

\$ Good value for the money.

■ Below average quality, to be avoided.

*** **2003 Siduri, Pisoni Vineyard, Santa Lucia Highlands, \$52.** The winery and the growing area rate at the top of my pinot noir lists. It is an incredibly generous, very ripe cherry, slightly chocolaty, solidly built composition and can drink well now

but will soften even more with cellaring.

*** **2002 Williams Selwyn, Allen Vineyard, Russian River Valley, \$72.** Then there are times when only the best will do. This brilliant wine, along with pinots by Williams Selwyn made from the Roeholl Vineyard and from the Coastland Vineyard are the best versions of the grape I have tasted this year. Expensive? Yes, but they are so complete in their fruit, balance, and structure that one can only smile when drinking them.

Charles Olken is a magazine publisher, syndicated columnist and author of wine books. For more information about his Connoisseurs' Guide to California Wines, log onto www.wineaccess.com/expert/connoisseurs.