

In Pursuit of \$20 Pinot

AFFORDABLE CABERNET? NO PROBLEM. BARGAIN MALBEC? EASY. A GOOD BOTTLE OF INEXPENSIVE PINOT NOIR? NOW THAT'S A CHALLENGE. SO WE TASTED 65 TO FIND 15 GREAT BOTTLES WE'RE CERTAIN YOU'LL FALL FOR.

BY RAY ISLE

ONE WAY TO THINK of buying wine is that it's a carnival game, like the kind where you throw darts at balloons and try to pop one that will give you a prize. You walk into a supermarket and there in front of you are 50 or even 100 bottles of Cabernet or Chardonnay; you take your chances, make your pick and fairly often you come home with something pretty palatable.

But try doing that with Pinot Noir, especially for less than \$20? Forget about it. That's when the wine version of the game is rigged. The prize seems great, but the darts are dull, the balloons are underinflated and you, my Pinot-loving friend, are the mark.

Even so, I don't blame the sellers. In my opinion, the real culprit is the grape itself.

Of all the major wine grapes in the world, Pinot Noir is undoubtedly the most difficult to grow. Thin-skinned and finicky, it takes umbrage easily at problems like too much sun (it burns), too

much moisture (it rots) and too much heat (it gets fat and tastes like raisins). It grows best in benighted places like Burgundy, where summer hailstorms have wiped out huge portions of the crop in four of the last five vintages. It's also genetically unstable—not really a problem in the short run, but in the long, it's a bit like marrying someone and having all your kids turn out to be mutants. Finally, Pinot doesn't produce much. It's what viticulturists like to call shy-bearing, which means that compared to something fecund like Chardonnay, it's always going to be more expensive, grape for grape. Add all that up and you're looking at higher cost.

The other problem is that Pinot has become popular. Since the mid-2000s, when interest in it began to rise—thanks, *Sideways*—sales of the grape have been climbing steadily, year after year. That would be great if there were endless amounts of affordable top-quality Pinot Noir fruit out there, but there aren't. Plus, a lot of the vines that have been

planted to compensate for the increased demand aren't in the best places for the grape...and refer back to the previous page for the various issues that can stem from that decision.

The obvious answer to this situation, and the strictly practical one, is just to say the hell with it and start guzzling Malbec instead. But here's the thing: Pinot lovers (and I'm one) aren't practical. This grape's particular appeal—its earthy, spicy, wild-berry flavors and its rare ability to offer intensity and delicacy at the same time—isn't found in other wines. Which is also why, I'd argue, Pinot is rarely blended with other red

varieties, unlike Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Grenache and many more. One could accuse it of being standoffish; one might be right.

So here you are. You love Pinot. You know that you can spend \$150 and get a transcendent bottle, but you are not interested in spending \$150. You want to spend \$20. You are in the store and the game is rigged. What do you do?

Simple: You cheat. And you do that by having someone else (me) taste 65 affordable Pinot Noirs, pick the best and put them on a handy list—like the one below. Enjoy!

F&W Top Bottles

Affordable Pinot Noir

2014 THE PINOT PROJECT CALIFORNIA PINOT NOIR (\$12)

An impressive effort from wine importer Michael Skurnik's Pinot-centric label: Russian River Valley-like character (cherry cola, spice) at a third the cost.

↓ 2014 UNION WINE COMPANY UNDERWOOD PINOT NOIR (\$14)

This peppery red from winemaker JP Caldcleugh uses grapes from vineyards across Oregon.

2014 BUENA VISTA NORTH COAST PINOT NOIR (\$15)

Buena Vista founder Agoston Haraszthy, who first made wine here in 1857, would have been pleased with this ripe but finely balanced effort.

→ 2015 FOWLES WINE FARM TO TABLE PINOT NOIR (\$15)

Chewy raspberry fruit and spice notes from Australia's premier Pinot-growing region, Victoria, make this red a great bottling to seek out.

2013 OATLEY FAMILY WILD OATS EDNA VALLEY PINOT NOIR (\$15)

The Oatley family may be Australian (Robert Oatley, who passed away earlier this year, started Rosemount), but lately they've been sourcing grapes on California's Central Coast. This fragrant wine tells you why.

This peppery Pinot comes in 12-ounce cans, too.



The perfect pairing? Pork, of course.

2014 GARNET VINEYARDS MONTEREY COUNTY PINOT NOIR (\$16)

Fruit from cool benchland vineyards makes for a (not too) juicy red with a light spearmint note.

2013 LA FOLLETTE NORTH COAST PINOT NOIR (\$17)

Though the label uses the broad North Coast appellation, Russian River Valley fruit is the core of this crisp red.

2014 TRINITY HILL HAWKES BAY PINOT NOIR (\$17)

New Zealand may be known for Sauvignon Blanc, but it makes top Pinots, too. Trinity Hill's savory bottling is one to look for.

2014 ERATH OREGON PINOT NOIR (\$18)

Cherry fruit and light tea-leaf aromas make this red from one of Oregon's first wineries distinctly compelling.

2014 CAMERON HUGHES LOT 527 ANDERSON VALLEY PINOT NOIR (\$18)

Anderson Valley's cool climate gives this supple California wine an aromatic red fruit character that's hard not to like.

2014 BROADLEY VINEYARDS WILLAMETTE VALLEY PINOT NOIR (\$20)

Longtime Oregon producer Broadley Vineyards is known for pricey, single-vineyard wines; for a sense of the winery's style, try this silky cuvée.

2014 JOHANNESHOF REINISCH PINOT NOIR (\$20)

Austrian Pinot Noir? Why not, if this minty, elegant wine is any example. Johanneshof Reinisch, the winery that made it, lies about 20 miles south of Vienna, at the foot of the Eastern Alps.

2014 MONTINORE ESTATE RED CAP WILLAMETTE VALLEY PINOT NOIR (\$20)

The labor-intensive biodynamic farming approach Montinore uses typically results in much pricier wines.

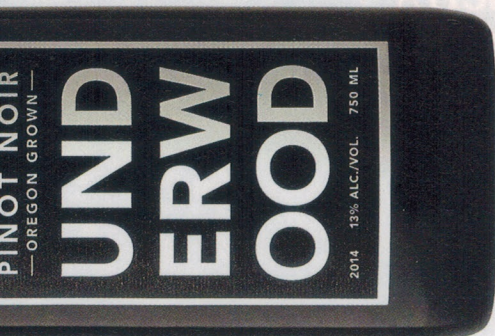
2014 OLEMA SONOMA COUNTY (\$20)

Russian River and Sonoma Coast grapes combine to give this Pinot bright acidity and (helped by a bit of French-oak aging) appealing spice notes.

→ 2014 TAKEN WINE COMPANY COMPLICATED PINOT NOIR (\$20)

Rich, even luscious, this Sonoma Coast Pinot nevertheless comes off as perfectly poised. Cool vineyard sites and the talents of Taken's winemaker, Josh Phelps, no doubt are responsible.

A Sonoma Pinot for a fair price.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY OF FOWLES WINE; COURTESY OF TRINGHERO FAMILY ESTATES; COURTESY OF UNION WINE CO.