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## Shedding light on pinot noir's success

By DALE ROBERTSON Copyright 2010 Houston Chronicle  
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TODD SPOTH

The difference in American pinot noir production from just two decades ago and now is better vineyards, says winemaker James Hall of Patz & Hall.

On any given day at the Chronicle, a package or three of wine is deposited in my office "cellar." Almost all of it comes unsolicited and, these days it seems, at least half of it is pinot noir. I'm drowning in pinot noir, 99.9 percent of which is either from California or Oregon.

(You'd think the folks at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti or Domaine Leroy would slip me the occasional bottle, but *jamais*.)

There's a measure of irony in this pinot flood because two decades ago, what we mostly heard from American vintners was how impossibly difficult the varietal was to handle. Thin-skinned and finicky to the nth degree, pinot noir so bedeviled the Calera Wine Co.'s Josh Jensen that he wrote an entire book on his maddening experiences called *The Heartbreak Grape*.

Yet today everybody's apparently a pinot expert. The grape could be in danger of becoming the new merlot, another over-planted, over-bottled varietal to be scorned. Across the pond in France, the Burgundians must be horrified. Quantity-wise, the production from the Côtes du Nuits, home to those aforementioned icons that never make their way to 801 Texas, must now be a drop in the bucket compared to what's gushing forth from the New World.

So what happened?

For starters, China's flooding of the global food chain with cheap apples happened. This according James Hall, of Patz & Hall, maker of classy pinot noirs that, to be sure, will never sully the "brand." Not so long ago, what's now some of the most prized pinot terroir in Sonoma's Russian River Valley was apple orchards. But once the Chinese blew the bottom out of the market for Sonoma, the apple trees disappeared and the soil found its true calling.

The fundamental difference in pinot production then and now, Hall says matter-of-factly, is "better vineyards. You talk to some of the guys in Burgundy about growing pinot and they'll go 'Hmm, I don't think it's that hard.' It took a change of mindset to pull away from those more fertile, warmer sites that put out of a lot of tonnage to the far Sonoma coast and the Russian River area where the soils are very sandy and produce much lower yields."

As for the Yale-educated Jensen, his epiphany came when he moved to France after earning a masters in anthropology from Oxford. Working a Romanée-Conti harvest brought him a new focus. But his mentors insisted limestone soil was integral to growing pinot noir so, when he began looking for vineyard sites, he wound up near Mt. Harlan, 90 miles south of San Francisco, on a plot that's a chilly 2,200 feet above sea level.

While there's limestone aplenty, the neighborhood's growing conditions were otherwise challenging. The quality of the Calera pinots is a tribute to Jensen's skill and perseverance.

Hall gives much credit to his competitors at Williams-Selyem, a Sonoma pinot pioneer whose first vintages, he says, "could run with the Burgundy big boys" and "were watershed events" in the evolution of California pinot noir. Also, Hall concedes growers in Oregon's Willamette Valley south of Portland were already ahead of the game because of their nearly ideal Burgundian *terroir*, save again for the lack of limestone.

The short answer for why the most ethereal pinots from California and Oregon taste different — not better or worse, mind you, just different — from the great Burgundies, the answer lies right under your feet. As for the distinction between California and Oregon

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#### EVENT OF THE WEEK

- What:** Passport to the Rhône, a tasting of wines from France's Rhône Valley
- Where:** Pappas Bros. Steakhouse, 5837 Westheimer
- When:** 5:30-7 p.m. May 14
- Info:** This is another one of those dream end-of-the-week tastings the Pappas folks throw together now and again. The list of featured wines includes: Château de Beaucastel (1996 Châteauneuf-du-Pape, 2003 Châteauneuf-du-Pape blanc), Domaine du Pégau (2004 Cuvée Reserve Châteauneuf-du-Pape), Château Rayas (2005 "La Pialade" Côtes du Rhone), August Clape (2006 Comas) and Jean Louis Chave (2001

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Hermitage), among other star producers.

- **Cost:** \$65 plus tax
- **Reservations:** 713-780-7352

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pinots, the soils may be similar but the climates differ significantly, generally making the former wines more fruit-driven and the latter more complex.

Also, Hall insists that offering a variety of pinots that are each from specific, top-drawer single vineyards is a huge component of his success.

"Pinot noir," he contends, "doesn't lend itself as well to blending as other varietals."

Mary Hansen, who with her husband, Dave, owns the overachieving upstart ArborBrook Vineyards in Willamette's Chehalem Mountains, agrees. On a recent visit to Houston, Hansen said ArborBrook's fine entry-level pinot, the Heritage Cuvée, will feature estate-grown grapes and nothing else beginning with the 2009 vintage. The 10-year-old winery's flagship, the elegantly earthy Estate 777, already comes not only from exclusively estate-grown fruit but also only from the specific block of 777 Dijon Clone vines.

When it comes to making truly serious, world-class pinot noir, the vineyard reigns supreme. Choose accordingly, I suspect, and you'll rarely be disappointed.

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### WHAT I'M DRINKING

- **Who:** Frank Moore, Gravitas and Textile sommelier
- **What:** 2006 Royal Tokaji Dry Furmint
- **Why:** When it starts heating up outside, I often find myself gravitating toward whites. Although I'm far from an "Anything But Chardonnay" guy, who wants to chew vanilla, cream and butter in Houston when you're poolside? Already known for legendary dessert wines, this pedigreed Hungarian varietal offers a spectrum of quince and peach marmalade flavors on the nose, with a crisp acidity that keeps your mouth clean to taste your food. Also, unlike riesling, furmint routinely clocks in at 14 percent alcohol, which keeps the party going.
- **Buy it:** \$8 by glass, \$30 by the bottle at Gravitas

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