

Now, even Malbecs want to be Pinot Noirs

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Pinot Noir is the wine lover's grape. This is a huge generalisation of course, but it is extraordinary how many wine fanatics lust after the delicacy and richness of wines made from this, the most capricious vine of all and the one responsible for virtually all red burgundy. My own wine epiphany was a glass of Chambolle-Musigny, Les Amoureuses 1959 sipped when a student. We treated our own children to a delicious example Joseph Drouhin, Chambolle Musigny Les Amoureuses 1999 exactly 40 years younger at a recent birthday dinner (too late in their privileged lives for any epiphany).

The 1960s and 1970s were not a glorious period for red burgundy but average red wine quality has risen remarkably in the Côte d'Or in the past 10 or 20 years, inspiring ever more wine producers around the globe to try their hand at growing this early-ripening though infuriatingly unpredictable vine variety. It demands somewhere cool enough to delay ripening and give the grapes long enough on the vine to build up the haunting perfumes of which they are capable – which rules out the majority of wine regions. However, even in a suitably cool climate, Pinot Noir is very sensitive to weather and can produce quite different styles of wine in different years.

At an international Pinot Noir symposium in Bruges recently, examples were presented by growers clearly in love with Pinot Noir from each of California, Germany, Chile, Italy, New Zealand, Austria, Tasmania, Slovenia, South Africa and Belgium itself. Oregon, the Pinot state, was the most obvious omission.

Pinot Noir has become quite extraordinarily popular in the coolish climes of Germany and New Zealand, surpassing all but the most widely planted white grape varieties there (Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc respectively) in terms of total area planted.

The Germans indeed have realised, rather to their surprise, that they have become the world's third most important growers of Pinot Noir, outdone only by France and the US. And since German Riesling has become so popular, especially with American wine drinkers, they are focusing their promotional efforts on their favourite red grape variety. (If ever we needed proof of global warming, it is surely that Germany now routinely ripens red grapes; I had a fearsome 14 per cent 2003 Ikarus Cabernet from Hensel in the Pfalz recently.)

In Bruges, at the open tasting after the symposium, the array of impressively ripe, deep-coloured Pinot Noir – or Spätburgunder as the grape is known in German – from Germany attracted particular attention with excellent examples from the likes of August Kessler in the Rheingau, Rudolf Fürst in Franken, Diel in Nahe, Knipser in Pfalz and Huber in Baden.

But the single most exciting wine shown at the symposium (where each producer was allowed to present one wine in exactly seven minutes) came from Slovenia. Yes, it was a better wine in my view than the lone representative of Burgundy, a 2005 from Lucien Lemoine, who wisely described Pinot Noir production as “a lesson in humility”. Eighth-generation vine grower Ales Kristancic from Movia just over the border from Italy in Slovenia showed a Movia Modri Pinot 2002 (Pinot Noir) that had all the qualities of a great Pinot Noir: captivating perfume, masses of life and zest with fruit that seemed to dance on the palate and, above all, perfect balance

Another wine from biodynamically grown grapes on the fringes of Italy also showed exceptional harmony: Alois Lageder, Krafuss Pinot Nero 2000 Alto Adige. Kristancic's thesis was that biodynamic viticulture is especially well-suited to the fickle Pinot Noir, which virtually demands plant-by-plant individual attention to give good wine anyway. Kristancic explained that he keeps his young wine in barrel for a seriously extended period on the lees of fermentation, as is increasingly

practised around the world, so as to increase the extent to which the local terroir imprints itself on the wine.

The Belgian Pinot was a little weak, it has to be said, and I have yet to taste a seriously impressive still red wine made from Pinot Noir grown in England, but it is certainly not true that Burgundy has a monopoly on fine Pinot production nowadays. New Zealand, California and Oregon have been proving otherwise for years. Austria can play the Pinot game too, as Paul Achs demonstrated in Bruges, as can such cooler corners of Australia as Tasmania and the Yarra Valley. Similarly, albeit on a more limited scale, Antarctic-influenced Walker Bay near Hermanus has established South Africa's reputation as a Pinot producer.

However, it is not at all surprising that Pinot Noir has been slow to invade South America. Until very recently the main wine regions have been (like most of Iberia) simply too hot for this fragile grape. But Chile's winemakers are well travelled and, having been exposed to the excitement, albeit elusive, of great red burgundy, they have been prospecting cooler corners that might yield Chilean counterparts. Cono Sur's range of keenly-priced Pinots is already well established but we can now choose from dozens of well-made examples from the likes of Casablanca and San Antonio, even if truly great Chilean Pinot is still the goal rather than a reality.

And even Argentina is getting in on the act. The dominant company Catena has already made one or two fine, if very light-bodied, examples from particularly high-altitude vineyards and Salentein have succeeded similarly in the foothills of the Andes west of Mendoza. But I recently tasted Chacra, Cincuenta y Cinco (55) Pinot Noir 2005 from Argentine Patagonia way to the south of here which looked very promising – very, very slightly jammy but with real delicacy, subtlety, an appetisingly dry finish and amazing persistence. The number 55 denotes the year in which the vines, now owned by Piero Incisa della Rochetta of Tuscany, were planted, which must play a part in this wine's quality. (There is also a 32 version.)

This was all part of an ambitious blind tasting of eight Pinots from around the world mixed up with, of all things, seven Argentine Malbecs. The aim was to investigate a phenomenon noted by the London representative of Wines of Argentina that Argentina's signature red grape Malbec, once made routinely thick and syrupy, is increasingly being made in a more delicate, perfumed – and yes, Pinot-like – style. We tasters had to mark them once for quality and separately for the extent to which they conformed to the stylistic stereotype of a fine Pinot Noir, with perfume, refreshing acidity, pleasing texture and nuance.

Although in the end it turned out to be pretty easy to pick out the Pinots from the Malbecs, in terms of style I did give a pretty high Pinot-like rank to both the high altitude Catena, Adrianna Lot 3 2003 Malbec (Bibendum Wine) and Noemia, Malbec 2004 from Rio Negro in Patagonia – although I think at £40 and £50 a bottle respectively, they are overpriced.

A recent vertical tasting of Malbecs from one of the more venerable Mendoza producers Luigi Bosca demonstrated just how prevailing fashions and techniques have lightened up Malbec over the past 30 years. The 1978, their very first varietal Malbec, was an antique, the fruit seeming to have been boiled out, perhaps without sufficient temperature control in the winery. Over the years, you could see how the tannins became increasingly polished and less obvious while the fruit became riper and riper but also more evident and satisfying on the palate. The most recent vintage in this Luigi Bosca line-up was 2002 whereas the Malbecs for blind comparison with Pinots were from younger vintages. Perhaps by 2010 Luigi Bosca will be making Volnays from their Malbec?