



## American Pinot Who?

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May 30, 2008

### Gris or Grigio, the Varietal Offers Great Quaffs -- If You Pick Carefully

Who am I? What is my name?

If wines could speak, that's what American Pinot Gris would be saying about now. This white wine has been going through a lot of changes over the past few years, even including its name. Were the changes for the better? We decided to find out with a broad, blind tasting. Our results were mixed, but we found a couple of terrific bargains that most certainly can speak for themselves.

The Pinot Gris grape was best known for a long time for making complex and mostly dry wines in the Alsace region of France. It has also become a specialty of Oregon. We have been such longtime fans of Oregon's Pinot Gris that it was one of the first wines we wrote about, in 1998, when Oregon Pinot Gris was still hard to find and our column was only four months old. Over the past decade, the Pinot Gris grape became famous, however, as a fresh, zippy summer quaffer from Italy called Pinot Grigio.

California jumped on that bandwagon quickly and plantings of Pinot Gris soared from just 644 acres in 1997 to more than 9,000 acres a decade later. In California, some wineries call it Gris and some call it Grigio. In Oregon, meantime, the wine had to be called Pinot Gris until late last year, when the state changed its wine-labeling law.

The issue isn't just the name. Pinot Gris can be a wine of nuance and texture or, as the Italians showed, it can be a light delight with underlying minerals. While many American winemakers use "Pinot Gris" to indicate that the wine is fuller-bodied and "Pinot Grigio" to indicate that it's sunny and light, there's certainly no rule about that and there are plenty of exceptions.

So, where do we stand? What is the current state of Gris-Grigio? We bought almost 60, at all price ranges, to find out. We



gathered wines from Oregon, California and Washington -- including so many of our longtime favorites, such as Adelsheim, Firesteed and Benton-Lane -- and tasted them in blind flights over several nights. We mostly bought 2006, because those are the ones you are most likely to see, but we saw a few from 2005 and 2007 that we also picked up.

While we can certainly enjoy a simple, gulpable Pinot Grigio from the U.S. or Italy, we've always preferred a Pinot Grigio or Pinot Gris with a little bit more stuffing. At its best, these are aromatic wines that can offer some weight, with hints of melon, tangerine and minerals, maybe some mouthfeel and even a hint of oiliness. They should have enough acidity to pull that off without any heaviness. In our minds, even lighter Pinot Grigio should have enough complexity to make it more than a kind of grown-up lemon water.

In our tasting, we had quite a few winners. They were from all over -- Oregon, Washington and different areas of California. **(We also tasted a good Pinot Gris recently from the New York winery Dr. Konstantin Frank, showing that this grape also has a future in other parts of the U.S.)** Our very best of tasting, a Pinot Gris from Bethel Heights Vineyard in Oregon, showed what this can be at its best: a wine of substance that truly tastes like nothing else, with mouth-filling flavors of melons and minerals. Terry Casteel, the winemaker and a member of the family consortium that owns Bethel Heights, said the important thing is to grow the grapes in the right place. "You need to grow Pinot Gris where it's going to cool off at night, which gives you a balance of natural acidity in the wine," he said. "The temptation is to always move to warmer places where you can perhaps grow a little more. But it has delicate enough flavors that you could lose a lot of that if you overheat it during the growing season.

"We do everything we can to preserve the fruit and make it the center of the wines," Mr. Casteel said, explaining that the wine was made completely in stainless steel -- not a touch of oak. (Almost all of our favorites never touched oak, or just had a quick fling with it.) Bethel Heights makes almost 3,000 cases of Pinot Gris and it's hard to keep it in stock, he said. It's distributed in 30 states and the 2007, which Mr. Casteel said has a similar flavor profile, has just been shipped.

Our biggest surprise on the upside came on the lower-priced wines. Hogue has been one of our favorite value wineries for years and its Pinot Grigio is a real winner -- crisp, clean, lovely and a terrific buy at \$6.99. Even more of a surprise, though, was a wine called Barefoot Cellars. We go so far back with Barefoot that we remember when it was a second label of Davis Bynum Winery and was called Barefoot Bynum. Now Barefoot Cellars is owned by Gallo and its Pinot Grigio is just as common in jug-size bottles as in regular-size bottles. It's nonvintage and its appellation is simply "California."

If we had to take a guess, we'd assume this was a very simple, acidic wine with some sweetness. But that's why we conduct our tastings blind. We found the wine charming and filled with fruit, with some depth and no obvious sweetness. We were pleased and surprised when we found that it cost \$5.99. We tasted it twice more -- once in a large bottle -- and our notes were consistent. Jennifer Wall, the winemaker, said the Pinot Grigio contains 6% of an unusual, aromatic grape called Symphony. "Symphony is a fantastic grape. I love it. It's one of my secret blending wines that I use in a few wines. It's an

aromatic and flavor booster that gives the wines a little extra oomph that amplifies the floral aromatics and flavor.

"My goal when I blend is to create a wine that is varietally correct first, then food-friendly, then affordable," she said. "It tastes like it was grown in the vineyard. I want people to enjoy it alone and with food. It's dry so that it doesn't compete with the food." The winery made a million cases of the Pinot Grigio.

And now, sadly, the downside. We were shocked how many wines we tasted that were simply unpleasant, either leaden with oak or smelly with acetate. Far too many were one-dimensional and harsh. We couldn't believe how many smelled like fingernail polish remover and didn't taste much better. What is going on here? While the smell of fingernail polish remover is a flaw that we've encountered before, of course, the surprise was that it was present in more than a few of these wines. Mr. Casteel of Bethel Heights speculated that the wines had that off-putting smell because the grapes may have been allowed to get too ripe, resulting in some "microbiological spoilage." Whatever the cause, it affected too many in our sampling.

As a result, we'd be careful in the American Pinot Gris aisle. This is a case where we would certainly want some advice from a good merchant before taking the chance on a wine that could be unpleasant. The good ones, though, show what a distinctive wine American Pinot Gris can be, and, with some guidance, we'd urge you to seek one out.