

Oregon's '08 Pinots have a vintage year. Really.

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Of course we'd heard the hype. When a vintage gets touted with zeal, a wine writer's inner nag is tripped.

The 2008 vintage from Oregon? Well, *sure* it's just that stupendous. And yes, I *did* just see a unicorn prance by. Also, my cellar is guarded by a leprechaun and the 2009 Bordeaux are absolutely worth the money.

On Oregon's '08s, at least, I'm happy to report there's no suspension of disbelief required. The wines are gorgeous, as we discovered in our recent panel tasting.

Quite simply, it has been several years since we had such winning results. I was joined by Eric Railsback, sommelier at RN74 in San Francisco, and Debbie Zachareas, owner of Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant, both of whom sell an awful lot of Pinot. Of some 48 wines tasted, we wound up with 20 to recommend.

So these wines are a pleasure. I rather like the description from Harry Pederson-Nedry of Chehalem Wines, one of Oregon's senior winemaking voices, of what '08 yielded: "a perfect spherical wine." In other words, a wine whose elements feel complete and harmonious.

That's doubly good news because Oregon Pinots have largely avoided the price inflation that has befallen the grape. The wines aren't cheap - excellent Pinot never is - but only three of our 20 recommendations exceed \$40, and there are plenty at \$30 and less with cellar potential.

The '08s are marked by an elusive combination: They taste fully ripe and brim with fruit - yet achieve that with alcohol levels that rarely top 14 percent. It was a dominant theme in our tasting; as I went back to check alcohol levels, I saw an abundance of fleshy, ripe wines that landed just above 13 percent.

Yet, restraint in the wines doesn't necessarily mean delicacy. The more traditional the winemaking, the more the wines are still slightly knotted and in need of time. But the flavors are transparent and clear, mostly unhindered by too much new oak.

And there is more. If grapes were modest in their sugar levels, their flavors developed fully and slowly. That elusive mix is the signature of ageless Pinot - powerful flavors without undue weight.

"There's a lot of stuff packed into them," says Steve Doerner of Cristom, whose use of whole grape clusters and indigenous yeasts yields some of the Willamette Valley's most long-lived wines.

"It'll be fun to taste those wines in five, 10 years, because all the complexity will be able to show itself a bit more."

An easy glide

Indeed, the 2008s are generally so good that it is difficult to go wrong in choosing one. You get the feeling that Oregon vintners are almost weary of the praise; they'd rather talk about the challenge of the brittle 2007s or the robust 2009s.

Tough luck. When you find a year like this, you break out the cymbals. The 2008s are just plain gorgeous. And if Pinot is that most hair-pulling of grapes, the '08s were an easy glide.

"We didn't have to work as hard," says David Paige, winemaker at Adelsheim Vineyard. "The '08s had real structure and classic Pinot Noir body and complexity whether you knew how to coax that out of the grapes or not."

Thing is, winemakers fretted for most of the year. The season began with cool temperatures and then a heat spike, leading to a very late fruit set, in which the vine develops nascent berries and seeds. That in turn led to drastically reduced crops. Peterson-Nedry got less than 2 tons per acre versus a more typical 2.5.

So there was less fruit to work with, which of course means there won't be quite as much of the '08s around.

The year didn't seem particularly auspicious through the summer, either. But in September, during a spate of moderately warm, clear weather, typically finicky Pinot fruit pulled off a hat trick: Flavors matured while crucial acidity remained and sugars stayed in check.

A happy ending

Then came October. Those sunny, slow-ripening conditions endured well into the latter half of the month, which allowed vintners to hold off at a time when the threat of rain usually hastens the harvest.

"We were all on pins and needles wondering if it was going to be too late," says winemaker Lynn Penner-Ash of Penner-Ash and Alexiana.

That is the stuff of classic vintages, and indeed similar conditions - a late harvest with a slow, easy finish - have been the hallmark of great Oregon years like 1993 and 1999.

If there's any complaint with the '08s, it's the wound-up, reticent quality some currently show. We encountered plenty of ebullient fruit, but I suspect we would have had even more wines to recommend a year from now.

That's not actually a bad thing; on balance this vintage should endure beautifully in the cellar. But, says Peterson-Nedry, "it does take longer than big flashy quarterback and cheerleader vintages, like 2006, to open up."

Outlook for '10 vintage

One final thought: The tale of 2008 - a fretful wait, with redemption in late September as sugar levels stayed in check and a long, slow, glorious October endgame - seems to be setting itself up in Oregon again this year.

For that matter, many California Pinot vineyards are in similar shape after a worrisome wait through the cool summer. Flavors are developing without sugars rising too high. If good weather holds into October, that could

mean a banner 2010 vintage in both states - at least for winemakers who want to make restrained, transparent Pinot.

So fret not. After years of watching Pinot mutate into an outsize creature, this is a year for fans of its classic lines to take heart.

2008 Acrobat Oregon Pinot Noir (\$20): Acrobat is King Estate's affordable second label, and while the 2009 is already out, you can still find the '08 in good supply. Great ripe flavors for the price, with soft-edged cherry, a tobacco accent and solid citrusy highlights.

2008 Adelsheim Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$32): This longtime Oregon name offered its best releases in years with the 2008 vintage, showing a coiled-up power at low alcohol levels (13.5 percent or less). This more affordable blend is taut with leather and huckleberry aromas. As it unwinds, a darker mineral edge will provide a great underpinning to ripe fruit. The 2008 Elizabeth's Reserve (\$50) is even more dramatic and unique, with edgy blue fruit flavors, great acidity and classic dried-leaf accents.

2008 Alchemist Cellars Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$25): Ryan Harms and his Union Wine Co. are better known for their Kings Ridge value wines. But this new higher tier shows off a classic, juicy Oregon expression with aging potential. There's restraint in the ripe cherry flavors, edged with bright red berry and a subtle musk and nutmeg spice. Remarkable nuance for the price.

2008 Alexana Dundee Hills Pinot Noir (\$38): This is the Oregon project from the owner of St. Helena's Revana label, with the wines made by longtime talent Lynn Penner-Ash. Big and ripe, with lots of generosity. Marked by a loamy edge to its strawberry jam character, with lots of tense mineral on the palate and a raft of brown spice and birch bark.

2008 Amity Estate Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$35): Under winemaker Darcy Pendergrass, Myron Redford's pioneering label has produced a classic 2008. Accented by scents of fennel seed and moss, there's lots of racy but rich fruit - raspberry and watermelon skin, with a refined tannic edge. Very much in Oregon's more restrained style, and harnessing mid- to late-October harvests.

2008 Anam Cara Cellars Nicholas Estate Chehalem Mountains Pinot Noir (\$29): Nick and Sheila Nicholas maintain their own estate site on a southeast-facing slope near Newberg. This spicy, expressive take is full of bright, tenser notes (perhaps from nearly 40 percent use of the more structured 667 clone). It's an energetic wine, heady with fennel, toasted spices, moss, bright raspberry and a lemon-peel edge. Layers of bright Pinot fruit deliver immediate pleasure, but clearly have potential to evolve.

2008 Andrew Rich The Knife Edge Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$45): With a wide array of wines, Rich is one of the Northwest's most omnivorously talented winemakers. This limited release shows a muscular style, but there's still terrific restraint to it, with more fresh strawberry fruit and plum skin-like grip. The very pretty, refined tannins show Rich's ability to offer finesse in a great year.

2008 Aubin Cellars Verve Stoller Vineyards Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$30): Jerome Aubin brings fruit from one of Oregon's most successful vineyards to Oakland for this appealing bottle, due in October. Beautiful woody scents of birch bark and dried mushroom, with ripe strawberry and a bright, tangy finish. A raft of dense tannins adds to its appeal with food.

2008 Benton-Lane Estate Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$25): Winemaker Chris Mazepink took advantage of the late growing season to craft a winning profile for this larger production blend from one of Oregon's long-established producers. A curious profile of brambly berry, lily and menthol, with a racy edge. There's a bite to the finish, but that will give it added character with food.

2008 Brandborg Benchlands Umpqua Valley Pinot Noir (\$22): Most Pinot is in northern Oregon, but Terry and Sue Brandborg continue to impress with their parcels in the Umpqua Valley, several hours south. We've liked the Benchlands before, and the '08 is a study in subtlety: softer sweet berry and watermelon, with bright mineral highlights and a certain finesse. Tangerine and thyme accents round out the high-toned fruit. Pretty and thoughtful.

2008 Broadley Vineyards Shea Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$50): The Broadleys tend toward a deep, opulent style for their single-vineyard bottles. Add in the nonpareil Shea vineyard and the vintage and you have a weighty effort that succeeds in finding an oak-edged sweet spot. Dark, chewy and bursting with blackberry and black cherry notes. Powerful stuff.

2008 Brooks Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$25): Winemaker Chris Williams found just the right balance of robust cherry fruit and a raspberry-like brightness in this sleek, aromatic blend, harnessing 35 percent new oak. Heady nutmeg and tree-bark scents. A minty, almost camphor-like accent and mineral tangerine kick lift the fruit. Keep an eye out for the musky Janus (\$35) when it arrives next year.

2008 Chehalem 3 Vineyard Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$27): This popular bottling from Harry Pederson-Nedry and his team is blended from three of their top sites (Stoller, Ridgecrest and Corral Creek). At just 13.4 percent alcohol, it's a model of the subtle power of the 2008s, showing off its classic Oregon profile: a tangy orange edge and earthy tree-bark notes that give depth to strawberry and ripe plum-skin flavors. Vibrant and simply delicious.

2008 Cloudline Oregon Pinot Noir (\$19): Cloudline is less a second label for Domaine Drouhin Oregon than a leveraging of winemaker Veronique Drouhin-Boss' talents to craft an affordable table wine. It's a perfect meeting of great vintage and great price. Light on its feet, with tightly wound huckleberry fruit, dusty ripe cherry and a proper grip.

2008 Cristom Mount Jefferson Cuvee Eola-Amity Hills Pinot Noir (\$30): Steve Doerner latest release of the Mount Jeff is a standout of a wine that remains one of the best deals in Oregon. The '08 is elegant and spicy, with aromas of black tea, tangerine peel and the matsutake mushroom note that always seems to mark this wine, balanced by an innate brightness - gorgeous raspberry and mineral, with fine, broad tannins that provide terrific length.

2008 Domaine Drouhin Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$40): Drouhin is the most evident link between Oregon and Burgundy, and in a year like this, Veronique Drouhin-Boss' more traditional winemaking (just 20 percent new oak) yields an effort that will be rewarded with at least a couple of years in the cellar. Dark and brooding, with a Pommard-like tone edged by aromas of damp forest leaves. Gorgeous raspberry and beetroot highlights, with a refined tannic presence that shows its aging potential.

2008 Penner-Ash Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$45): Lynn Penner-Ash extended her growing season almost into November for this blend of a dozen vineyard sources. There's lots of barrel power from 35 percent new oak for a dark, wood-inflected profile full of brooding cherry fruit and the potential to flourish with a few years' aging.

2008 Seven of Hearts Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$24): Byron and Dana Dooley have crafted this approachable, early-drinking take in a generally wound-up vintage. Lots of ripe fruit here - a slightly jammy, soft-edged strawberry presence, with a charming lemon-peel bite on the finish.

2008 Sokol Blosser Dundee Hills Pinot Noir (\$38): The Sokol Blosser family first planted vineyards in the Dundee Hills in 1971, making them among Oregon's early Pinot pioneers. Their benchmark cuvee is shining in such a great vintage; it's big, wound up and full of potential. A forest-floor note amid opulent cola, nutmeg and deep, ripe cherry, with a good bit of tannic guts.

2008 Solena Estate Grande Cuvee Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$25): Laurent Montalieu's label typically focuses on individual sites, but this affordable blend shows a deeper, richer style evident in its dark cherry flavors. There's a winning, earthy bite that reveals its bigger size.

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