

YEAR'S BEST US PINOT NOIR

Our blind panels tasted **1,185** new-release US pinot noirs over the past 12 months. Our critics rated **142** as exceptional (90+) and **25** as Best Buys. **Luke Sykora** reviews the wines of California; **Patrick J. Comiskey** reviews the wines of Oregon. Find a complete list of wines tasted and all reviews at wineandspiritsmagazine.com.

CALIFORNIA



95 | Chanin \$60
2013 Sta. Rita Hills Sanford & Benedict Vineyard Pinot Noir This is Gavin Chanin's second vintage making his own wine from Sanford & Benedict, though he worked with the vineyard as early as 2004 when he was at Au Bon Climat. This comes almost exclusively from an own-rooted Mount Eden selection planted in 1971 on eroded chert and diatomaceous earth, Santa Barbara's oldest pinot noir vines. In 2013, they grew a tight, monumental pinot noir with bracing acidity and tannic gravitas. An abundance of fruit springs up out of the stony structure, vibrating with bright cranberry-red acidity and oceanic saltiness that fill the tensile structure with cool flavor. Give it five years or more in the cellar and watch its coltish energy turn into rich complexity. (W&S 12/15; 342 cases) *Gavin Chanin, Lompoc, CA*

95 | Cobb \$80
2012 Sonoma Coast Old Firs Block Coastlands Vineyard Pinot Noir Old Firs is one of the two original vineyard blocks that Ross Cobb's parents—David and Diane—planted in 1989. The soil here is rich, deep clay loam, which allows the vines to be dry farmed. Still, it's a cool site, and yields are quite low. This 2012 is closed at first, but with air it becomes translucent, then transparent: refreshing scents of juniper and rosemary, red fruit mingled with earth, the appetizing zestiness of blood oranges. The overall impression is one of cool intensity, the wine's flavors tied as if by invisible strings to precise, stony tan-

nins. The structure is analogous to the coiled reserve of a young grand cru Burgundy, yet supremely coastal—a brilliant wine that couldn't come from anywhere else. (W&S 10/15; 300 cases) *Cobb Vyd's., Cazadero, CA*

95 | Emeritus \$55
2013 Sonoma Coast Pinot Hill Pinot Noir Brice Jones, the former Sonoma-Cutrer owner, who moved his attention to pinot noir after selling that brand, recently sold his William Wesley vineyard near Annapolis. I was disappointed to hear the news, as the site produced one of my favorite coastal pinot noirs in 2011. Even so, this 2013 is a pretty strong consolation prize, from a dry-farmed site at the opposite end of the Sonoma Coast in the Sebastopol Hills. A cold hillside vineyard, Pinot Hill is heavily influenced by the fog and wind from the nearby Petaluma Gap. Jones planted the vines in 2008 without irrigation, pushing them to draw water from a layer of clay under four feet of sandy Goldridge soil. This inaugural vintage is a touch awkward at first, alive with energy but oscillating between stemmy greenness and red-fruited acidity. Yet, in the glass, the structure grows completely seamless and fine, and those flavors harmonize into an herbal strawberry tone that feels indelibly coastal. It's confidently ripe and beautifully gastronomic, a silky ride toward savory hints of pine needle and black trumpet mushrooms—with which it would be delicious, especially next to duck breast. It's a wine to keep in the cellar for a few more years, or decant. (W&S 2/16; 500 cases) *Emeritus Vineyards, Sebastopol, CA*

94 | Banshee Wines \$80
2013 Sonoma Coast Coastlands Vineyard Pinot Noir This comes mostly from the Old Firs block at Coastlands, one of the oldest pinot noir plantings on the coast, established by the Cobb family in 1989. Banshee has been getting the fruit since 2012, when they brought on Ross Cobb as their consulting winemaker. This wine's reduction emphasizes its green notes in aromas of celery and cedar fronds. It also brings a rosy, electric brightness to the wine, a quality that holds

as the wine absorbs air. It grows into a pinot noir with stunning purity and precision, infusing the senses with complex coastal spice and delicate red fruit. Decant it if you want to drink it now, or better yet, cellar it for five or six years to experience a mature coastal pinot noir with impeccable balance. (150 cases) *Banshee Wines, Healdsburg, CA*

94 | Belden Barns \$48
2013 Sonoma Mountain Serendipity Block Pinot Noir In 2005, Nate and Lauren Belden purchased a vineyard on Sonoma Mountain, first planted by David Steiner in the early 1970s. Many of the estate's vines were succumbing to virus and phylloxera, so they redeveloped most of the vineyard. They later transitioned out of careers in finance and brand strategy, respectively, to focus on creating an estate winery, Belden Barns, which launched with the 2012 vintage. This comes from one of their replanted blocks, 1.3 acres of pinot noir (nine different clones) on decomposed volcanic material at an elevation of 1,000 feet. "This tastes like a mountain wine," commented Martin Sheehan-Stross of San Francisco's *Wayfare Tavern* immediately after tasting it. Fermented as whole clusters and aged in neutral oak, it's centered on a cool, firm structure that spins out a wild orbit of woodland aromas: manzanita, bay leaf, sassafras, anise. There's some warmth of alcohol here that pulls against the cool tannins, but it only propels those aromas farther, driving fascinating length and detail that conveys an indelible sense of place. (W&S 12/15; 71 cases) *Belden Barns, Santa Rosa, CA*

94 | Cobb \$85
2012 Sonoma Coast Diane Cobb Coastlands Vineyard Pinot Noir Ross Cobb's mother, Diane, planted this block at the top of the estate in 1989, mostly to figure out what would work on the property. It's a complex mix of genetic material—more than 20 pinot noir selections grown on their own roots. It was meant to serve as a nursery block, but turned out to make fascinating wine in its own right. This 2012 feels herbal and salty