

Where to Find Exceptional California Pinot Noir

The answer: at the end of a hair-raising drive in a remote region called Anderson Valley, where the conditions are ideal for producing world-class Pinot. Our wine columnist seeks out the bottles not to be missed.



By [Lettie Teague](#), WALL STREET JOURNAL May 19, 2022 4:23 pm ET

The second in a three-part series on California's Anderson Valley. Find part one [here](#).



1. 2019 FEL Savoy Vineyard Pinot Noir \$75

This Pinot from the famed Savoy Vineyard is lithe yet supple, marked by red and dark fruit aromas and a bright acidity. FEL winemaker Sarah Green noted that “there is a real prettiness to Anderson Valley Pinot”; this wine is the proof.

2. 2020 Dupuis Estate Pinot Noir \$65

Winemaker Wells Guthrie said this may be the best Pinot Noir that he has ever produced—and he has been making Pinot for more than two decades. It is certainly a beautifully balanced and elegant wine.

3. 2019 Williams Selyem Ferrington Vineyard Pinot Noir \$70

This richly textured, explosively aromatic red with soft but polished tannins, aged in 55% new French oak, put Ferrington on the map. It's one of the best of the 26 Pinots produced by winemaker Jeff Mangahas.

4. 2019 Smith Story Helluva Vineyard Pinot Noir \$50

While other winemakers source from Helluva Vineyard, this Pinot is made in a notably ripe, easy to drink style. It's the last vintage for Smith Story from this vineyard: Going forward they will source only certified-organic fruit.

5. 2019 Husch Estate Pinot Noir \$30

This attractive wine comes from the Anderson Valley's first Pinot Noir grower, at it since 1971. It is the very model of an accessible wine: Marked by crunchy red fruit, it's exceedingly pleasant, approachable and easy to drink.

“DO YOU FEEL that wind?” Guy Pacurar asked. “That wind blows all afternoon long. It's what makes Anderson Valley Anderson Valley.” We were standing on a ridge overlooking Ferrington Vineyard, his father-in-law Kurt Schoeneman's property. Mr. Pacurar is one of a select number of winery owners who obtain Pinot grapes from that vineyard, for Fathers + Daughters Cellars, which he owns with his wife, Sarah Schoeneman, and daughter Taylor Pacurar.

Wind, fog, rain and a cool-temperate climate make Anderson Valley, in Mendocino County, a particularly great place to grow Pinot Noir. And Ferrington Vineyard is one of the region's jewels.

In 1992, Burt Williams, then-winemaker of Williams Selyem winery in Healdsburg, effectively put the vineyard on the map when he produced Ferrington's first vineyard-designated Pinot Noir. The wine won raves from critics and inspired other winemakers to pursue Ferrington Pinot, too. Today, the 10 winemakers who produce Ferrington Vineyard Pinots include Jeff Mangahas, current Williams Selyem winemaker, and Phillip Baxter, who makes Pinot Noir for his own eponymous label (though not from Ferrington) as well as for Fathers + Daughters.

Ferrington is, in many ways, emblematic of Anderson Valley. Although the region is most famous for Pinot Noir today, the vineyard was previously planted to varieties important in earlier eras, including Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer and Sauvignon Blanc. Pinot was so unimportant in the Valley 50 years ago that the very first planting—in 1971, at Husch Vineyards—was allotted a tiny 2-acre plot.

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Over the following couple of decades, however, winemakers from all over California sought to make their own versions of Anderson Valley Pinot Noir, known for its savory character, bright acidity and snappy red and dark fruit. The 1990s proved a particularly vibrant time, as more Pinot vineyards were planted and more winemakers from other regions ventured north, most of them from nearby Sonoma and Napa.

Jason and Molly Drew of Drew Family Cellars came all the way from the Central Coast of California to turn an Anderson Valley apple orchard into a vineyard. Quite a few other vineyards of note were planted in the 1990s and early 2000s, as well, including Helluva Vineyard (1997), in Boonville, and Savoy Vineyard (1991), north of Philo.

The Savoy Vineyard was particularly important, for the quality of the fruit as well as the talent it attracted. Ted Lemon of Littorai Wines was the first to produce an acclaimed Savoy Vineyard Pinot Noir, and other talented winemakers followed suit, including Ehren Jordan of Failla Wines, Eric Sussman of Radio-Coteau and Vanessa Wong of Peay Vineyards. Today there are eight winemakers turning out Savoy Vineyard Pinots. Cliff Lede, owner of the eponymous Napa winery, purchased the 44-acre vineyard in 2011, just two years after he purchased the Anderson Valley's Breggo Cellars and renamed the brand FEL Wines in honor of his mother (Florence Elsie Lede).

Savoy is near the “deep end” of the valley closest to the ocean. When FEL winemaker Sarah Green drove up from Sonoma to meet me in the Savoy Vineyard one morning, it was still very cool. Ms. Green explained that the cool air sits on the vineyard long into the morning.

Ms. Green makes the nearly two-hour drive from the FEL winery in Sonoma to Anderson Valley at least once a month and much more during harvest. “It’s a bit of a drive but truly one of the most scenic in the region,” she said. Many winemakers commute to the valley from elsewhere. Mr. Mangahas has been making the one-hour trip from the Williams Selyem winery in Healdsburg for 12 years.

Wells Guthrie spent 20 years commuting from Sonoma before finally moving to Anderson Valley full time in 2019. He spent those decades sourcing Pinot for Copain, a winery he sold to Jackson Family Wines in 2016. While Mr. Guthrie stayed on with Copain for a couple years after the sale, he wasn’t happy. “It wasn’t my vision anymore,” he said.

When I met Mr. Guthrie at his own winery, Dupuis Wines, high atop a winding road outside Boonville, he seemed clearly content—though he recalled a bit of

resentment on the part of valley winemakers toward “outsiders” like him in the early years. Later, in an email, he elaborated: “I think there was a time when some of the ‘outsiders’ were drawing more attention for their wines, which ruffled a few feathers.” He allowed that a few outsiders were less than respectful of the locals, too.

Mr. Guthrie bought the property that became Dupuis Wines with the help of a single investor, Benno Dorer, former CEO of Clorox, whom he met through a mutual friend. The property includes 7 acres of Pinot Noir vineyard, a house he uses for guests and a winery. “I’m clearly present here now: I live above the winery,” Mr. Guthrie said with a laugh.

Alison Smith Story and her husband, Eric Story, of Smith Story Wine Cellars, have been making Anderson Valley wines for eight years. They tried living in Anderson Valley for a few years and even opened a winery tasting room, but health issues, the Covid pandemic and staffing challenges forced them to move. “It was bucolic, it was gorgeous, but it was hard to find help,” Ms. Smith Story noted. They opened a tasting room in Sonoma in November 2021.

Residents and commuters to Anderson Valley produce equally impressive Pinots, but after making my own way to this remote region recently, I have to applaud the residents for making a life here, with all the additional challenges that presents. For instance, because there is no hospital in Anderson Valley, many locals hold helicopter insurance in case they need to be airlifted. Their production of Pinot Noir is, you could even say, a death-defying act.

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