

MIX RECOMMENDS**PINOT GRIS: OREGON'S
SECOND MOST-
IMPORTANT WINE GRAPE***Katherine Cole* / photos by *Ross William Hamilton*

Pinot gris moves, but we're not exactly moved by it. And we like it that way. Let me elaborate: Pinot gris is Oregon's second most-important wine grape and most successful white wine, enjoying healthy sales worldwide. But while Oregon gris can be delightful, it isn't super-special in the way pinot noir can be. It tends to be a delicious -- but not quite exquisite -- white wine that works with a wide variety of foods.

We don't have a problem with that. Hand us a glass of gris at a cocktail party or a luncheon and we'll happily sip it. Will we stop and ponder over it? No. Will it take our breath away in the way that a wondrous pinot noir sometimes does? Not a chance.

But at times, all we want in a wine is an easy affability. Sometimes we just want to sit down with a late-summer salad and something off the grill and a chilled glass of white that we can savor absent-mindedly as we enjoy the evening. Sometimes we don't want to feel compelled to contemplate wine. And this is the very reason we love pinot gris.

THE STANDARD-BEARERS

Two local wineries have set the Willamette Valley's signature gris style. The first is [The Eyrie Vineyards](#), which produced the first American pinot gris way back in 1970. The Eyrie's gris is bone dry and creamy in texture, with notes of minerality, almonds and pears.

[King Estate](#) in Eugene is the state's most prolific producer of pinot gris; retail shops and restaurants across the nation and world carry this wine. Its style is more ebullient: slightly spritzzy on the palate and bursting with juicy fruit flavors such as ripe melon and citrus.

Both wines successfully strike a balance between the lightness of an Italian pinot grigio and the richness of an Alsatian pinot gris. (See below for more about the Alsatian and northern Italian styles.) Because we know these two classics so well, we didn't include them in our blind tasting of more than 20 Willamette Valley pinot gris. We wanted to get a sense of what else was out there.

LESS IS MORE

When we tasted through our lineup, we were put off by a few contenders that seemed to try too hard. They smacked of barrel-aging, acidification and off-dryness. They didn't fit with our ideal of fresh, bright pinot gris purity.

We wondered if some of these egregious gris had been made from over- or under-ripe fruit that had arrived from the vineyard in sub-par condition and had been subjected to a lot of fiddling behind winery doors. Or perhaps they'd been made from perfectly tasty fruit that had simply been overdressed. We come to gris looking for casual enjoyment, but these wines were all dolled up for the prom.

"Pinot gris can be really light and refreshing, but some of these wines we tasted tonight were on the heavier side," observed panelist Grant Butler. "It seems like that is not a style that is going to appeal to people, especially if they are just beginning to explore wine."

By contrast, the wines we preferred tasted like fresh, ripe fruit and not much else. Instead of descriptors like "nuts," "smoke" and "candy," we found ourselves referring to pears, peaches, white flowers and a cornucopia of melons and citrus. For us, locally grown gris should conjure the aromas and flavors of those sun-kissed fruits that reach their peak in late summer and early autumn, which is why now is a terrific time to sip it.

WHAT WE LOVED

Happily, our taste buds led us to wines with relatively moderate prices. The most expensive gris, in the \$20 to \$25

range, were the ones that tasted over-manipulated to us. It appears that all of that superfluous work in the winery ends up costing the consumer more.

All of our winners came from the 2007 or just-bottled 2008 vintage; the 2006s we tried struck us as stale and past their prime. Despite what some vintners might claim about the aging ability of Willamette Valley gris, we find this wine for the most part to be most enjoyable in its youth.

The surprise find of the night was discovering that our favorite bottle was also the least expensive of our winners. It came from Cloudline Cellars, a second label produced by the esteemed **Domaine Drouhin Oregon**. The 2007 is only Cloudline's third pinot gris vintage, but tasting it, we wondered if DDO (whose only white is a chardonnay) ought to get into gris production under its own label.

"It's a brighter style but it is still reflective of the grape variety," observed Mimi Martin. "It has the type of acidity that is refreshing and crisp and cleans the palate." Indeed, the Cloudline was ethereally light alongside its peers, displaying an effortless simplicity that we found deeply satisfying. This wine didn't try to do too much and didn't ask us to think too hard. And that, for us, is pinot gris perfection.

BEST VALUE/BEST

OVERALL 2007 Cloudline Oregon Pinot Gris (\$14.75)

We all loved this lighter-bodied wine for its delicacy and balanced, crisp acidity. Freesia and lavender aromas combined with flavors of kiwi, pineapple, peach and grapefruit kept us coming back for more sips. "Hell of a value," declared Dixie Huey. "Sings brunch!" Grant Butler riffed on this theme, suggesting food matches such as berries in cream, a veggie frigate or -- most memorably -- a pineapple upside-down cake.

CLASSIC GRIS

2008 Chehalem 3 Vineyard Willamette Valley Pinot Gris (\$19)

We must have simple tastes, because we liked this better than Chehalem's reserve pinot gris, which costs \$5 more. We all appreciated this wine's minerality, clean acidity and citrus notes; Huey and I both noticed a mint-basil character that made us want to match it with summer produce from the garden or farmers market. Darryl Joannides swooned over it, declaring this wine had more texture and layers than its peers. "It's a very good-quality example of an Oregon pinot gris," summed up Adam Rhynard.

A GRIS TO GRILL WITH

2007 Four Graces Dundee Hills Pinot Gris (\$15)

Rhynard loved the "smoky nose, minerality and earthiness" of

this "spicy" gris, calling it "character-full." I found it robust, with hazelnuts on the nose and minerality and white pepper on the palate. Butler praised its "supple, rounded mouth feel" and ripe notes of apricot, peaches and cantaloupe, deciding that "this would be a great grilled-chicken wine." Joannides concurred that "it has the weight to take on big flavors." And at \$15, it's the right price.

LATE-SUMMER SALAD SIPPER

2008 **Ponzi Vineyards Willamette Valley Pinot Gris** (\$16)

As soon as she tasted the Ponzi, Huey was sharing the recipe for her favorite late-summer/early-autumn salad (warm pears, blue cheese, walnuts, toasts, butter lettuce). We all agreed this was a salad wine because of its light spritz body and piquant notes of herbs, ginger, orange zest, mango and pear.

FLAIR FOR ASIAN FARE

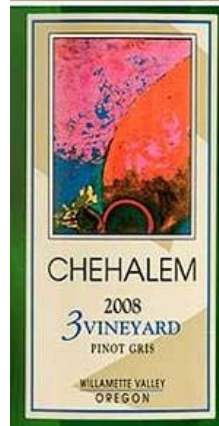
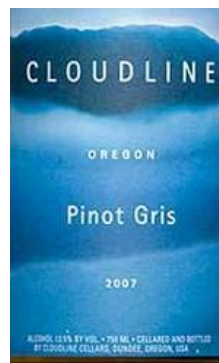
2007 **Solena Oregon Pinot Gris** (\$18)

Butler declared that this rich, creamy white "would be really good with something like spicy Asian food" and the rest of us concurred, mentioning Chinese and Thai as possible pairings. (I even got a whiff of Chinese dumplings off the nose!) Rhynard complimented its "orange-blossom" aroma, and we all noticed notes of ripe melon. But Mimi Martin declared this hedonistic style of gris to be "too rich for me."

HONORABLE MENTION: PINOT GRIS APERITIF

2008 **Elk Cove Willamette Valley Pinot Gris** (\$19)

While a couple of us didn't care for this one, Joannides called it "clean and classic" and Huey deemed it "delicious," citing notes of flowers, cantaloupe, white peaches and orange zest plus a peppery finish. "There's something delicate about it," observed Martin. "The fruit is cooler, with crisp apple and pear. The body is lighter, with some bright acidity." Pinot gris may be easy-drinking, but it's not so easy to grow. The grape is labor-



intensive, needing major pruning -- happening here in Ponzi Vineyards' Aurora vineyard -- to keep yields low and fruit quality high.

PANELISTS

Dixie Huey, proprietor of Trellis Wine Consulting,
www.trelliswineconsulting.com

Darryl Joannides, owner of Cork * A Bottle Shop,
corkwineshop.com

Mimi Martin and Adam Rhynard, co-owners of The Wine and Spirit Archive educational center, wineandspiritarchive.com

Grant Butler, The Oregonian's critic-at-large

Katherine Cole, wine columnist for The Oregonian

EUROPEAN SHADES OF GRIS

Pinot gris is a genetic mutation of pinot noir, making it something like a fraternal twin to the ruby-hued darling of Oregon winemaking. So it's well suited to the growing conditions of the Willamette Valley.

But instead of Burgundy (French pinot noir country), the epicenter of pinot in France is Alsace, the cool northeastern region where volcanic soils and dry, sunny autumns create powerfully spicy, viscous, sometimes slightly sweet gris. These rich wines pair well with hearty local fare such as pork and potatoes.

The cool and mountainous wine regions of northern Italy produce boatloads of crisp, dry, lemony pinot grigio, perfect for washing down delicate seafood dishes and herbaceous pesto. (As you've surely deduced by now, "grigio" and "gris" mean the same thing: gray. This refers to the grayish tint of the ripe grape skins.)

You've probably stumbled across Santa Margherita, the faddish Italian white that sparked the pinot grigio rage in the U.S. some two decades ago. Consistently topping the popularity charts in American wine sales, Santa Margherita is a crisp and innocuous white that goes well with lots of foods. But is a bottle worth the \$20-plus it sells for today?

Even more shocking, the average per bottle price for Santa Margherita in restaurants is \$52 -- highway robbery, really -- according to a poll recently conducted by Wine & Spirits magazine. With Santa Margherita opening the price door so wide, other pinot grigios and pinot gris have begun to follow

suit, charging -- in our opinion -- more per bottle than their wine is really worth.

Unfortunately, pinot gris is nearly as labor-intensive to grow here in the Willamette Valley as is pinot noir: The vines must be pruned down to produce approximately three tons of fruit per acre for good wine. So while we aren't interested in spending more than \$20 for a bottle of gris, we also aren't sure we could find anything we'd like for less than \$14.

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