

What's the best complex Pinot Noir beyond Burgundy?

Some thrilling, Burgundy-ish red wines can now be found around the world



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Published MAY 1 2026

While the wine world shakes its head in disbelief at the prices of red burgundy, it's worth considering some of the best Pinot Noirs produced outside Burgundy. In my experience there are legions of really well-made, varietally recognisable Pinots out there. But those familiar with the most convincing (and annoyingly elusive) red burgundies may find these substitutes wanting. Good non-Burgundian Pinots are typically delightfully pure and fruity with no excess of oak, but they can lack what I might call the “grunt” of the best red burgundies. Admittedly, red burgundy can easily be disappointingly tart or, in recent hot vintages, unrecognisably sweet, but the best have a depth of flavour, a complex undertow that may be attributable to particularly senior vines and/or a terroir effect that is more satisfying than the majority of non-Burgundian alternatives. And they generally improve in the glass, often — wild generalisation alert — being more impressive at the end than the beginning of the tasting experience, whereas simpler Pinot Noirs are often all about aroma rather than development on the palate and persistence.

This set me thinking about non-Burgundian producers of Pinot Noir that, in my opinion, can offer some of the thrill of a really good red burgundy. Rippon of Central Otago springs to mind. This long-established family estate on the ultrascentic shores of Lake Wanaka was a pioneer of biodynamic viticulture in New Zealand. The wines take time to evolve but they have long been more captivating than most. Valli's Central Otago Pinots also reward cellaring, and Bell Hill of North Canterbury's Burgundy-inspired Pinots are magical. The state of Victoria has Australia's longest history of making complex Pinot Noir. Bass Phillip, a Gippsland estate initially planted in 1979 with Cabernet Sauvignon, switched to the Burgundy grapes in the mid 1980s, and recently attracted the compliment of being acquired by Jean-Marie Fourrier of Gevrey-Chambertin, no less. Bindi and Curly Flat have demonstrated the potential of Macedon Ranges in high country on the other side of Melbourne. In South Africa some of Master of Wine Richard Kershaw's Pinots are getting there.

Oregon established itself as America's Pinot Noir state, building on foundations laid by David and Diana Lett in the 1960s at The Eyrie Vineyards, and Eyrie's Pinots are still Oregon's closest to the Burgundian prototype. The whole ethos of the cooler state's burgeoning wine culture was built on the fact that it was “not California”, but California has its own fascinating Pinot Noir history with some surprisingly Burgundian wines, despite ostensibly seeming too warm for this notoriously fickle, early-maturing grape variety.