

THE CHRONICLE RECOMMENDS

By Jon Bonné

Russian River faces crossroads

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Picket Fence BEST VALUE



2009 Picket Fence Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$18, 13.8% alcohol): Fred Franzia's 585 Wine Partners harnesses Silverado Premium Properties' broad holdings in Sonoma for this perfect example of mass-appeal Pinot. Winemaker Alison Crowe brings in smoky oak tones that frame solid black cherry fruit and an orange-peel accent. Immediately enjoyable in a don't-think-twice way, which is a rarity for Pinot in these parts.



- 2009 Dutton Goldfield Dutton Ranch Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, \$38
- 2009 EnRoute Les Pommier Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, \$60
- 2009 Freeman Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, \$44
- 2009 Holdredge Selection Massale Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, \$45
- 2009 Mossback Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, \$25
- **2009 Picket Fence Vineyards Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, \$18 (Best Value)**
- 2009 Sequana Dutton Ranch Green Valley of Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, \$45
- 2009 Zepaltas Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, \$31

WINE

A small crop of Pinot picks from 2009

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But too often the '09s from what has been ground zero for California's Pinot prowess were data points for the shortfalls of Pinot ambition: too much oak, too much heat, too much override fruit. One of our bigger tastings of the year yielded a surprisingly small roster of recommendations.

40 wines tasted

To help with this latest crop, I was joined by Ian Becker, manager of Arlequin Wine Merchant in San Francisco; and Eric Railsback, sommelier at RN74. And we found a healthy list of bright spots in our lineup of about 40 wines. Relatively new labels like Zepaltas and Sequana broadcast a welcome fleetness of flavor that's the very essence of Pinot. So did established ones like Dutton-Goldfield.

But too often we found low-acid, slightly sweet, indistinct bottles from notable names that seemed to pay tribute to a cynical view of taste. That, plus a proliferation of new plantings with fashionable vine clones, is fueling a certain sameness up and down Westside and Eastside roads.

Could it stem from a sense of self-importance? While some producers would gladly have filled our entire lineup with their vineyard designates, we were overwhelmed by the number and underwhelmed by the quality. Fewer are the wineries content to rest their fate with a simple "Russian River Valley" label.

If 2009 adds to the evidence, let's be clear these are trends witnessed over the past several years. And as Anderson Valley, Sta. Rita Hills and the overlapping Sonoma Coast capture ever more attention, Russian River is in peril of becoming lost in the crowd.

A few caveats: First, some 2009s from wineries that release later than usual have yet to



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After the challenges of 2008, the 2009 vintage in the Russian River Valley should have been a thing to behold. It was relatively cool and long as growing seasons go, with ample sun and — assuming Pinot grapes came in at a reasonable moment before mid-October rain — more than enough time to ripen without peril.

The potential was there for great flavor with less alcohol. And some of the wines reflect exactly that, brimming with flavor without falling back on power.

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Craig Lee / The Chronicle 2003

A Pinot Noir cluster, top, ripens while fruit is harvested in a vineyard in Windsor. Russian River Valley is known as a top source for Pinot Noir.

cross our transom, so hopefully we'll find more to like as the year progresses. Though we tasted most 2008s a year ago, the handful we tasted last month for reference showed the nuance possible in that vintage — further casting a shadow on the '09s.

Even so, many charms

Which isn't to say there aren't many charms to be found in 2009, often from spots that maintain the presumed cool marginality that all of Russian River once lauded. We're talking here of the Petaluma Gap and Green Valley,

spots closer to the coast that still keep growers up nights praying for ripeness. (Those prayers evidently have been more than answered as you move inland.)

But, as Napa Valley can attest, reputation comes with a risk of the complacency that success can bring. If Russian River has a cachet that emerging areas can only covet, now might be the time for a dose of reinvention.

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Note: The Chronicle is now printing alcohol levels for all recommended wines. They are listed next to the price.



2009 Dutton Goldfield Dutton Ranch Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$38, 13.5% alcohol): Dan Goldfield's commitment to restraint is paying off as a lighter-touch style of Pinot is again gaining its due attention. The Dutton Ranch is a mix of parcels from the Duttons' wide holdings; this latest is heady and exotic, with mint and curry leaf accents to fresh raspberry and cherry. Great mineral tension and subtle tannin to reward aging. The Emerald Ridge Vineyard bottling (\$58, 13.5% alcohol) further finesses that texture, though at a cost.



2009 EnRoute Les Pommier Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$60, 14.5% alcohol): The stylized Toulouse-Lautrec look to the label might hint at EnRoute's provenance as the Sonoma chapter of the Far Niente roster. A fine example of the heftier, rich style found on the Goldridge sandy loam that permeates the valley. Opulent and dark, full of extracted cherry, sweet oak and liqueur, with a tart wild-strawberry kick and roasted spices.



2009 Freeman Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$44, 14.2% alcohol): Ed Kurtzman again nailed this blend for Ken and Akiko Freeman, predominantly from the Petaluma Gap area. There's a stylistic leap in the Freeman lineup, and if the 2009 Keefer Ranch (\$48, 14.2% alcohol) is heady with fruit leather and earth, this multi-vineyard blend is a counterpoint: beautifully energetic, with dried bay leaf and birch branch, cardamom, wild strawberry and a richer black-fruit tone. It frames the potential of Petaluma's colder corners.



2009 Holdredge Selection Massale Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$45, 14.4% alcohol): John and Carri Holdredge pay homage to the concept of "mass selection" — or choosing a vineyard's own material to grow new vines. Massale can be a key to complexity, and this is a classic, loam-driven Russian River profile, full of black cherry and moist earth. Big and robust, with a freshness that adds a lemony zing.



2009 Mossback Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$25, 13.9% alcohol): The Giguere family created this label to highlight Sonoma fruit. Their affordable Russian River bottle comes with a small dose of Yolo County Syrah — a subtle tribute to their past at RH Phillips? — and it's fresh and fleet-footed. Plenty of floral and stony accents to its raspberry and zesty orange fruit.



2009 Picket Fence Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$18, 13.8% alcohol): Fred Franzia's 585 Wine Partners harnesses Silverado Premium Properties' broad holdings in Sonoma for this perfect example of mass-appeal Pinot. Winemaker Alison Crowe brings in smoky oak tones that frame solid black cherry fruit and an orange-peel accent. Immediately enjoyable in a don't-think-twice way, which is a rarity for Pinot in these parts.



2009 Sequana Dutton Ranch Green Valley of Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$45, 13.9% alcohol): There seems to be a stylistic shift afoot at this Hess-owned label. The alcohol here dropped nearly a percentage point from 2008, and if James MacPhail's prior efforts with these wines have impressed with luscious impact, the 2009 Dutton, still with robust flavors, is gorgeously light on its feet. A tight-knit leather and cherry profile, with a heady kirsch aroma and accents of soapstone and nutmeg.



2009 Zepaltas Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$31, 14% alcohol): For his own label, Santa Rosa-based Ryan Zepaltas primarily used fruit from Windsor's Nunes vineyard and blended in a bit from the W.E. Bot-toms and Suacci sites. (We often like Zepaltas' Suacci Carciere wines quite a bit.) Here's to the broader appellation label — this is alluring and subtle, with floral tones that bring life to deep raspberry and leather flavors. A savory fenugreek accent makes for a pretty, layered package that barely reveals its 40 percent new oak.

Photos by Craig Lee / Special to The Chronicle