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10 Enticing California Pinot Noirs

New reviews of Pinots from across the Golden State for less than \$40

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Tasting Highlights bring the best wines from our editors' most recent tastings to WineSpectator.com members.

Finding solid California Pinot Noir on a budget is a challenge, but this week's selection includes a handful of wines that stand out for their quality and wallet-friendly prices. This diverse group spans multiple vintages and represents sites stretching from Anderson Valley to Santa Lucia Highlands in Monterey. As an added bonus, many of these wines are widely available.

One clear standout here is Castle Rock's Reserve Pinot from Russian River Valley. Castle Rock's wines are typically modestly priced, but the winery took a big step forward in quality with this wine in 2012. Also look for the producer's Carneros bottling from the tricky 2011 vintage.

There are some single-vineyard wines here as well, including a pair from Figge Cellars. Peter Figge was senior vineyard manager at Estancia in Monterey for nearly a decade before he branched out on his own in 2004. While working for Estancia, he moonlighted as a vineyard consultant, establishing relationships with local growers. He decided to make his own vineyard-driven wines after listening to his clients lament that their grapes were disappearing into other producers' blends. He now makes Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Syrah from four vineyards in Santa Lucia Highlands, Arroyo Seco and the broader Monterey appellation. Production hovers around 2,000 cases a year.

CASTLE ROCK Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Reserve 2012

Score: 90 | \$18

An extraordinary value, deceptively complex, firm, ripe and well-structured. The plum, raspberry and blackberry flavors are intense and pure, gliding along. Drink now through 2021. 2,600 cases made.—*J.L.*

CLOS PEGASE Pinot Noir Napa Valley-Carneros Mitsuko's Vineyard 2010

Score: 90 | \$35

Fresh and snappy, with rich, lively blackberry and blueberry fruit that's deep and concentrated without being weighty. Offers a long, layered finish. Drink now through 2021. 1,925 cases made.—*J.L.*

J Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 2012 Score: 89 | \$37

Plum, cherry, raspberry, licorice, wilted rose and loamy earth notes all add up to a complex mix of scents and flavors, with a firm texture coated in a gravelly crushed rock dustiness. Drink now through 2022. 17,800 cases made.—*J.L.*

BARNETT Pinot Noir Anderson Valley Donnelly Creek Vineyard 2012 Score: 88 | \$30

Exhibits tight dusty berry, pennyroyal and dried savory notes, with black licorice accents, ending with a mix of dried cedar and tobacco leaf hints. Drink now through 2020. 860 cases made.—*J.L.*

FIGGE Pinot Noir Monterey Pelio Vineyard 2011 Score: 88 | \$29



Timm Eubanks

Clos Pegase's 2010 Mitsuko's Vineyard Pinot Noir is an outstanding buy at \$35.

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Presents a crisp, trim, lively mix of red berry and blackberry fruit, with spicy, floral aromatics and a touch of fresh earth. Drink now through 2019. 550 cases made.—*J.L.*

MACMURRAY RANCH Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 2012 Score: 88 | \$28

A rich, expressive style, with deep, tannin-laced blackberry, raspberry, spice and herb notes, full-blown, focused and persistent. Drink now through 2022. 60,000 cases made.—*J.L.*

SPELL Pinot Noir Sonoma County Nichole's Blend 2012 Score: 88 | \$39

Presents a well-proportioned mix of dusty berry and light oak notes, ending with firm tannins and a dash of dried herb. Drink now through 2022. 902 cases made.—*J.L.*

CASTLE ROCK Pinot Noir Carneros 2011 Score: 87 | \$14

Pleasantly trim and spicy, with dried berry, herb, cedar and crushed rock notes. Loses a bit of focus on the finish. Drink now. 4,580 cases made.—*J.L.*

FIGGE Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands Paraiso Vineyard 2011 Score: 87 | \$26

Offers a crisp, snappy mix of red and dark berry flavors, with a spicy, earthy edge, ending with clean, gripping tannins. Drink now through 2019. 503 cases made.—*J.L.*

FREI BROTHERS Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Reserve 2011 Score: 87 | \$23

Fresh, with vivid, snappy dark berry, violet scents and a crushed rock minerality, this is tight from start to finish. Drink now through 2018. 18,600 cases made.—*J.L.*