

- [Skip to article](#)
- [Get Home Delivery](#)
- [Log In](#)
- [Register Now](#)
- [Home Page](#)
- [Today's Paper](#)
- [Video](#)
- [Most Popular](#)
- [Times Topics](#)



Search All NYTimes.com



Dining & Wine

- [World](#)
- [U.S.](#)
- [N.Y. / Region](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Science](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Arts](#)
- [Style](#)
- [Fashion & Style](#)
- [Dining & Wine](#)
- [Home & Garden](#)
- [Weddings/Celebrations](#)
- [T Magazine](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Autos](#)

Advertise on NYTimes.com

The Pour

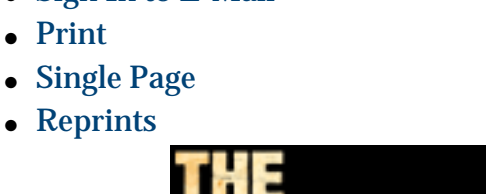
Finessed and Light: California Pinot Noirs With a Manifesto



Monica Almeida/The New York Times

A DRY VITALITY Jim Clendenen at Au Bon Climat in Santa Barbara County.

- [Sign In to E-Mail](#)
- [Print](#)
- [Single Page](#)
- [Reprints](#)



ARTICLE TOOLS

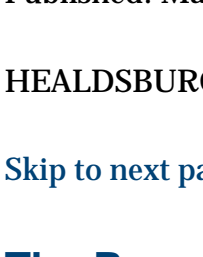
By ERIC ASIMOV

Published: March 10, 2009

HEALDSBURG, Calif.

[Skip to next paragraph](#)

The Pour



A blog on the pleasure, culture and business of wine, beer and spirits.

[Go to The Pour »](#)

Multimedia



Audio Slide Show

A New Breed in California Pinots

Related

The Pour: A Closer Look at California Pinots (March 10, 2009)

Times Topics: Pinot Noir - U.S. | Eric Asimov



Tony Centicola/The New York Times

AS the rain slanted down onto the vineyard around Copain Wine Cellars, just outside this town in northern Sonoma County, Wells Guthrie, the proprietor, poured a glass of one of his 2006 pinot noirs.

The wine was fresh and light with aromas of flowers and red fruit. Even in the gray dimness of his tasting room I could see my fingers on the other side of the glass through the pale ruby wine.

It was vibrant and refreshing, nothing like the dark, plush, opulent wines that have made California pinot noir so popular. Mr. Guthrie used to make wines more along those heavier lines, but not anymore. After the vinous equivalent of a conversion experience, with his 2006 vintage he renounced the fruit-bomb style in favor of wines that emphasize freshness and delicacy.

"It got to the point where I didn't want the wine to be fatter than the food," he said. "Wine should make you think of what you want to eat."

From Mendocino and Sonoma through the Santa Cruz Mountains and Arroyo Grande south to the rolling hills of Santa Barbara County, a rebellion is brewing. The dominant style of California pinot noir remains round, ripe and extravagant, with sweet flavors of dark fruit and alcohol levels approaching and sometimes surpassing 15 percent.

But on a recent trip through these leading pinot noir areas I was thrilled to find a small but growing number of producers pulling in the opposite direction.

Instead of power, they strive for finesse. Instead of a rich, mouth-coating impression of sweetness, they seek a dry vitality meant to whet the appetite rather than squelch it. Instead of weight, they prize lightness and an almost transparent intensity.

Some of these producers are fairly new to the pinot noir game, like Anthill Farms in Healdsburg, a partnership of three young men who share a taste for balanced, elegant wines, or Peay Vineyards on the northern Sonoma Coast, which makes spicy yet polished pinot noirs, or Rhys Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains, which after just five vintages is already producing brilliantly distinctive wines.

Others, like Ted Lemon of Littoral Wines, Josh Jensen of the Calera Wine Company and Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat, have been preaching the virtues of finesse for more than a few years now.

"I wish somebody could explain to me how picking grapes when they're ripe in balance and making a wine in balance became unfashionable," Mr. Clendenen said as we stood in the middle of his utilitarian winery, in the middle of the Bien Nacido Vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley. On a big industrial stove Mr. Clendenen was preparing lunch, as he often does, for the winery staff and the occasional visitor. When it's ready, work at Au Bon Climat stops as everybody sits at a long, indoor picnic table to eat and drink a glass or two of wine, a reminder to all of the place and intent for their beverage.

"The ultimate use for wine is pairing with food," said Rick Longoria, who makes intense yet balanced pinot noirs in Santa Barbara County. "There is no greater experience than the beautiful synergy between wine and food that elevates both."

Food and wine's role at the table is seemingly what divides these stylistic camps. Is wine a supporting player at a meal, intended to harmonize with food? Or is it meant to be, figuratively speaking, a meal in itself, best consumed on its own?

The answers can sometimes seem paradoxical. Leslie Mead of Talley Vineyards in Arroyo Grande, north of Santa Barbara County, makes fresh, earthy pinot noirs that would do well on any table. Yet for herself, she appreciates the other approach.

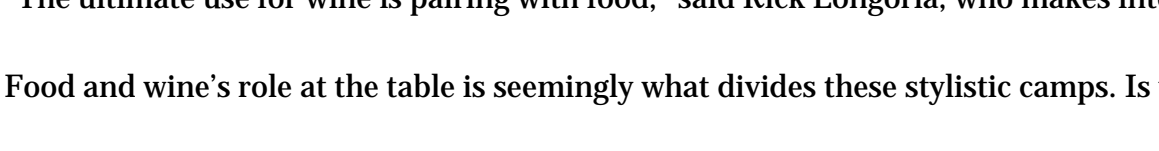
"I think there's a place for every style," she said. "Sometimes I like water with dinner and wine on its own."

I can respect that point of view, but I can't understand it. For me, wine's place is with food, and that's why I had begun to despair of so many California pinot noirs. Their power and sense of sweetness were overwhelming at the table. But it turns out that more than a few California producers share my feeling, like Ehren Jordan of Failla and Thomas Brown of Rivers-Marie, Joe Davis of Arcadian and Alex Davis of Porter Creek. Almost to a person, they make no secret of being inspired by the wines of Burgundy.

- 1
- 2
- 3

[Next Page »](#)

Next Article in Dining & Wine (34 of 51) » A version of this article appeared in print on March 11, 2009, on page D1 of the New York edition.



Past Coverage

- [THE POUR: The Truth About 'Suitcase Clones' \(October 22, 2008\)](#)
- [WINES OF THE TIMES: The Taste of Cool In a Pinot Noir \(April 2, 2008\)](#)

Related Searches

- [Pinot Noir \(Wine\) Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
- [California Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
- [Wines Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
- [Red Burgundy \(Wine\) Get E-Mail Alerts](#)

Next Article in Dining & Wine (34 of 51) »

MOST POPULAR

- [E-Mailed](#)
 - [Blogged](#)
 - 1. [Worried of Looking for Work, Some Create Their Own](#)
 - 2. [The TV Watch: High Noon on the Set, Cramer vs. Stewart](#)
 - 3. [Talking Business: Madoff Had Accomplices: His Victims](#)
 - 4. [Nicholas D. Kristof: Our Pigs, Our Food, Our Health](#)
 - 5. [Your Money: Thoughts on Walking Away From Your Home Loan](#)
 - 6. [State of the Art: One Number to Ring Them All](#)
 - 7. [Lucca Journal: A Walled City in Tuscany Clings to Its Ancient Menu](#)
 - 8. [Foreclosing on a Plane, Then Flying It Away](#)
 - 9. [Art Review | 'Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese': Passion of the Moment: A Triptych of Masters](#)
 - 10. [David Brooks: 'No Picnic for Me Either'](#)
- [Go to Complete List »](#)
1. [Obama on Spot as Rulings Aid Gay Partners](#)
 2. [Madoff Pleads Guilty to All Charges](#)
 3. [U.S. Abandons Detainee Label but Policy Is Largely Intact](#)
 4. [Economic Meltdown Not a Laughing Matter](#)
 5. [How to Leave Afghanistan](#)
 6. [How to Surge the Taliban](#)
 7. [Congresswoman With Ties to Bank Helped Seek Funds](#)
 8. [China 'Worried' About Safety of U.S. Treasuries](#)
 9. [China's Leader Says He Is 'Worried' Over U.S. Treasuries](#)
 10. [One Number to Ring Them All](#)
- [Go to Complete List »](#)
1. [march 1, 2009](#)
 2. [obama](#)
 3. [madoff](#)
 4. [china](#)
 5. [immigration](#)
 6. [education](#)
 7. [krugman](#)
 8. [modern love](#)
 9. [health](#)
 10. [stem cell](#)
- [Go to Complete List »](#)

The New York Times TRAVEL

Cheap and chic in Milan

Also in Travel:

- [A weekend in Madrid](#)
- [Sounds of silence on Cape Cod](#)
- [44 places to go in 2009](#)

Advertisements

Get Times Reader Free. A Digital Newspaper That Reads Like The Real Thing. Some promise you the world. We deliver. Subscribe today to The Times.

Get this exclusive free FRIZZ when you subscribe. [click to order»](#)

The New York Times
The Weekender
Save 50% [GO](#)

Inside NYTimes.com

<p>Magazine »</p> <p>The Loyalist, Valery Gergiev</p>	<p>Opinion »</p> <p>Op-Ed: The Bigger Apple</p>	<p>Travel »</p> <p>Banishing the Ghosts in Cambodia</p>	<p>Opinion »</p> <p>Are Unions Good? A Bloggingheads video debate on whether labor unions build up the middle class.</p>	<p>World »</p> <p>In Argentina, a Camera and a Blog Make a Star</p>	<p>Theater »</p> <p>For 'Dreamgirls,' Pacific Overtures</p>	<p>Business »</p> <p>In Italy, A for Vending Machine Makes the Pizza</p>	<p>Opinion »</p> <p>Room Debate: Bad Times Nurture the Pizza</p>	<p>N.Y. / Region »</p> <p>Times Are Tough, and Libraries Are Thriving</p>	<p>Style » U.S. »</p> <p>Take Their Word, They're V.I.P.'s</p> <p>Farmers Lead a Bid to Create 2 Californias</p>
---	---	---	---	---	---	--	--	---	--

- [Home](#)
- [World](#)
- [U.S.](#)
- [N.Y. / Region](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Science](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Arts](#)
- [Style](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Automobiles](#)
- [Back to Top](#)

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company

- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [Search](#)
- [Corrections](#)
- [RSS](#)
- [First Look](#)
- [Help](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Work for Us](#)
- [Site Map](#)