

South Central Coast Pinot Noir

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The South Central Coast, which stretches from San Luis Obispo County to Santa Barbara County, has growers who farm many different grape varieties, including Pinot Noir. Vineyard sites with ocean winds that temper warm days benefit this persnickety cool-climate grape.

About 80 percent of the 70 wines in the tasting were from Santa Barbara County appellations, which include the Santa Maria Valley, Santa Ynez Valley and Sta. Rita Hills. The 2006 vintage - which coincidentally also comprised 80 percentage of the tasting - had a late, wet start but the grapes matured nicely without becoming overripe so the wines maintain varietal cherry character and moderate body. Our South Central Coast Pinot Noir recommendations generally have good acidity, tend toward red fruit and have varying amounts of oak with mostly minimal tannins.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Alma Rosa Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$38) Aromas take some time to show. Savory musk, soy, loam, mint and radiant red cherry on the nose are more evident on the palate, which has tangerine and raspberry highlights.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Alma Rosa La Encantada Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$49) Nose of spice, graham cracker and damp loam with stewy, dried fruit. Rich black fruit flavors backed by oak, which adds significant structure; palate retains its brightness and balance.

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Cambria Bench Break Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$30) Red raspberry, plum, spice and creamy oak nose; the mineral-tinged palate shows a bit more fruit that has to compete with the oak. Extracted but a touch hard on the finish. One taster thought the oak overdone.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Cambria Julia's Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$21) Earthy loam, ripe cherry and pepper aromas follow an initial floral perfume. Similar flavors plus a savory edge and hint of leather on this lifted, delicately styled bottling. Balanced but perhaps fades a bit on the finish.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Daniel Gehrs Limited Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir (\$44) Nose offers loam, bright blueberry and tart black cherry. Rich red fruit, sweet raspberry and touch of orange and green herb converge on the palate, which has a savory, leathery edge. Finishes with a tart twang.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Derby Wine Estates Derbyshire Vineyard Central Coast San Simeon Pinot Noir (\$42) Sour cherry, violet and mineral aromas in this somewhat lean, very tart wine that nevertheless has some warmth to its cranberry and raspberry fruit. Strawberry leaf, grippy tannins and a tight, focused finish. Winery only.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Fess Parker Ashley's Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$55) Spicy, darker fruit nose with palate that has a rich middle, some brightness and lots of structural tannins but retains its balance. Better with medium-rare red meat and a few more years.

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Fess Parker Bien Nacido Vineyard Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir (\$55) Bright cherry, pencil lead, touch of cola and evident oak on nose. Big in style, nicely extracted. Grippy tannins linger on the tart finish, which one taster thought a touch acrid.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Firestone Vineyard Rancho Santa Rosa Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$36) Layers of earth and mineral combine with soft floral and dark berry fruit. Palate has up-front loam with slightly jammy strawberry and Bing cherry beneath. Lively mineral nuance on finish.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Gainey Vineyard Limited Selection Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$48) Loamy, earthy nose with more fruit on the palate; a distinct sweet spot reminiscent of sweet cherry pie filling is reined in by a rhubarb-like tartness. Plenty of oak, structure and extract in a lighter-style wine.

Rating: THREE STARS 2006 Kenneth Volk Vineyards Garey Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$48) Subtle rose perfume wraps around the more concentrated strawberry, blackberry nose that also has sassafras and nice toasty oak. Darker fruit flavors with white mineral and a subtle grip from fine-grained tannins.

Rating: THREE STARS 2006 Kenneth Volk Vineyards Santa Maria Cuvee Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$26) Nose starts with a floral note then moves to tart cherry and cranberry fruit with a hint of moss. Bright, acidic palate has broad tannins and a sweet fruit on finish. Lighter weight but very food-friendly.

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Kenneth Volk Vineyards Sierra Madre Vineyards Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$36) This wine is richer, fuller-bodied and riper than its more slender sister. Black fruit, spice, light soy sauce and earth flavors with ripe but not overly ripe fruit. One panelist thought it a bit wound and tight now.

Rating: TWO STARS 2007 Queen of Hearts Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir (\$14) Juicy cherry and raspberry aromas with flavors of tart cranberry and oaky vanilla. Lighter weight and softer, but one taster thought it underfruited and raisined. Winery only.

Rating: THREE STARS 2006 Rusack Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$36) Layered, complex nose of lovely ripe berry highlighted with loam and the barest hint of barnyard. Deep, rich palate supports the aromas; very well balanced with good structure and lengthy finish.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Rusack Reserve Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$40) Notes of coffee mocha and bright, high-toned black cherry aromas with whispers of herb and smoky bacon. Somewhat less weighty palate, which offers similar flavors and well-incorporated oak.

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Sea Smoke Southing Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$50) A subtle nose that shows a fair amount of pretty oak and loam that echoes on the smooth, supple palate; ripe, bright black cherry provides support but it finishes a tad dry.

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Sea Smoke Ten Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir (\$80) Lovely combination of fruit and earth that is layered and deep but still subtle. Ripe, rich and sweet with blackberry, black cherry and expensive oak; citrus hint on the nicely textured finish. A glossy, showy, mouth-filling wine.

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Talley Vineyards Stone Corral Vineyard Edna Valley Pinot Noir (\$50) Sawdust, blackberry and boysenberry on the subdued

nose, which leads to a palate with plenty of oak that wraps around ripe but restrained fruit. A bigger, oakier style.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Taz Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir (\$25) Nose of high-toned cranberry, Bing cherry, dry loam and hint of pencil lead; similar flavors on the palate that also shows some spice and brightness. Lovely balance.

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Taz Fiddlestix Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$35) Meaty, jammy, ripe berry aromas with vanillin, baking spice and soft oak notes. Rich and extracted but the weighty berry pie filling has a tussle with some alcohol on the finish, which also has a nice lemon zest brightness.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Taz Cuyama River Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$28) Bright aromas of very ripe, juicy fruit, vanilla cream highlighted with Bing cherry and an oaky depth. More tart cranberry and raspberry on the focused palate, which has a knotted mineral presence. May improve with a few more years.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Testarossa Bien Nacido Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$56) Dark juicy berry, violet and floral aromas with touch of coconut and oak. Big and deep with some pretty ruby cherry fruit flavors. Tart, focused finish. Winery only.

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Testarossa Sanford and Benedict Vineyard Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$56) Spice and pepper undertones to the ruby red fruit, which has a touch of savory herb. Slight boysenberry profile on the palate. Lighter style with food-friendly acidity; drink soon.

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Tolosa Marley Anne Edna Valley Pinot Noir (\$48) Leather, blueberry and black fruit aromas emerge with some air; plum and blackberry fruit lend a tart, bright edge, which underscores the nice tannic structure. Oaky wood tannins linger on the finish. Winery only.

Panelists include: Lynne Char Bennett, Chronicle staff writer and wine coordinator; Jon Bonné, Chronicle wine editor; Frank Klein, owner, Fish and Farm restaurant. For additional recommended wines, go to sfgate.com/wine.

**Key: Rating: FOUR STARS Extraordinary Rating: THREE STARS Excellent Rating:
TWO STARS Good**

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