

## My Wines of the Year

It's an odd way to start a column, I know, but I feel that I must first apologize. What am I apologizing about? Well, a number of the wines to follow are unusual, even esoteric.

I didn't do this on purpose. I'm a great believer in trying to make wine more accessible rather than more forbidding. These are, however, the most illuminating wines I tasted this year.

What makes them illuminating? Nothing less than their ability to convey the potential of their locales, while standing as profound achievements in their own right.

**Ostler Pinot Noir Waitaki Valley Caroline's 2010 (\$45).** Never heard of New Zealand's Waitaki Valley? You're in good company. Few wine lovers have.

Located on the east coast of New Zealand's South Island, Waitaki Valley is not only the country's newest—and smallest—wine region, but also its riskiest, climatically speaking, due to recurrent frosts, which have discouraged some of its pioneers. Of the roughly 300 acres of vines that have been planted in Waitaki Valley, only one-half to two-thirds are still in production this year.

But when you taste the 2010 vintage of Ostler Vineyards' Caroline's Pinot Noir you know in a single sip why Waitaki Valley is a rare and remarkable region. What's it got? It has what Pinot Noir lovers around the world know are the two magic words: coolness and limestone.

I've tasted three vintages of the Ostler Caroline's Pinot Noir (2008, 2009 and 2010), and based on that sampling I can testify that the stunning 2010 is no anomaly. The same features keep showing up in the wine: striking minerality; crisp, refreshing acidity; and a pure, beautifully delineated panoply of the grape's signature berry flavors.

The Ostler Caroline's 2010 reminds me of a fine Chambolle-Musigny, a Burgundy village noted for its layered, perfumed Pinot Noirs made from limestone soils. Frankly, I can't think of higher praise than that. Hard to find, but worth the effort.



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**Domaine Drouhin Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Laurène 2010 (\$65).**

The 2010 vintage in the Willamette Valley produced some of Oregon's best, most nuanced Pinot Noirs yet achieved, equaling the exceptional 2008s. Both years saw very low yields and created almost uniformly fine Pinots across vineyards and producers.

From its inaugural vintage in 1992, Domaine Drouhin Oregon's Laurène has been the winery's signature Pinot Noir, with a demonstrated capacity to age beautifully over a span of years.

Eighteen years later, the 2010 persuasively demonstrates what might be called the depth and dimension of true maturity. The vines are now mature and so too is the winemaking. Here, it all comes together, irresistibly so.

While there cannot be a "single best" Oregon Pinot Noir in a vintage this good, I'll say this much: the 2010 Laurène is a contender for that prize.

**Quinta de Foz de Arouce Beiras Tinto 2010 (\$20).** Looking at this unfamiliar name, I can imagine your confusion: "Who? What?"

Quinta de Foz de Arouce is a Portuguese winery located in the large wine region called Beiras. An aristocratic property (it's been in the family since the 12th century), the 37-acre vineyard is a solitary jewel; there's not another vineyard within 50 miles.

The main grape variety in this silky, refined red is Baga (80 percent), with Touriga Nacional fleshing out the balance. Fermented in stainless steel and aged in small French oak barrels for eight months, this fragrant, courtier-smooth wine is suffused with red berry and clean earth notes. The price is almost preposterous.

**Vestini Campagnano Terre del Volturno Kajanero 2010 (\$16).** This is a southern Italian red from the Campania region (think Naples) that's almost certain to impress.

A relatively new winery started in the 1990s, Vestini Campagnano is dedicated exclusively to some very old, once-thought-extinct grapes, such as Pallagrello Nero and Pallagrello Bianco.

The Kajanero is a blend of Pallagrello Nero, Casavecchia, Aglianico and Pizzutella. Fermented and aged in stainless steel, this spicy red is ripe yet refreshing, crying out for roasted meats. Though robust, it's far from rustic. Above all, it's highly original. Don't let the modest price fool you. This is singularly fine wine.

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