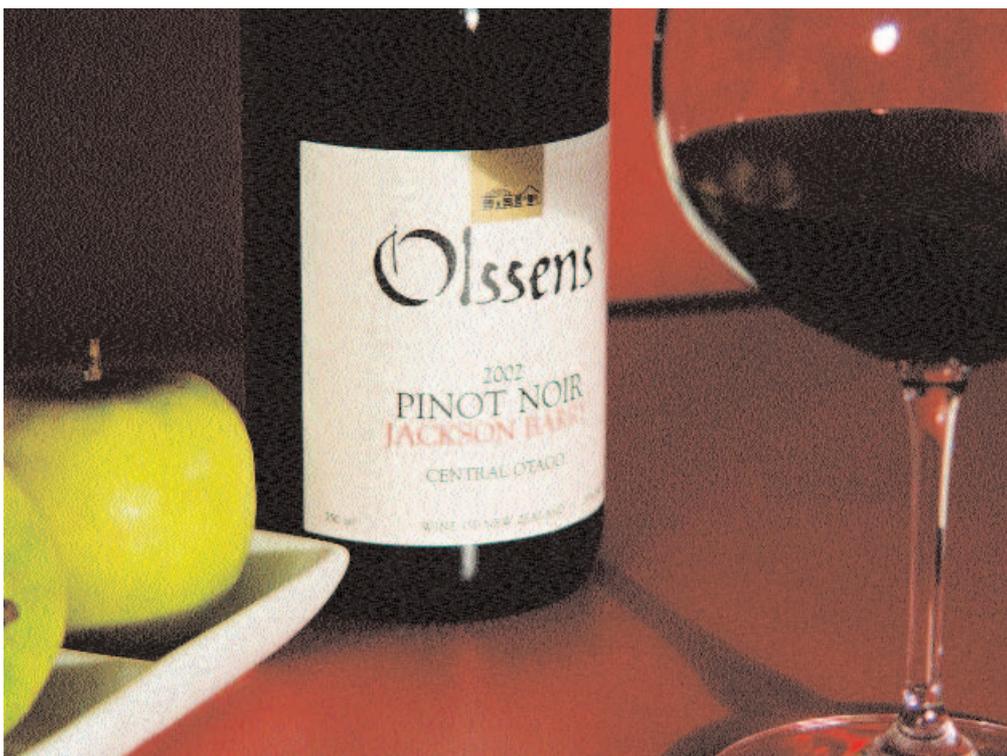


FOOD DRINK WINE

BY KATIE K. BELL



NEW ZEALAND DIVAS *The country's Pinot Noirs are taking center stage in the wine world*

Demanding, fussy and unforgiving, Pinot Noir is the diva of all grapes. It requires very specific growing conditions, ripens too quickly and is extremely vulnerable to rot. Yet, winemakers the world over still persist in trying to tame this challenging varietal. Old World winemakers (think France) have spent well over a millennium creating delicate, earthy, wines with subtle fruit. New World winemakers (think California and Oregon), produce less complex, far fruitier versions brimming with ripe raspberry and strawberry aromas. The perfect Pinot Noir blends both styles—something New Zealand's vintners seem to be doing with amazing consistency.

"They are pretty excited down there," says Sam Governale, former wine director for Commune and MidCity Cuisine, and current owner of OWC, Atlanta's newest wine bar and retail store featuring more than 50 wines by the glass and a cellar of more than 400 bottles. "New Zealand Pinot Noir offers the best of both worlds, combining the earthy, complex, more intellectual style of Burgundian wines with the bright, fruit-driven, more cheerful style of Californian wines."

Finding these wines outside of New Zealand isn't always easy. Most Pinot Noir vines in New Zealand are a mere 15 years old—babies in the wine world—partly because of the specific growing conditions the Pinot grape requires. Land currently used for many of New Zealand's vineyards was once used to graze sheep, and is only slowly being reclaimed to grow grapes. Because just a small portion is dedicated to Pinot Noir, production is limited and demand is high. "When you find one of these wines you should buy it because when you go back it may well be gone," says Michael A. Venezia, corporate director of wine education for United Distributors, an Atlanta wine and spirits wholesaler.

The three regions with optimum climate conditions to watch for are Marlborough, Central Otago and the Wairarapa/Wellington areas. Wines from these regions will continue to improve as the vines mature. For a Pinot that embodies the New Zealand style, try Jackson Barry from Olssens, Central Otago's boutique winery, which specializes in hand-crafted, small production, world-class vintages. Dense with fruit, spice and earth, these are complex and serious wines. Olssens' Summer Dreaming Rose is ideal as a

picnic wine with its light color and fresh strawberry fruit aromas.

Affordable and easy-to-drink Dyed-in-the-Wool Pinot from Canterbury, New Zealand, is widely available and a good place to start experimenting. Its blend of spice, earth and bright red berry fruits is charming, while Marlborough's Huia (pronounced "wee-uh") Pinot Noir is a bit more elegant with a smoky, spicy finish. Villa Maria, one of New Zealand's oldest and largest wineries, produces rich, spicy Pinot Noirs—look for their Reserve Marlborough label.

As for food pairings, the earthy, smoky undertones in Pinot Noirs are enhanced when served with seared or chargrilled meats. "Tender white meat rubbed with a cumin or chile-based rub pairs nicely with the smoky qualities in these wines," Governale says. "You can't go wrong with a rack of New Zealand lamb." These wines also match well with chicken and seafood because they are not as tannic as many other reds, such as Cabernet Sauvignon.

Demand is high among connoisseurs and many of these wines are already allocated to restaurants, which means Atlantans have access to a limited amount of production. Expect most of these wines to cost \$20 to \$40 a bottle. As with most divas, they are worth every penny. ▲

WHERE TO BUY:

Ansley Wine Merchants, 1544 Piedmont Road, 404.876.6790
OWC, 329 & 331 Walker St., 678.575.7773, www.owcatlanta.com
Tower Package Store, 2161 Piedmont Road, 404.881.0902
The Wine Gallery & Market, 2625 Piedmont Road #51, 404.869.3508

WHERE TO TRY:

d'Vine Wine Bar, 5486 Chamblee Dunwoody Road, 70.350.9463,
www.atlantawinebar.com