

THE CHRONICLE'S WINE SELECTIONS

West Coast Pinot Gris/Grigio

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What's the difference between Pinot Gris and Pinot Grigio? Nothing, yet everything.

It's the same grape in different languages: "gris" is French and "grigio" is Italian. Both mean "gray." But there's a huge difference in bottles labeled Pinot Gris versus Pinot Grigio.

As a general rule, wineries calling it Pinot Gris follow the traditions of France's Alsace region, where the grape is turned into floral, minerally wines. And wineries calling it Pinot Grigio follow the Italian tradition of making lemon-flavored water.

OK, that's unkind, especially because Pinot Grigio is so popular. This white genetic cousin of Pinot Noir is now America's fifth favorite **wine**, according to the Nielsen Co., and sales grew by a whopping 18.9 percent by volume over the past year. At that rate, it could move into fourth place within two years, passing White Zinfandel.

But the lemon-water analogy rang true for us after tasting 42 wines labeled Pinot Gris and 32 labeled Pinot Grigio from Oregon, California and Washington. All of the wines rated 2 1/2 stars and above were called Pinot Gris save one huge exception, made by an Italian-named winery, which proved there's no reason a **wine** called Pinot Grigio can't be complex and delicious. Most wineries simply choose not to make it that way to please the mass market. And why not? There are plenty of occasions when a simple palate-cleanser is called for, and that's the time to open a bottle labeled Pinot Grigio.

Because it's trendy, Pinot Grigio is grown everywhere, but wines from cool climates are far better. Oregon is the best place overall -- though we tasted just 19, half our recommendations come from there. That said, we also learned that the best wines from cool parts of California can be just as good as the best from the Beaver State. It largely depends on the name.

TWO STARS 2006 Balletto Russian River Valley Pinot Gris (\$14) John Balletto took over his family's zucchini farm at age 17 after his father died in 1977. He bought more land to grow vegetables, but eventually competition in the vegetable industry led him to try a more profitable crop: **wine** grapes. He's up to 12,000 cases per year, including 4,100 cases of this finessed **wine**, with good citrusy flavors that can carry a noticeable sweetness and some floral notes.

THREE STARS 2006 Benessere Carneros Pinot Grigio (\$25) Though situated in Napa Valley, where Cabernet is king, Benessere general manager and winemaker Chris Dearden heavily invested in Sangiovese. Pinot Grigio, a much more popular Italian grape, is a natural brand extension. But this is as far from a flavorless Pinot Grigio as imaginable. Lush fruit characterizes this **wine**: lemon marmalade, papaya, apricot. The palate is very forthcoming yet never overpowering. It's the best bottle of **wine** labeled "Pinot Grigio" in this country.

TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Benton-Lane Willamette Valley Pinot Gris (\$16) Carol and Steve Girard bought an old sheep ranch in 1988 to create a winery. Sunnymount Ranch is in a "rain shadow" just east of some of the highest peaks in Oregon's coastal mountain range, an advantage in the often-soggy state. This is an intense, fresh-tasting **wine** with plenty of tart pineapple and some papaya on the midpalate.

TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Chehalem Reserve Willamette Valley Pinot Gris (\$24) This **wine** is for Chardonnay fans. Flavors of ginger and vanilla are boosted by nice minerality and earthiness and a dense texture. It takes Pinot Gris about as far in the rich/big direction as it can go. Beware the 15.5 percent alcohol.

TWO STARS 2006 Cooper Mountain Vineyards Reserve Willamette Valley Pinot Gris (\$15) The winery's Web site says this about proprietor Robert Gross: "He's a psychiatrist, a homeopath, an acupuncturist, a vineyard owner and winery owner. You might call him superman but we just call him Bob." Well, Bob, we liked the slightly sweet pineapple flavor of this **wine** and its lip-smacking acidity, but what we really want to know is where do you launder your capes without revealing your secret identity?

TWO STARS 2006 Elk Cove Vineyards Willamette Valley Pinot Gris (\$19) This is a highly anticipated **wine** because the 2005 vintage made the top 100 lists of two national magazines. It delivers grapefruit flavors with gingery notes and some minerality. More than 13,000 cases were produced, so it shouldn't be hard to acquire.

TWO STARS 2006 Estancia California Pinot Grigio (\$12) Estancia is owned by Constellation Brands, the world's largest **wine** company, giving it access to good vineyards. That shows in this well-made, affordable **wine**, which is juicy, simple (all lemon, nothing else) and likable.

TWO STARS 2006 Fetzer Vineyards Valley Oaks California Pinot Grigio (\$9) Here's a simple, intensely ripe and slightly sweet **wine** -- it's like a kiwi and lime rickey -- at a nice price.

TWO STARS 2006 Francis Coppola Presents Bianco California Pinot Grigio (\$11) Francis Coppola talks often about how he liked the food-friendly, unpretentious homemade wines served at family dinners when he grew up. Sure enough, this **wine's** like that: It's lemony simple but totally quaffable.

TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Greenwood Ridge Vineyards Anderson Valley Pinot Gris (\$16) Greenwood Ridge winemaker Allen Green is the center fielder for the winery's baseball team, which dominated the Redwood Empire Baseball League's age-45-and-up division last year, going 24-0. Green also found time to make the most unusual **wine** on this list: With dense flavors of mango nectar, maraschino cherry and papaya, it would be hard to tell blind whether it's red or white. The more we sipped it, the more we liked it.

TWO STARS 2006 Hogue Columbia Valley Pinot Grigio (\$9) Like Estancia, Hogue is now owned by Constellation Brands. This is a very solid, palate-cleansing **wine**, with tart, slightly pungent grapefruit flavor and a medium-long finish.

TWO STARS 2005 King Estate Domaine Oregon Pinot Gris (\$25) King Estate has the look and feel of a small feudal monarchy, presided over by Ed King Jr. and Ed King III with a succession of famous or soon-to-be-famous winemakers and consultants. Fortunately it's a benevolent kingdom; all of the winery's estate vineyards are certified organic. This **wine** smells, but doesn't taste, sweet. Instead, it has a sharp mineral profile, pineapple fruit flavors and lots of complexity, though it is a little hot.

TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Morgan R&D Francioni Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Gris (\$18) Morgan winemaker Gianni Abate was raised in the Central Valley and worked for Bronco **Wine** Co., Delicato Family Vineyards and Robert Mondavi Corp. Morgan makes 45,000 cases a year, about one-tenth what Bronco makes per week, but Abate has adjusted to artisanality. This tightly wound **wine** starts with tart lime, mineral flavors assert themselves midpalate, and there's some earthiness on the medium-long finish.

TWO STARS 2006 Ponzi Vineyards Willamette Valley Pinot Gris (\$17) Ponzi became one of the first wineries to plant Pinot Gris in Oregon in 1979. Made from grapes from six vineyards, all of which are certified sustainable, this is an interesting, delicate, easy-to-drink **wine** with light pineapple flavors and slight floral notes.

THREE STARS 2006 Van Duzer Estate Willamette Valley Pinot Gris (\$17) Van Duzer's estate vineyard has the same average high daily temperatures as all of northern Willamette Valley, but its average lows are 13 degrees lower. Grapes there ripen later, developing more flavor while maintaining their natural acidity. That plays out in this **wine**, which features bright pineapple and green apple fruit and keeps evolving in the glass.

TWO STARS 2005 WillaKenzie Estate Willamette Valley Pinot Gris (\$19) Owner Bernard Lacroute grew up in Burgundy and drank gallons of bad jug **wine** while studying plasma physics on a NASA fellowship at University of Michigan. His tastes got pricier after he succeeded in building computer companies in California and he sunk some of his earnings into founding this winery in 1991. This **wine** combines green pineapple flavors some chalky minerality; the 14.5 percent alcohol is unfortunately noticeable.

KEY: FOUR STARS...Extraordinary, THREE STARS...Excellent, TWO STARS...Good

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