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HEAD TO NEW ZEALAND FOR PINOT NOIR

Pinot Noir fans are at a definite disadvantage compared to those who savor easier-to-grow grapes such as cabernet sauvignon and merlot. Because the latter are easier to grow, the grapes are cheaper and the wines more reasonably priced. It's fairly easy to find satisfying examples of these wines for \$10 a bottle, often for less.

But pinot noir is a fussy little grape, with a relatively narrow range of places where it really likes to grow. If the climate is too warm during the growing season, the wines taste prune-y; too cool, and the wines have little color or flavor—they taste like watered-down rose. Even if the weather is nearly right for the variety, soil type and drainage issues can

make the wine much less than satisfactory. Maybe that's why I often find I'd rather have a glass of good Beaujolais rather than an ordinary Pinot Noir.

This rarity of really good Pinot Noir results in high prices. And the prices get higher once the best wines are discovered. Just look at a region such as Oregon—try to find a Pinot you really like for less than \$15 a bottle (actually, \$18 to 20 is more realistic). Not many years ago there were \$10 examples readily available.

And so the search goes on for satisfying Pinot Noir at an affordable price. But don't go looking in the usual places: Burgundy, Oregon and a few select spots in California. Instead, think someplace new ... and really, really far away.

Think New Zealand.

Up until recently, New Zealand has been best known for Sauvignon Blancs, dry Rieslings, un-oaked Chardonnays and some outstanding expensive Pinot Noirs.

Up until a few days ago I hadn't

found many affordable choices. Then I suddenly discovered more than half a dozen at a blind tasting. Here are the results:

The **2006 Wildrock** (*Central Otago, \$15*) was my least favorite, and the group of tasters concurred. Yet it was quite enjoyable nonetheless, with plenty of cherry/berry fruit on display, a tasty touch of earthiness and a solid length. It simply suffered from the strong competition.

Also from the Central Otago District (at the south end of the South Island, a cooler area) is a wine we didn't taste blindly, but which greatly impressed us. It was the **2003 Blind Trail** (*\$21*)—sweet fruit laced with spice, leading to a smooth and supple finish and made complex from the additional time in bottle.

One wine stood out as more Beaujolais-like than Pinot: the **2006 Sherwood Estate** (*\$17*). A blend of grapes from different sites at the north end of the South Island, it was dark and almost "sweet" with fruit intensity, despite some five months in the barrel. This is a delicious wine for gulping rather than sipping.

The wine liked best by the group was the **2005 Villa Maria "Private Bin"** (*Marlborough, \$17*). Lightly spiced, with delicate fruit, this one took a little while to open up, and then showed lovely, classic Pinot character. The Marlborough District is New Zealand's largest wine producer and is located at the north end of the South Island.

I love a Pinot with velvety texture, and the **2004 Pencarrow** (*Martinborough, \$16*) offered more than a bit of it, along with ripe fruit, an earthy note and a touch of smoke in the finish. It was my favorite of the flight. (Martinborough is at the south end of the North Island.)

Another favorite was the **2005 Nautilus** (*Marlborough, \$24*). It had a sweet yet earthy nose that reminded me of red Burgundy, along with a spicy note running through the delicious fruit. It was impressive, if not quite the fine value of some of the other wines here.

None of these wines will be stacked three cases high at your local grocery, but they're well worth looking for. All should drink very well for the next few years, giving delicious pleasure to any Pinot Noir fan looking for great wine at a great price. I'm buying several of them for my own enjoyment.