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## THE CHRONICLE'S WINE SELECTIONS Oregon Pinot Noir

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Climate, which is a major part of terroir, determines the ultimate quality and character of wine grapes. Climate plays its role year to year, vintage to vintage. Our tasting of current release Oregon Pinot Noirs, encompassing the 2003, 2004 and 2005 vintages, shows its effects.

In one of the warmest vintages on record, the 2003 fruit ripened earlier than usual, and that year's wines are often bigger and more concentrated, with slightly more alcohol than wines from the 2004 vintage, which are closer to Oregon's norm. Ripe cherry/strawberry fruit, light to medium body, crisp, structured acidity and slightly lean, elegant wines are what I envision when I think of Oregon Pinot.

The 2005 vintage saw cooler and less sunny fall weather than usual in many areas. This may translate to lower-alcohol wines with ideal flavor development and acidity.

Additional recommendations are listed at [sfgate.com/wine](http://sfgate.com/wine).

**TWO STARS** 2004 Archery Summit Premier Cuvee Dundee Hills Pinot Noir (\$37) This medium-bodied effort has a lush nose of sweet cassis, boysenberry and cherry cola with touch of barnyard. The more restrained palate offers plenty of red cherry, pomegranate, spice hint and continued note of just-turned earth, then firm but silky tannins make their presence known.

**TWO AND A HALF STARS** 2003 Argyle Nuthouse Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$42) Argyle's winery was formerly a hazelnut drying facility, where Nuthouse -- the big, bold brother in the Argyle family -- is now aged and fermented. The very ripe 2003 vintage added

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Oregon Pinot Noir

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even more oomph to this almost California-style wine, which has sweet concentrated cherry, other red fruit and some alcohol that pokes its head out at the end.

**TWO AND A HALF STARS 2003 Argyle Spirithouse Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$52)** This juicy, well-ripened, low-production wine is named after the ghost who is said to haunt the Argyle tasting room. She'd enjoy the cherry/berry aromas with hints of exotic spice, tobacco and tea leaf. Though the ripe fruit palate is concentrated, there's more red fruit than black, plus a bit of heat on the finish.

**THREE STARS 2003 Domaine Serene Evenstad Reserve Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$52)** This is the first of four top bottlings from Ken and Grace Evenstad, owners of Domaine Serene, whose Pinot Noir focus has led to an outstanding 2003 vintage lineup. There's a bit more sweetness in this wine than in the other three wines, and the multitude of mixed berries combines with firm tannins and good acidity for a long, balanced finish.

**THREE STARS 2003 Domaine Serene Hill Vineyard Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$75)** Winery Hill Vineyard, one of Domaine Serene's three estate vineyards, is dry-farmed, which contributes to the intensity of this polished wine. Concentrated ripe blackberry and black cherry abound and linger on the palate, along with firm but velvety tannins.

**TWO AND A HALF STARS 2003 Domaine Serene Jerusalem Hill Vineyard Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$75)** Here's another very good medium-bodied wine from the Evenstads. This one has more up-front fruit than its siblings but dries out some at the end when faced with its tannins. There are also hints of menthol and spice, but it doesn't quite reach the level of the others.

**THREE AND A HALF STARS 2003 Domaine Serene Mark Bradford Vineyard Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$90)** Named after the Evenstad's son, Mark Bradford is one of seven Evenstad Estate vineyards. Deep, dense and extracted, this wine has wonderful concentration of ripe cherry, blackberry and earth, with a touch of spice. It's well structured, balanced and wonderfully supple for an Oregon Pinot.

**THREE STARS 2004 Lachini Vineyards Lachini Family Estate Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$42)** With concentrated cherry and vanilla from plenty of new French oak, this wine has a lovely touch of earthiness, which complements the full-flavored, bright, ripe fruit. A touch of woody spice rounds out the aromas and palate and lingers on the finish.

**TWO AND A HALF STARS 2004 Lemelson Vineyards Thea's Selection Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$32)** Eric Lemelson's Thea's Selection offers a delicate floral perfume, ripe strawberry, black cherry, plum, spice and touches of earth and has structure and acidity to pair well with food. Tartish red-plum skin leaves a slight astringency on the finish.

**TWO AND A HALF STARS 2004 Ponzi Vineyards Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$35)** This delicate wine has bright, lively aromas of red raspberry, red cherry and earth with sweet floral and baking spice overlay. It's well balanced on the palate and ripe but not overly so, with lingering soft, supple tannins and jazzy acidity that's so welcome with food.

**TWO AND A HALF STARS 2003 Rex Hill Reserve Oregon Pinot Noir (\$42)** More fruit and fleshiness accompany the somewhat

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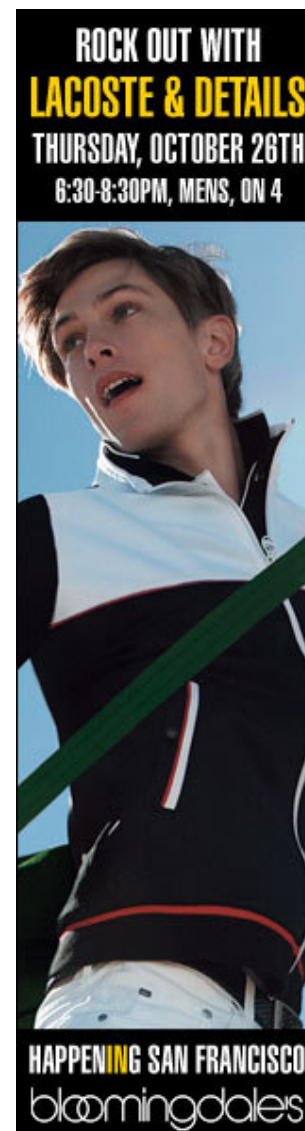
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delicate nose of this ripe cherry, oak-influenced wine. There's structure and length, plus a little menthol, which accompanies its spicy notes and slight bit of heat.

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**TWO AND A HALF STARS** 2004 Torii Mor Temperance Hill Polk County Pinot Noir (\$60) This is one of five single-vineyard Pinot Noirs produced by Torii Mor. Cherry that's not overwhelmingly ripe, forest floor, black walnut and cinnamon stick coalesce on the long finish. Its restrained style has richness, with integrated notes of oak.

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**TWO STARS** 2005 Willamette Valley Vineyards Whole Cluster Fermented Oregon Pinot Noir (\$18) A hint of sweetness -- especially on the finish -- accompanies boysenberry, blackberry, cherry, sweet spice and earthy aromas and flavors. There's also a touch of menthol and green eucalyptus on the entry. The moderately full body and fairly plush mouthfeel are good for a wine in this price range.

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Also recommended:

2005 Bergstrom Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$30)

2003 Cooper Mountain Vineyards Five Elements Series Mountain Terrior Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$35)

2005 Erath Oregon Pinot Noir (\$18)

2002 Hamacher Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$40)

2004 King Estate Signature Collection Oregon Pinot Noir (\$26)

2004 Lemelson Vineyards Jerome Reserve Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$50)

2004 Ponzi Vineyards Reserve Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$50)

2003 Rex Hill Dundee Hills Cuvee Oregon Pinot Noir (\$34)

2004 Scott Paul La Paulee Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$38)

2004 Sokol Blosser Dundee Hills Pinot Noir (\$32)

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

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