

THE TOP

100

Our Annual Roundup Of the Year's Most Exciting Wines

What a difference a year makes. Despite an economy that continues to struggle, wine lovers are reaching a little deeper into their pockets to enjoy top quality wines. Nonetheless, value-oriented wines are still very much in demand. These trends, along with strong regional vintage variations, are reflected in *Wine Spectator's* Top 100 for 2011.

What is consistent is the quality of the 100 wines our editors selected this year. The average rating is 93 points. The average price has dipped, however, to \$44, compared with \$48 last year.

During the course of the year, *Wine Spectator* editors blind-tasted more than 16,000 new releases. Of these, more than 5,400 rated outstanding (90 points or higher on our 100-point scale); these were the initial candidates for our Top 100. We apply four criteria to determine the final selections: quality (as represented by score); value (as reflected by release price); availability (measured by case production, or, for international wines, the number of cases imported); and an X-factor we call excitement.

California dominated again this year, increasing its presence to more than a quarter of the list on the strength of the 2009 vintage for Pinot Noir and 2008 for Cabernet Sauvignon and blends. In fact, there were so many outstanding '09 Pinot Noirs it was difficult narrowing

the selection to just four.

Italy is back on track after its depleted group of last year. Tuscany leads the way again, primarily with the excellent 2006 vintage for Brunello di Montalcino. In France, the Rhône Valley stole the spotlight based on the stellar 2009 harvest, while Beaujolais also made its mark with a pair from '09.

Both Argentina and Australia lost ground compared with last year, while Chile, whose presence was strong a year ago, dropped off the list altogether. This paved the way for a New Mexican sparkler to debut in the Top 100, and Greece makes a return.

No equation determines the final selections; these choices reflect our editors' judgment and passion about the wines tasted by *Wine Spectator* in 2011.

For complete tasting notes of the Top 100 wines, see this issue's Buying Guide. Senior tasting coordinators Alison Napjus and MaryAnn Worobiec, tasting coordinator Nathan Wesley, associate tasting coordinator Augustus Weed and assistant tasting coordinator Margaret Raber, plus associate editors Tim Fish, Mitch Frank and Jennifer Fiedler and assistant editor Ben O'Donnell contributed to the profiles. We hope you enjoy the exciting group of great values, new labels and proven names that make up *Wine Spectator's* 2011 Top 100.

CONTENTS

- 48 WINE OF THE YEAR
- 50 TOP 100 AT A GLANCE
- 53 PROFILES OF WINES NOS. 2 TO 100
- 58 TOP 100 BY REGION AND VARIETY
- 61 WINES OF THE YEAR 1988 TO 2010
- 64 10 YEARS OF TOP TENS
- 108 100 TOP VALUES OF 2011
- 161 TOP 100 TASTING NOTES
- 165 CLASSIC SCORERS OF 2011

Wine
Of The
Year





KOSTA BROWNE

PINOT NOIR SONOMA COAST 2009
95 \$52 5,818 cases made

By James Laube

One of the biggest stories coming out of California in recent years is the steady rise of Pinot Noir. Considered the most challenging of grapes to master, Pinot has found a comfy home in the Golden State, and settled into an amazing groove. Central to that story has been the improbable ascent of a small winery in Sonoma, started more than a decade ago by two restaurant waiters who pooled their nightly tips with the dream of one day making their own wine.

In the late 1990s, Dan Kosta and Michael Browne were working at John Ash & Co., in Santa Rosa, Calif. Each night after work they'd each put \$10 into a white envelope and stash it in a drawer, figuring that once they had enough money, they'd start making wine. That day came in 1997. They took the \$1,300 they'd saved and bought a half-ton of Pinot Noir, an old stemmer-crusher and a used oak barrel.

With no formal winemaking training, Kosta, then 25, and Browne, 29, stumbled along a path of trial and error, learning as they went. In 2000, they bottled their first Pinot under the Kosta Browne label. Their first vintages weren't terribly inspiring. The wines reflected their makers' inexperience and the inherent challenges of the demanding Pinot grape. Some wines were rustic. One flirted with a flaw. But in 2002, one of their four Pinots broke the ice. They'd found a go-to vineyard, which has proven to be one of their stars.

That Pinot (93 points, \$48 on release), from Kanzler Vineyard, near Sebastopol, exhibited the kind of purity of flavor, richness,

depth and finesse that has become Kosta Browne's signature style. In 2003, they bottled seven Pinots, all outstanding or better, followed by eight different Pinots the following year, again all excellent. Since 2002, they've made 66 wines that have earned 90 points or higher. In 2009, the greatest vintage yet for California Pinot Noir, this dynamic duo made 11 outstanding Pinots and their first Chardonnay, including the extraordinary Pinot from the Sonoma Coast that is *Wine Spectator's* Wine of the Year for 2011.

Kosta Browne's string of great Pinots is amazing by any measure. They don't own a single vine and make wine in a makeshift, rented warehouse in Sebastopol. Browne is the mastermind winemaker, ultimately proving that if you pay attention to the details, from sourcing great grapes to meticulous winemaking, something beautiful can emerge. Kosta oversees the sales and marketing side; most of the 15,000-case production is sold direct to consumers. Early on, Chris Costello joined the winery and became an integral part of the business as Kosta Browne took on new investors to raise money to add vineyard sources and buy new barrels and other equipment.

In 2009, Kosta and Browne sold majority control to Vincraft, reportedly for close to \$36 million, as a way to refinance debt and build for the future. They still own just shy of half, and paid off some of their previous investors with proceeds from the sale. Since then, Vincraft has brought in a skilled management team and plans are under way to build a winery in the small, west Sonoma town of Sebastopol, which lies near many of the label's vineyard sources.

"Never in a million years would I have ever imagined this," Browne says, reflecting on his winery's startling success. The Sonoma Coast bottling in particular showcases his talent and the



Kosta Browne Pinot Noir aging in barrel



Ripened Pinot grapes

SARA SANGER

SARA SANGER



Dan Kosta (left) and Michael Browne

quality of his grape sources. Making a few hundred cases of great Pinot is hard enough; making nearly 6,000 cases of great Pinot is an admirable accomplishment.

Early on, Browne knew 2009 would be a great vintage. As he began to taste through barrels of different lots, he discovered that one blend in particular not only worked beautifully, but kept getting better every time he put together a mock blend for blind tastings against KB's single-vineyard wines. "Every time, that wine came out near the top," Browne says. "It was pretty amazing. It just kept getting better."

The wine comprises fruit from three vineyards: Gap's Crown, from

which the winery makes an individual bottling; Terra de Promissio, near the winery; and a new site, Walala Vineyard, located in the northernmost reaches of Sonoma Coast. The vineyards share a close proximity to the Pacific. But Walala added a red fruit component that gave the wine a brightness and clarity, says Browne. The wine spent about a year in new oak before being released early in 2011.

Sonoma County has long been one of California's most prized winegrowing regions, famous for its diversity of appellations and grape types. But Pinot Noir, a wine many considered least likely to succeed, has become Sonoma's signature red. Leading that parade is Kosta Browne, proving how far dreams can carry you. □