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16 California Pinot Noirs

New reviews of winemaker Brian Loring's 2010 Pinots offer an exciting glimpse of the vintage

James Laube

Posted: January 9, 2012

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Tasting Highlights bring the best wines from our editors' most recent tastings to WineSpectator.com members.

The first trickle of 2010 California Pinot Noirs is starting to move through our blind tastings, and we can only hope the ensuing ripples and waves maintain the initial level of excitement and quality.

Brian Loring has positioned himself as one of the early-release charges, and his 2010s, much like in recent past vintages, give the year a solid sendoff. He makes Pinot from most of California's favored Pinot appellations, so in one sense his wines offer an overview of the year in a consistent style. Of the 16 new Pinots I tasted (including a handful from his Mateo label), 11 earned outstanding marks.

As a group, the wines offer pure, complex, fruit- and floral-driven aromatics. The deep, rich and layered fruit flavors are elegant, offering the kind of delicacy and finesse you hope for with Pinot. A couple of the wines show a little more tannic muscle. Overall, the wines are of similar quality to 2009, which was a step up from 2008 and 2007.

"2010 was the year where everything was upside down and everything was late," said Loring, who makes his wines in Lompoc, Calif. That meant that vineyards that normally got picked first ended up getting picked near the end of harvest.

"It was a logistical nightmare because we'd staged our picking bins in all the wrong spots," said Loring, who pointed out that the cool growing season and late harvest weren't much of an issue since rain wasn't much of a factor, unlike 2011. "I think the key to the vintage was being patient and allowing the fruit to get truly ripe."

Loring continued, "The temptation was to look at the calendar and pull the trigger too soon, since it kept getting later and later in the year. I heard some winemakers saying that they were excited to be bringing fruit in at such low Brix, which would translate to lower alcohols. But I worry that those wines may end up being underripe. ... In some cases, we picked as much as a month later than we'd ever picked before at some vineyards. Our overall Brix average was a bit lower than normal, but that just meant that we had to add very little water to the fermentors."



Jessica Boone

Brian Loring gives the 2010 California Pinot vintage a solid sendoff.

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Alcohol levels ended up being consistent with recent vintages, said Loring. "Acid levels held due to the cool weather, so we didn't have to acidify any wines in 2011. The one thing we did watch closely, both when making picking decisions and when handling the fruit in the winery, was tannin levels. Due to the cool weather, tannins didn't seem to resolve themselves like in warmer years. Aside from waiting to pick until we were happy with the tannins, we also pressed some of the lots to barrel slightly sweet to avoid getting any potential harsher seed tannins, and we also stopped our press runs before the last, harder press cycle."

Overall, said Loring, "I think the 2010s have nice concentration, but are slightly less dense than our 2008s or 2009s." The 2010s remind him more of 2007 than 2008 or 2009. "Hopefully, we made the right calls, and the tannins are ripe and provide a nice backbone without being green or astringent," he added. "While I normally say our wines are ready to go right out of the gate, I think the 2010s could use some time in the bottle. Maybe that makes them more 'serious' wines? But they definitely would be candidates for some aging."

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LORING Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands Rosella's Vineyard 2010 Score: 94 | \$48

Combines dense, fresh earth, snappy wild berry, underbrush and mineral notes, fanning out and gaining depth and richness. Ends with a touch of black licorice and spice. Drink now through 2020. 325 cases made. —J.L.

LORING Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Durell Vineyard 2010 Score: 94 | \$48

Impressive for its rich, expansive, deep layers of ripe fruit, offering portals into huckleberry, wild berry and boysenberry character, supported and framed by fresh acidity and mineral tannins, with a long, engaging finish. Drink now through 2021. 150 cases made. —J.L.

LORING Pinot Noir Green Valley of Russian River Valley Graham Family Vineyard 2010 Score: 93 | \$48

Full-bodied, fleshy and concentrated, offering a mix of dark berry flavors, with blueberry, wild berry, plum and spice, that lead to a long, pure, richly flavored aftertaste. Drink now through 2020. 175 cases made. —J.L.

LORING Pinot Noir San Luis Obispo County Aubaine Vineyard 2010 Score: 93 | \$48

Front-loaded with rich fruit that's deep and layered, offering intense, concentrated plum, wild berry and raspberry. Gains depth and persistence on the finish, where the flavors are all the more impressive. Drink now through 2019. 800 cases made. —J.L.

LORING Pinot Noir Sta. Rita Hills Cargasacchi Vineyard 2010 Score: 93 | \$48

Both rich and restrained, offering deeply concentrated black and red fruits, with blackberry, raspberry, spice and mineral notes. Showing great acidity, balance, depth and persistence. Best from 2013 through 2021. 225 cases made. —J.L.

LORING Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands Garys' Vineyard 2010 Score: 92 | \$48

Starts with a burst of wild berry raciness, then tames down. Clean, pure, vibrant and vivacious, with the wild berry and raspberry fruit core tight and well-focused. Drink now through 2019. 300 cases made. —J.L.

MATEO Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 2010 Score: 92 | \$38

Very rich and almost syrupy, with pure, deep, complex layers of dark berry, tilting toward blueberry and wild berry. Turns elegant and detailed, while retaining its rich core of flavors. Drink now through 2020. 50 cases made. —J.L.

LORING Pinot Noir Green Valley of Russian River Valley Keefer Ranch Vineyard 2010 Score: 91 | \$48

Fresh and snappy, with a complex mix of floral, mineral, blackberry and wild berry flavors that are pure and elegant, ending with fine-grained tannins. Drink now through 2018. 450 cases made. —J.L.

LORING Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 2010 Score: 91 | \$29

Light toasty oak gives way to a richer array of dark berry flavors, built around blueberry, wild berry, floral and lavender scents. Turns elegant, spicy, peppery and delicate on the finish. Drink now through 2020. 300 cases made. —J.L.

LORING Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands 2010 Score: 91 | \$29

Offers a complex range of red fruits, with cherry and raspberry at the core. Well-structured, intense and snappy, ending with a mix of mint, spice and lavender. Drink now through 2016. 300 cases made. —J.L.

LORING Pinot Noir Sta. Rita Hills Rancho La Viña Vineyard 2010 Score: 91 | \$48

Rough-hewn when tried, but surely intense and concentrated, with vibrant wild berry, raspberry and mineral. Best to cellar this a year or two to enjoy the full benefits. Best from 2013 through 2021. 175 cases made. —J.L.

LORING Pinot Noir Sta. Rita Hills Clos Pepe Vineyard 2010 Score: 89 | \$48

A trim, pure and elegant style that offers subtle floral, mineral and wild berry flavors that lose their velocity on the finish. Yet this is a refreshing and vibrant wine. Worth seeing where it goes. Drink now through 2019. 600 cases made. —J.L.

LORING Pinot Noir Paso Robles Russell Family Vineyard 2010 Score: 88 | \$48

What's there is appealing, with loamy earth, wild berry, spice and floral notes that are rustic and chewy, so short term cellaring should be a plus. Drink now through 2018. 150 cases made. —J.L.

LORING Pinot Noir Sta. Rita Hills 2010 Score: 88 | \$29

Ripe, complex and generous plum, raspberry and black cherry flavors are front and center, pure and persistent, holding their focus and depth. Drink now through 2016. 300 cases made. —J.L.

MATEO Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands 2010 Score: 88 | \$38

Sleek and elegant, with refined black cherry, plum and wild berry flavors that are pure and complex, ending with a touch of mineral and spice. Drink now through 2017. 200 cases made. —J.L.

MATEO Pinot Noir Sta. Rita Hills 2010 Score: 88 | \$38

The initial burst of vivid wild berry, mineral, fresh earth and raspberry flavors shows a rustic, tannic edge, but that's a plus if you like to chew on young wines. Should prosper with cellaring. Drink now through 2020. 50 cases made. —J.L.