

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Santa Cruz Mountain Pinot Noir: The Chronicle recommends

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Our latest foray into this unheralded region for Pinot Noir considered two potentially stellar vintages. Both 2009 and 2010 were modest ('10 was downright cold) and those who gave into each year's potential stood to be rewarded.

The best wines from our lineup of more than two dozen were heady, complex and light on their feet.

The rest? If Pinot Noir's identity issues are revealing themselves nowadays, that's especially true in Santa Cruz. We encountered a few too many off flavors in some wines, and - in what's becoming a theme for 2010 - too many attempts to make a hefty wine in a year that wasn't inclined to provide one.

Santa Cruz has long wrestled with this gap in winemaking quality. As the world takes ever more notice, it will become ever more important to confront it.

As for the region, though, the possibilities for greatness are manifest. Ridgetop vineyards like Mount Eden remain benchmarks, but the plantings - new and old - near Corralitos and Aptos (go to [bit.ly/HJmACV](http://bit.ly/HJmACV)) are more than living up to their potential.

They continue to prove just how much there is to marvel at in the Santa Cruz Mountains - when the winemaking is on par with a beautifully defined sense of place.

**2009 Windy Oaks Terra Narro Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir** (\$29, 13.9% alcohol): Since 1999, [Jim Schultze](#) and his family have been building a reputation for ethereal Pinot from the little-known Corralitos area. As Corralitos' profile grows, Windy Oaks is a standard-bearer. This impressive, nuanced bottling shows why. The least oak-influenced of its lineup - compared with the 2009 [Diane's](#) Block (\$39, 13.9%), with toasty notes amid its rose-petal prettiness - this shows Pinot's shady side, with dusky pine and juniper aromas to balance its delicate strawberry fruit.

**2010 Alfaro Family Lester Family Vineyard at Deer Park Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir** (\$38, 13.7%): The cool 2010 vintage seems to have brought out the best in [Richard Alfaro](#)'s efforts, both with his own Corralitos vineyard and with other sites. This bottle from the nearby Lester site, planted to a mix of Dijon and older selections like Mount Eden, is tension-filled, packed with juicy currant fruit. Iodine and juniper accents balance a dose of new oak, but the innate beauty of fruit from this Aptos site shines through.

**2010 Wind Gap Woodruff Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir** (\$50, 12.7%): Syrah master Pax Mahle has brought out surprising structure in a light-touch wine made entirely with whole grape clusters. There's a saline edge to its taut red fruit - with scents of pomegranate, carob, musk and dried mushroom. As it opens, richer plum flavors show its full flesh.

**2010 Ghostwriter Santa Cruz County Pinot Noir** (\$30, 13.5%): Healdsburg-based Kenny Likitprakong (Hobo Wine) has become a curator of Santa Cruz sites, and while his single-vineyard efforts are winning, this blend of multiple sites (mostly near the town of Aptos) matches bright raspberry and rhubarb to a heartier earthen side. It's a contrast to the wonderful marjoram-scented delicacy of the 2010 Ghostwriter Woodruff Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$45, 13.2%), from that 30-year-old dry-farmed site, one of the area's emerging stars.

**2010 Thomas Fogarty Rapley Trail Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir** (\$55, 14.3%): The winemaking team of [Michael Martella](#) and [Nathan Kandler](#) is dialing in an ever more nuanced style at Fogarty, including this bottle from Fogarty's old-estate planting in the north of the appellation, near Woodside. The use of grape stems reveals itself in intense aromas of exotic peppercorn, with lavender, tangerine and bright raspberry. Generous and aromatic, if very stylish.

**2009 Mount Eden Vineyards Estate Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir** (\$52, 13.5%): As the would-be dean of Santa Cruz Pinot makers, [Jeffrey Patterson](#) reveals the full potential of 2009 - rich, powerful flavors and moderate size. That trademark mineral power of this Saratoga site, home to [Martin Ray](#)'s mid-century efforts - brings a bright, stony edge to match dark underbrush, tree bark, allspice and fresh bayberry. A subtle, long-aging vintage.

*Panelists: [Jeff Bareilles](#), wine director, Manresa; Jon Bonné, Chronicle wine editor; Rebecca Rapaszky, wine buyer, Noe Valley Wine Merchants.*