

[Home](#) / [News & Features](#) / [Retrospective / Vertical](#)

2008 Oregon Pinot Noir Retrospective: A Classic Vintage Revisited

At age 10, these Willamette Valley Pinots have shed their firm tannins yet retain their vitality



Photo by: Andrea Johnson

The Mineral Springs Vineyard in Yamhill-Carlton was the source of one of Tony Soter's brilliant 2008 Pinot Noirs.

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◀ 251

◀ 4



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Willamette Valley's 2008 Pinot Noir vintage looked golden from the start. Weather that year was ideal: Cooler-than-usual temperatures for most of the season helped preserve acidity and keep alcohol levels moderate, and harvesttime saw sunny skies and moderate temperatures that prevented overripeness. A smaller-than-usual crop yielded intense flavors.

In my three decades of reviewing Oregon Pinot Noirs, the dazzling 2008 vintage produced more outstanding ratings (90 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale) and more classic ratings (95-plus) than any year before it. The vintage rated 96 points, topped since only by 2012.

A decade on, it was time to revisit them, and they're doing even better than expected. Tasted blind, 17 of the 32 bottles I reviewed scored higher this time, some by as many as six points. Ten more scored exactly the same or within one point. (An additional three wines suffered from faulty corks and were not reviewed.)

More important, nearly all the wines showed the vitality and freshness of younger wines while developing the savory nuances of age. Tannins had mostly resolved into textures that range from silky to velvety. In short, these wines have become the classics the vintage promised.

On release, the hallmark of 2008 was vibrant, ripe, fruit-centered flavors that played against alcohol levels mostly in the low- to mid-13 percent range, a full percent lower than other ripe vintages. After a year or two in the bottle, tannins began to show a firm presence. That waved a caution flag for those looking for polish and suppleness. 10 years later, those tannins are not an issue for most of the wines in this tasting.

All this is especially true of the top-scoring wines in this lineup, both at 97 points.

Supple, seductive and expressive, Soter Yamhill-Carlton Mineral Springs Vineyard layers red fruit flavors with caramel notes as the finish lingers effortlessly against polished tannins. More explosively expressive, it has gained in harmony and completeness, as compared with its original rating of 93 points. The estate vineyard, planted in 2002 and farmed biodynamically, shares a ridge with Ken Wright's Abbott Claim vineyard.

"The 2008 vintage is a benchmark," says Tony Soter, who moved to Oregon to focus on Pinot Noir after a career in California. "It has all the salient Willamette Valley characteristics and none of the jammy, warm-weather flavors, [with] the character one might expect from wines with pretense to pedigree. ... It took some time [for the 2008s] to arrive at this state, so I don't expect them to fade quickly."

The Maysara Pinot Noir McMinnville Estate Cuvée's mineral notes cut through blueberry and red cherry flavors, with fine acidity balancing a finish that just doesn't quit. The wine has achieved a lovely sense of density since its release, when it seemed brighter and showed the same minerality. Various parts of the vineyard, spread over rolling hills in the McMinnville AVA, went into this cuvée (renamed Cyrus in more recent vintages).

"There were no extremes of weather in 2008. We could let the grapes hang on longer without compromising sugar levels," says Naseem Momtazi, referring to the fact that a long hang time can result in higher alcohol levels. Momtazi handles marketing for her family's Maysara winery and Momtazi Vineyard, planted in 1998 and 1999.

The 2008 vintage was only the third for Matzinger-Davies, the husband-and-wife collaboration of Archery Summit's then-winemaker Anna Matzinger and Rex Hill winemaker Michael Davies. Today their Willamette Valley bottling is a smooth-textured, open-weave rascal, offering juicy dark plum, boysenberry and smoke notes, with hints of honeysuckle and wet slate emerging on the finish. Its 96-point showing reflects the extra depth and harmony gained since its 92-point score on release.

The Matzinger-Davies grapes are purchased from Povo and Three Trees vineyards, which are at around 700 feet elevation, on the Amity Hills side of Eola-Amity Hills. "We were getting to know our two sites back then," Anna says. "We got smaller clusters and smaller berries, which resulted in marked concentration."

Also at 96 points, Evening Land Eola-Amity Hills Seven Springs Vineyard outperformed its original 92-point rating. The vineyard's signature stony minerality knifes through dark plum, blackberry and clove flavors, gaining momentum as the finish persists. It has fleshed out beautifully from the light and zesty wine it was on release, then overshadowed by ELV's higher-priced La Source and Summum bottlings (which were not available for this tasting).

Elk Cove Willamette Valley Mount Richmond and Penner-Ash Yamhill-Carlton Shea Vineyard, both from the Yamhill-Carlton AVA, also earn classic 95-point scores. Both show suppleness and seductive textures and flavors, with the presence and stature to let mature flavors flourish for years.

The Elk Cove, from the winery's largest estate vineyard (180 acres), layers black cherry, plum, floral and mineral notes. The Penner-Ash, from select blocks in the large Shea Vineyard, planted in 1989, offers red cherry, pear, paprika and floral flavors, a sanguine note adding complexity on an open texture.

Four wines had lost some of their charm over the years. Tannins too firm for the flavors knocked Archery Summit Ribbon Ridge Looney Vineyard, WillaKenzie Yamhill-Carlton Pierre Leon, Siduri Willamette Valley Arbre Vert Vineyard and Witness Tree Willamette Valley Vintage Select into the "very good" range (85 to 89 points).

Another bottle was obviously done in by cork taint, and two others showed the hollow center and lack of fruit typical of wines minimally affected by corkiness.

Several bottles under twist-off closures showed impressive development along with pristine flavors, including three magnificent beauties. Argyle Eola-Amity Hills Nuthouse (95 points) delivers a sense of transparency to gently expressed guava, raspberry and pear flavors. Chehalem Dundee Hills Stoller Vineyard (94) gracefully expresses currant and savory character, gaining depth with each sip. And Benton-Lane Willamette Valley First Class (94) packs currant, plum and toast flavors in a seamless, velvety package.

Bottles like these create the overwhelming sense that not only have these wines improved, they have years ahead of them.

Reviews and tasting notes for all wines that scored very good, outstanding or classic are listed below.

2008 Oregon Pinot Noir Retrospective

MAYSARA Pinot Noir McMinnville Estate Cuvée 2008 Score: 97

Beautifully focused and expressive, with a lovely sense of density to the blueberry and cherry flavors. A vein of minerality cuts through the richness to join with finely gauged acidity, carrying to a lengthy finish. This just doesn't quit. Drink now through 2028. 1,000 cases made.—H.S.

SOTER Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District Mineral Springs Ranch 2008 Score: 97

Supple, seductive and expressive, layering guava, raspberry and cherry flavors with clotted cream and caramel notes as the finish lingers effortlessly against polished tannins. Has presence, complexity and a sense of completeness. Drink now through 2025. 1,200 cases made.—H.S.

EVENING LAND Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills Seven Springs Vineyard 2008 Score: 96

Sleek, focused, lively and generous on a taut frame, with a prominent streak of stony minerality cutting through the dark plum, blackberry and clove flavors, gaining momentum as the finish persists impressively. Drink now through 2023. 1,600 cases made.—H.S.

MATZINGER DAVIES Pinot Noir Willamette Valley 2008 Score: 96

Polished and inviting, this smooth-textured, open-weave rascal offers juicy dark plum, boysenberry and smoky notes mingling effectively, lingering gently with hints of honeysuckle and wet slate on the

nicely judged finish. Drink now through 2025. 165 cases made.—H.S.

ARGYLE Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills Nuthouse 2008 Score: 95

Lithe and elegant, with a sense of transparency to the garnet color and gently expressed flavors of guava, raspberry, pear and clotted cream, lingering effortlessly against refined tannins. Under twist-off, this should gain for many more years. Drink now through 2028. 3,200 cases made.—H.S.

ELK COVE Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Mount Richmond 2008 Score: 95

Supple, refined and generous, with layers of black cherry, plum, mineral and floral flavors wrapped in velvety tannins. The finish rolls on, picking up hints of licorice and caramel. Drink now through 2023. 894 cases made.—H.S.

PENNER-ASH Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Shea Vineyard 2008 Score: 95

Open-textured and seductive, with cherry, pear, paprika and floral flavors. A sanguine note adds complexity to the long and evocative finish. Has presence and stature, promising to let the mature flavors flourish for years. Drink now through 2025. 325 cases made.—H.S.

BENTON-LANE Pinot Noir Willamette Valley First Class 2008 Score: 94

Supple, velvety and expressive, offering layers of currant, plum, clove and toast flavors that come together seamlessly on the long, beautifully formed finish. Persists with intensity and grace. Drink now through 2025. 741 cases made.—H.S.

CHEHALEM Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Stoller 2008 Score: 94

Graceful and gently expressive, with crinkly tannins underlying currant and savory flavors, finishing with tension and fine balance. Successive sips bring out additional fruit and complexity. The twist-off cap makes this a good bet to persist in the cellar. Drink now through 2028. 595 cases made.—H.S.

ET FILLE Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District Kalita Vineyard 2008 Score: 94

Impressive for the purity and clarity, with enough density to drive the cherry, plum and floral flavors against polished tannins into a long and vivid finish. Has presence, and savory overtones add depth. Drink now through 2023. 206 cases made.—H.S.

REX HILL Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Alloro Vineyard 2008 Score: 94

Taut and focused, this juicy, red-fruited style offers raspberry and guava notes, with a hint of pink peppercorn emerging as the flavors dance lightly against lively acidity and refined tannins. Elegant and impressive for the persistence. The finish sings. Drink now through 2023. 98 cases made.—H.S.

BETHEL HEIGHTS Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills Flat Block 2008 Score: 93

Firm and focused, with a toasty edge enriching the core of blackberry, licorice and floral aromas and flavors. Tannins are present but not obtrusive, allowing the full range of expression to come through. Hints at orange peel as the finish lingers effortlessly. Drink now through 2028. 202 cases made.—H.S.

DE LANCELOTTI Pinot Noir Chehalem Mountains Estate 2008 Score: 93

On the lighter side, with transparency to the garnet color and gentle presence to the red plum, pear and floral flavors as they linger easily against polished tannins on the peppery finish. Has presence and persistence. Drink now. 500 cases made.—H.S.

MERRIMAN Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District Merriman Vineyard 2008 Score: 93

Firm and focused, with taut, lively acidity set against ripe cherry, licorice and smoked paprika flavors that linger with intensity. The tannins are present but not obtrusive as mature flavors peek through on the finish. Drink now through 2025. 100 cases made.—H.S.

PONZI Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Abetina Vineyard 2008 Score: 93

Beautifully aromatic, featuring cherry, wild herb and subtle chocolate notes swirling seductively, with a firm texture holding together a range of mature orange peel-accented cherry and savory spice

flavors, lingering with presence. Drink now through 2023. 100 cases made.—H.S.

KEN WRIGHT Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District Savoya Vineyard 2008 Score: 93

Focused, expressive and generous, with blueberry, plum, orange peel and caramel notes on a deftly balanced frame. Finely wrought tannins underline the long and sleek finish. Drink now through 2025. 1,790 cases made.—H.S.

DOMAINE SERENE Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Evenstad Reserve 2008 Score: 92

Lithe and tangy, with vivid acidity balancing ripe cherry and floral flavors, hinting at mineral and spice notes as the finish lingers against gently refined tannins. Still feels youthful. Drink now through 2023. 8,000 cases made.—H.S.

THE FOUR GRACES Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Black Family Estate 2008 Score: 92

Taut, with driving acidity balancing ripe cherry, red plum and floral flavors that linger, finishing with fine tannins and precision. A hint of smoke adds interest. Drink now through 2023. 190 cases made.—H.S.

LACHINI Pinot Noir Chehalem Mountains Lachini Family Estate 2008 Score: 92

Lithe, supple and sleek, this red-fruited style shows some delicacy and a gentle touch as the guava, pear and cranberry flavors glide over refined tannins into a long finish. Hints of stone and floral add to the long, subtle finish. Drink now. 325 cases made.—H.S.

LE CADEAU Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Serendipity 2008 Score: 92

Supple and expressive, wrangling the violet-scented blackberry, cherry and dusky spice flavors into a focused and deftly balanced mouthful. Lingers against refined tannins. Drink now through 2025. 68 cases made.—H.S.

RANSOM Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Selection 2008 Score: 92

Taut, crisp and sleek, with refreshing cherry and saline flavors playing against refined tannins and nicely sublimated acidity. The finish echoes blueberry and spice notes, gaining momentum. Still needs to settle into itself. Drink now through 2028. 800 cases made.—H.S.

SINEANN Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Resonance Vineyard 2008 Score: 92

Sleek and tangy, with wet slate and sanguine overtones to the clove-accented blackberry and cherry flavors, wrapped lightly in fine tannins as the finish lingers gently. Drink now through 2023. 800 cases made.—H.S.

ADELSHEIM Pinot Noir Chehalem Mountains Bryan Creek Vineyard 2008 Score: 91

Bright and tangy, with lively acidity to balance the cinnamon-scented cherry and mineral flavors, finishing with presence and a taut balance. Lingers gently. Drink now. 360 cases made.—H.S.

CRISTOM Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills Eileen Vineyard 2008 Score: 91

Lithe and open-textured, swirling with blackberry, grapefruit peel, white pepper and brick aromas and flavors, picking up momentum as the finish sails on. The tannins are present but well-integrated, and mature nuances are starting to emerge. Drink now through 2023. 659 cases made.—H.S.

RAPTOR RIDGE Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District Shea Vineyard 2008 Score: 91

Lithe and sleek, with pear accents to the blackberry and cherry flavors, hinting at mint and rosemary as the finish sails easily against refined tannins. Toasty notes add interest. Drink now through 2023. 355 cases made.—H.S.

SHEA Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Shea Vineyard Block 7 2008 Score: 91

Focused, firm and sleek, layering savory spice-accented blackberry, cherry and mineral flavors into a taut package. Loses a bit of richness as the finish persists, but this feels like it has miles to go. Drink now through 2025. 294 cases made.—H.S.

TORII MOR Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Olson Estate Vineyard 2008 Score: 91

Lithe and focused, striking a refined balance between refreshing plum and floral flavors and mature overtones of wet earth and meatiness. The tannins are velvety and the finish hangs around, with moderate intensity. Drink now through 2023. 187 cases made.—H.S.

HADEN FIG Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Reserve 2008 Score: 90

Sleek and spicy, with white pepper and toasted grain overtones to the gentle cherry and floral flavors, riding easily over fine tannins into a long and graceful finish. Drink now. 70 cases made.—H.S.

SIDURI Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Arbore Vert Vineyard 2008 Score: 89

On the lighter side, with refreshing, open-textured guava and cherry flavors, finishing with polished tannins around a sleek blueberry note. Drink now through 2021. 174 cases made.—H.S.

WITNESS TREE Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Vintage Select 2008 Score: 89

Taut and flavorful, with lively acidity and firm but refined tannins supporting a riot of earthy black cherry and orange peel flavors, finishing with a meaty note. Drink now through 2023. 397 cases made.—H.S.

WILLAKENZIE Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Pierre Léon 2008 Score: 88

Firm in texture, with gritty tannins around a juicy core of blueberry, plum and savory flavors, finishing with some refinement and moderate length. Best after 2020. 3,000 cases made.—H.S.

ARCHERY SUMMIT Pinot Noir Ribbon Ridge Looney Vineyard 2008 Score: 87

Firm in texture, with sandy tannins around a modest core of blackberry, gravel and dusky spice flavors, finishing a bit chewy. Past its prime. 400 cases made.—H.S.

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