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Pfendler Vineyards' brooding pinot noir

By PEG MELNIK

Greg Bjornstad made a paradigm shift in his pinot noir, opting for the dark and brooding version found in this Pfendler Vineyards wine.

Bjornstad is the winemaker behind our brooding wine-of-the-week winner — the Pfendler, 2012 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir. The tasty bottling edged out other top-scoring contenders of high-end pinot with its budget-savvy price of \$45.

This pinot is layered with tasty notes of blackberry, bright rhubarb, tobacco and tea. Its range makes it a smart choice.

“In the 1990s, I remember Saintsbury (winery) being my gold standard for pinot noir, with delicious strawberry fruit and creamy vanilla flavors and textures,” Bjornstad said. “Then I took the vineyard manager/assistant winemaker job at Flowers Vineyard and Winery in 1997 and my entire pinot and chardonnay paradigm shifted with this 'revolutionary' Sonoma Coast profile. The wines were powerful, deep, dark and brooding.”

After Bjornstad's tenure at Flowers, he continued with the same kind of vineyard and winemaking philosophies at Tandem Winery and with his own label, Bjornstad Cellars.

“I bring all of those experiences to play at Pfendler, striving to craft balanced, elegant wines that have strength and presence, yet are approachable and rich,” said Bjornstad. “These are not usually showy, headliner wines, but intended to be wines that pique your interest and draw you in, and draw you back for another sip, to see what's going on now!”

The Pfendler brand is produced at Vinify Wine Services in Santa Rosa, with most of its vineyards in Petaluma.

Bjornstad said what the uninitiated don't know about pinot noir is that it takes some doing to find good ones.

“I think the movie 'Sideways' helped to bring the pinot noir varietal into public awareness,” he said. “I also believe that finding a really good pinot noir takes some effort, and some money. There are lots of indifferent wines out there, at lower prices that could be deflating the reputation of fine wines in general. A person could try one of those bottles and might be unimpressed and disinclined to pay more money next time to continue their education.”

Wine of the Week

2012 Pfendler Vineyards Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir ****

This pinot is layered with tasty notes of blackberry, bright rhubarb, tobacco and tea. Its range is what makes it a smart pick for the price.



Pairing: Pinot and lamb shanks

Our Wine of the Week, Pfendler Vineyards 2012 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$45), is lush, dark and lively. Flavors of black fruit — plums, cherries, raspberries — unfold with a rich succulence, with stewed rhubarb and a flourish of English Breakfast tea showing up as flavors devolve into the wine's silky finish.

For today's recipe, I'm using the delicate little bean known as flageolet. It was, until fairly recently, hard to find but, thanks in part to Rancho Gordo, a specialty food company based in Napa, it is readily available in most markets. If you do not want to use lamb, you can use smoked turkey leg, smoked ham hock or a big handful of those smoked onions. — *Michelle Anna Jordan*

Flageolets with Lamb Shanks - Makes 4 to 6 servings

1 pound dried flageolet beans, preferably Rancho Gordo, soaked in water for at least 6 hours or overnight

2 to 3 lamb shanks (about 2 pounds)

— Kosher salt

— Black pepper in a mill

— Olive oil

1 yellow onion, peeled and cut into small dice

2 carrots, peeled and minced

4 to 5 garlic cloves, minced

2 or 3 Italian parsley sprigs

1 or 2 fresh thyme sprigs

— Extra virgin olive oil

Drain and rinse the flageolets and set them aside briefly.

Season the shanks all over with salt and pepper.

Set a large heavy pot -- a Dutch oven is perfect -- over medium-high heat.

Add just enough olive oil to thinly coat the bottom of the pan and brown the shanks. Use tongs to transfer to a plate or bowl.

Lower the heat to medium, add the onions and carrots and saute gently until they begin to soften, about 7 to 10 minutes. Add the garlic, saute another minute and return the shanks to the pot. Add the flageolets, herb sprigs and enough water to cover the beans by about an inch.

Increase the heat to high and when the water reaches a full rolling boil, lower the heat and simmer very gently until the beans are tender, about 45 minutes or a bit longer. Cover the pot and let rest for 10 to 20 minutes.

Use tongs to transfer the shanks to a clean work surface. Remove the meat, cut it into small pieces and return it to the pot. Taste and correct for salt.

To serve, ladle into soup plates, add a swirl of olive oil to each portion and serve immediately.