

# Wine Spectator

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## Papapietro Perry's Vibrant Pinot Noirs



California Pinot Noir pioneer Ben Papapietro started making wine in his garage nearly 50 years ago; today his Russian River Valley reds are as relevant as ever.

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Flashback to the late 1970s: Ben Papapietro and Bruce Perry are working in the newspaper business in San Francisco. The friends and colleagues are also wine lovers. That passion spurs Papapietro to try home winemaking in 1980. With barrels in his basement, often filled with Zinfandel, Papapietro started his journey into serious winemaking. Perry joined in for added fun in 1985. Along the way, the duo befriended Williams Selyem founders Burt Williams and Ed Selyem.

### **A shared love of Burgundy among this California garagiste group steered Papapietro to Pinot Noir.**

But back then, the varietal was hard to source, as plantings were scarce. “Burt gave us some Pinot to play with, and we messed around with that for a while, to perfect our ‘house style,’” says Papapietro with a wink and a smile. “We experimented a lot until 1997, when Bruce finally convinced me to go commercial.”

The brand was officially born with the 1998 vintage, all 75 cases of it. Jump cut to today, and the brand turns out around 7,500 cases of wine annually, mostly Pinot Noir, along with some Zinfandel and Chardonnay. David Low joined in 2002 and, starting with the 2025 vintage, he'll be the primary winemaker. But it's not a step back for Papapietro who, along with his wife, Yolanda, and Renae Perry (Bruce's widow, Perry passed in 2022) are all still involved in the day-to-day ops.

In 2005 the operation moved into a bigger space at the Timbercrest Farms location on Dry Creek Road in Sonoma. A former dried fruit and nut farm, the facility offered warehouse space and refrigeration. Other wineries have since set up shop there as well, including Kokomo and Peterson. The Papapietro Perry tasting room is decidedly throwback in feel, while the winemaking offers neither bells nor whistles.

Today, the Pinot Noir portfolio comprises nine bottlings, mostly from vineyards in the Russian River Valley AVA, including Peters, Nunes, and Leras. “That was by design when we started,” says Papapietro. “We wanted different spots, warm and cool for early and later ripening, so that logistics during harvest would be easier. We didn't want everything coming in all at once. But I have to say, over the past 10 years or so, as things have gotten warmer consistently, with less fog, things are ripening closer together and it can be a squeeze.”

Now with over 25 vintages of commercial winemaking under his belt, has Papapietro changed his approach along the way?

“Not really. All that experimentation early really did set the style. It took 18 years to get there. But since we went commercial, no real changes,” he says.

“We ferment everything in 1 ton bins. Each clone and vineyard are kept separate, by hand. We barrel down for and then in the spring we start blending. What doesn’t make the single-vineyard or -specific bottlings goes to the AVA blend. Everything gets 12 months in barrel before bottling. All pretty straightforward.” There’s also no use here, as Papapietro notes, “I just don’t like the greenness of stems. Sometimes they’re ripe, but overall that’s not what I’m looking for. I prefer whole berries.”

The whole-berry aspect comes through in the wines’ juicy, vibrant fruit, which leads the way while showing a sparkle of savory and tea. There’s a light-handed gloss of toast framing it all while ample spice and perfume notes add range. The wines are Burgundian in spirit, but feel decidedly California overall.

**“I never considered challenging Burgundy for style,” says Papapietro. “I always wanted California style, California fruit.”**

“..but at times maybe it was too ripe. I remember back in 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 vintages. That was ripe, riper, ripest back then. Then ’06 came along, and it was a cooler year. After that I started picking a little sooner. The acidity was better, and those wines have lasted longer. That approach wound up helping in 2008 and 2020 too, because we harvested before the came, plus 2020 was a hot year.

I guess, looking back, that might be the one shift here along the way: picking a little bit sooner.”

## **Papapietro Perry 2023 Sonoma Pinot Noir Tasting**

The 2023 Papapietro Perry Pinot Noir Russian River Valley offers bright Bing cherry and red currant preserve, with a sleek, pure feel.

The 2023 Papapietro Perry Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Peters Vineyard is packed with succulent raspberry and damson plum notes supported by sleek acidity.

The 2023 Papapietro Perry Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Campbell Ranch, sourced from a vineyard way up the coast near Annapolis, offers well-packed wild blackberry, black cherry and bramble notes.

“Longer hang time up there, because it’s so cool. So thicker skins,” notes Papapietro of Campbell Ranch. “And 2023 in general, we had to wait. It was such a cool year, slow and steady, with no late heat at all.”

We finish with the 2023 Papapietro Perry Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Pommard Clones, an expressive spice box of aromas, with sparkly energy, succulent raspberry fruit and extra rose petal and savory notes on the fresh finish.

The lineup here ranges from \$60 to \$85, still very fair for top-flight California Pinot Noir and a bargain vis-à-vis premier cru level Burgundy, to which Papapietro Perry's Pinot Noirs are absolutely comparable in quality.

I guess the impressive nature of the wines here in the promising 2023 vintage isn't a surprise. After all, Papapietro did spend 18 years developing a house style first. Then he followed that with another quarter-century of gaining year-on-year experience with a small handful of growers. It would seem that at 78 years young, this California Pinot Noir pioneer is doing just fine.



Bruce Perry & Ben Papapietro