

RAISE YOUR GLASS OF WINE

Warren Johnston finds well-made, available wines in the \$10 range.

THE COLUMN WINE FINDER ABOUT

Small Winery Nails the Finicky Pinot Noir

Winemakers often will add oak chips, oak powder or oak staves to wine aging in stainless steel casks. As a rule, I'm not a fan of these methods — it seems like cheating.

But in the case of Sola Pinot Noir, which is aged with medium toasted oak staves, I can overlook it. It's difficult to find well-crafted Pinot Noir in the \$10 range, and Sola has produced a very good one.



At its price, Sola is one of the best California Pinot Noirs I've had recently.

It's a red wine that's

similar to a light Burgundy

with fresh berry flavors

and a slight hint of oak. And I found it on sale for \$9.99, a price that reflects that it wasn't aged in expensive oak barrels.

Sola
Pinot Noir, 2017
13.5 percent alcohol content
California, \$13.99

Sola Pinot Noir is 95 percent Pinot Noir and 5 percent Petite Sirah. The result is a wine that's balanced with a smooth finish.

Pinot Noir grapes are difficult to grow, requiring precise soils and climate. And wines made from the grapes are capricious and variable, author Jancis Robinson says in *The Oxford Companion to Wine*.

Tim Halikas co-founded Sola Winery in 2007, along with his close friend Greg Buonocore, a wine merchant, in Concord, Calif., in the San Francisco Bay area of Contra Costa County, the winery's website says.

Their goal was to produce "the highest quality West Coast wines at the lowest sustainable prices." I haven't tried the full line of Sola wines, but judging from the Pinot Noir, it seems that Halikas and Buonocore have met their founding aim.

At least 95 percent of the grapes to make the wine come from a single vineyard on the eastern border of the Sacramento Delta, a lush farming area known for its boutique wineries. The owners decline to disclose the vineyard's precise location.

"In some cases, we are forced to sign nondisclosure agreements. So the specific vineyard, like for all Sola wines, must remain unknown" to the public, the tasting notes say.

There also is not an abundance of information about the winery or its principals on the company's website or online. Sola is primarily run by friends and family, Halikas said in an email.

Sola is "a very small, independent operation," but apparently one that's growing rapidly and gaining the attention of national wine reviewers. *Wine Enthusiast Magazine* just informed him that the winery's 2017 Sauvignon Blanc received a rating of 90 out of 100 as a best buy, he said.

Halikas got a bachelor's degree from Sonoma State University, a school of about 9,000 students in Rohnert Park, Calif. He and Buonocore started Sola in January 2007, and he joined Buonocore

Distributing in sales at the same time, according to his LinkedIn page.

Buonocore inherited Buonocore Distributing from his father more than 30 years ago. The 90-year-old family business sells West Coast wines around the world, and Greg Buonocore also works with winemakers to produce Buonocore “Good Heart” Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah, which sell in the \$20 range.

The small team at Sola includes two skilled winemakers: Larry Langbehn, who made gold-medal-winning wines at LedgeWood Creek Winery before it was purchased by Gallo and closed, and Sterling Albert, who built an excellent reputation making artisanal wines.

Sola 2017 California Pinot Noir is widely available in New England, although it might be difficult to find in New Hampshire. I found it at Norwich Wine and Spirits, and other Vermont stores carry it as well. If you don't see it, ask the merchant to order it. Sola Pinot Noir a great bargain at the full price, and a steal under \$10.

Suggestions of wines in the \$10 range are always appreciated. Warren Johnston can be reached at raiseyourglassofwine@gmail.com.

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PINOT NOIR COUNTRY

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ABOUT THIS SITE

Warren Johnston’s column, which appears in newspapers and on-line, is designed to help readers cut through the sea of wine offerings that crowd the shelves of stores and find well-made, available wines that sell in \$10 range.

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