

# Sipping Sideways

A film character's passion for wine has viewers seeking out the best Pinot Noir

By LISA MCLAUGHLIN



AT LANDMARC A chic neighborhood bistro in New York City, wine director David Lombardo can always tell

when the most recent showing of *Sideways* at the nearby movie theater has let out: diners come in asking about Pinot Noir.

Although the characters in the film consume all sorts of wines, it's whiny oenophile Miles' poignant ode to this oft overlooked and finicky varietal that has moviegoers rushing to see what the fuss is about and poring over *Sideways: The Shooting Script* (Newmarket Press) for wine names and explanations. During the month of December, sales of Pinot Noir increased 15% in one New York City store, but it's in restaurants where the buzz is greatest. At Sona in Los Angeles, sommelier Mark Mendoza says, "The increase is remarkable." And at Las Vegas'

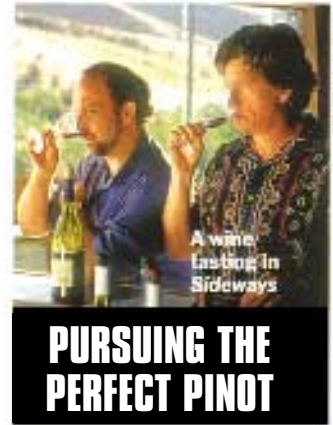
Sensi, sales by the glass are up 30% for the 2001 Sokol Blosser Willamette Valley Pinot Noir. Sommelier Rob Bigelow says, "The impact of the movie on sales is huge. It's almost as though it's introducing people to Pinot Noir." In New York City, Fred Dexheimer, beverage director for BLT Steak and BLT Fish, has also seen a post *Sideways* increase in Pinot Noir orders and commonly encounters diners discussing the movie as they are deciding on their wine.

No one could be more surprised by the sudden surge of Pinot interest than John Winthrop Haeger, author of the recently released and well-timed *North American Pinot Noir* (University of California Press), which details all aspects of the often moody grape and profiles 72 of the best American Pinot Noir producers. He devoted the past five years to exploring a wine that he felt was "a growing niche phenomenon" with a "healthy cult status. I thought Pinot Noir would never

be mainstream. It wasn't ever going to be synonymous with red wine." But then came the film. "I can't start a conversation or tasting now without the movie coming up," he notes.

Wine expert Leslie Sbrocco, author of *Wine for Women*, finds it appropriate that Pinot is part of the courtship dance of the characters Miles and Maya in the film. "Pinot is one of those wines that absolutely grab your heart," she says. "It beats it up a little too, but once you've had an earthshaking bottle of Pinot Noir, you are never the same. Like a first love."

If this wine is so amazing, why hasn't it been more popular? "It's always been one of those cult grapes," says Kevin Zraly, vice president of wine for the Smith & Wollensky Restaurant Group, noting that the great red Burgundies from France are 100% Pinot Noir. "But it's a grape that can't be mass produced." The Pinot vine's very specific growing requirements, including a long cool season, mark it as a difficult grape and make the gap between the highs and lows of its wines more significant than with other reds. "It can be like chasing the Holy Grail to find the best Pinot Noir," says Zraly. But for many, the chase is worth it.



## PURSuing THE PERFECT PINOT

Looking to join Miles on his quest for the very best Pinot Noir? We asked some experts for their picks



**MARK MENDOZA**  
sommelier at Sona in Los Angeles  
- Patz & Hall Alder Springs Vineyard, 2000

**WesMar, Russian River Valley, 2002**  
- Sea Smoke, Botella Vineyard, Santa Rita Hills, 2002

**LESLIE SBROCCO**, author of *Wine for Women*

- **Domaine Drouhin, Willamette Valley, Ore., 2001**  
- MacMurray Ranch Sonoma Coast, 2002  
- Craggy Range, Te Muna Road Vineyard, New Zealand, 2003



**FRED DEXHEIMER**, beverage director for BLT Steak in N.Y.C.  
- Melville, Santa Rita Hills, 2002  
- Lemelson Thea's Selection, Willamette Valley, 2002  
- Littorai, Savoy Vineyard, Anderson Valley, Calif., 2001

DAVE CHADIC—ENLIGHTENED IMAGES



WINE COUNTRY: Kalyra Vineyards in Santa Ynez Valley, Calif.