

FROM THE GRAPEVINE

By [JOEL M. FISHER](#) with Sara Fisher Chapin



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Ever heard of a wine shootout? It's truly a victimless crime.

The fourth Annual **Affairs of the Vine** Pinot Noir Shootout recently was held at San Francisco's California Culinary Academy. Affairs of the Vine owner Barbara Drady graciously invited me to observe and review the event hosted by her Sebastopol-based wine education company. For the Shootout, all wines are blind tasted by a diverse 28-person panel of wine makers, writers, Affairs of the Vine staff, and retail, restaurant and wine-trade professionals.

More than 225 domestic and international wineries submitted their best bottles. The judging panel bravely winnowed the field down to 43 submissions for the second round, then to a mere 16 for round three. The last bottle standing was announced on April 5.

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Two of this year's entrants are Shootout vets I know. Aaron Schalabrini is the hardworking winemaker at his family-owned **Annapolis Winery**, located near the Pacific Ocean in Annapolis, Ca. The winery currently produces between 2,000 and 3,000 cases per year, and has dreams of growing to 7,000 cases. Although Annapolis is not a certified organic winery, the UC Davis graduate has eschewed pesticides for the last five years. The winery ranked #11 in the 2004 Shootout, and is hoping to do even better this year. I found their Pinot Noir to open with a fresh zing of mint on the nose, followed by warm spices, good fruits and a zippy acidity.

The other familiar face is that of Dr. Tom Morgan, who owns **Casa Caballos Vineyards** in Templeton (Paso Robles area). Assisted by son Scott Tobin and loyal assistant Scott English, the winery currently produces 2,000 cases a year and intends to reach 4,000. Morgan's Pinot Noir finished in the top 16 last competition. This year's entry is a big, smooth Pinot with a nice dark-red tone and great mix of fruit.

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I thought there some real treasures among the top 16 battling it out this year. (Since this was a blind tasting – and I tasted all 43 entries – I didn't find out the associated wineries

until later.) The **Halleck Vineyard's 2004 Three Sons Cuvee Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley**, showed nicely balanced floral and fruit notes on the nose and sweet berries on the palate. **Fort Ross Vineyard and Winery's 2002 Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast** came on strong at first, but mellowed on the palate with moderate spices and a long, lush finish. The **Artesa Winery 2004 Estate Pinot Noir from Carneros** was enthusiastic and enjoyable.

Particularly striking was the **Bernardus 2004 Pinot Noir Monterey County**. Rich cinnamon and smoke hit the nose. The velvety, well-balanced wine showed an impressive long finish. Also showing a nice balance and good finish was **Lost Canyon Winery's 2004 Dutton Ranch Morelli Lane Vineyard Pinot Noir Russian River Valley**.

Amidst all the fruit-based Pinot Noirs, a few entries distinguished themselves with earthy overtones. Among them were the *2004 Russian River Selection Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley* from the **Gary Farrell Winery**, and **Casa Barranca's 2004 Sanford and Benedict Pinot Noir** from the Santa Rita Hills near Santa Barbara.

Last but not least are two particular gems I want to share with you. **Buena Vista's 2004 Dijon Clone Ramal Vineyard Pinot Noir** from the Carneros District was like sipping a candy store – but in a good way. Mint, chocolate and candied notes exploded on the nose and palate, smoothing out into a more traditional fruit-dominated finish. Also remarkable was the *2004 Pinot Noir, Anderson Valley* from **La Crema Winery**. Spicy but smooth, this wine shows all the signs of being a remarkable bottle for years to come.

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And now, for the winners! **Laetitia Vineyard & Winery** nabbed the honor of first place with its *2004 Estate Pinot Noir, Arroyo Grande Valley* (\$20). This bottle scored an impressive 94. Second prize went to the Buena Vista Dijon Clone I liked so much, which scored 93 points (and retails for \$38). Third place – by a nose, also scoring 93 – was **MacPhail Family Wines' 2004 Pratt Vineyard Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast** (\$56). **Row Eleven Wine Company** won fourth place at 93 points with its *2003 Solomon Hills Santa Maria Valley* (\$49). Rounding out the top five with 92.5 points was **Gary Farrell's 2003 Rochioli-Allen Vineyards Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley** (\$60).

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In the end, Casa Caballo moved up from 16th to 10th. Annapolis dropped in ranking this year, but remained in the top 20. All in all, it was quite a show! The range of talent and taste on parade was fantastic.

Happy Sipping!

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