

Seeking Excellence

THE CONTINUING ADVENTURE: IN PURSUIT OF BALANCE FOR CHARDS AND PINOTS IN NYC

by Chris Fleming, WSET Level III

THIS PAST WINTER, THE IN PURSUIT OF BALANCE NEW YORK CITY

(IPOB) tasting was an overwhelming success, with a stunning 575 trade members and 500 consumers attending. Perceptibly, the IPOB movement is building momentum as it has begun to mature. In addition to NYC and San Francisco, IPOB tastings were held in Houston, Osaka and Tokyo this year.

What started as a whim—a conversation of some top sommeliers as to the future of California Pinot and Chardonnay—has blossomed into one of our most revered industry tastings. IPOB is an association of 33 California wineries, founded in 2011 by Rajat Parr (Wine Director of Mina Group restaurants, Partner at RN74 in San Francisco & Seattle, and Partner/Proprietor of Domaine de la Côte and Sandhi wines) and Jasmine Hirsch (Sales & Marketing at Hirsch Vineyards). IPOB was created to promote wineries that seek to produce elegant, balanced Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. To become an IPOB member, wineries are chosen by an annual blind tasting conducted by a panel of two journalists, an educator/sommelier, a winemaker and a wine director. When tasting, the panel knows only the vintage and county of origin. IPOB has no minimum alcohol levels or mandatory winemaking methods, but wines are limited to California Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

A month later, I organized a tasting of IPOB Chardonnay and Pinot Noir at NYC's **Terroir Tribeca** with a group of ten influential wine trade buyers. IPOB wines have entered a competitive U.S. wine market during a period when pricing pressure from low-production vintages has kept Burgundies expensive.

"The majority of the wines on my list are American. Three years ago, I noticed people began spending less on American Chardonnay and Pinot. They will spend \$80–90, but invest \$50–60 more on Premier Cru Burgundy. Now, I can sell an American wine with the confidence that, if they're French wine lovers, it can stand on its own," observed Irene Justiniani, Beverage Director at Bar Americain.

The group felt most IPOB wines are priced above a level that would make them "gateway wines" for younger or inexperienced consumers, yet there are avid, receptive, experienced wine buyers for IPOB wines, which have continued to sell well. Jeffrey Patten, owner of Flatiron Wines in NYC's Flatiron District, noted, "There's a growing interest in these wines. Some [veteran wine buyers who drink 'big flavor' California Pinots like Marcassin, Kistler, Kosta Browne] and are more exposed to Burgundy, now they're trying these wines."

"The customer who appreciates these wines is willing to spend \$40, 50, 60. Most of the time, people who are looking for an 'entry level' Chardonnay want oaky, buttery, over-the-top wines, anyway," stated Jennifer DiDomizio, owner of California Wine Merchants, a boutique shop in NYC's Financial District.

Charles Puglia, Wine Director of Blue Hill at Stone Barns, reflected on the growing interest of his guests in IPOB wines: "It's a matter of slowly pushing people outside of what they normally drink from California. It's suggesting that these wines are going to be better with their food, overall. Better acid usually trans-



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Arnaud Tronche from Racines NYC has IPOB wines on the list. "We're a French restaurant. Guests want to try something French. But when we poured Sandhi Santa Rita Hills Chard by the glass. It worked very well; people loved it. It's not as big, and it's a good way to interest them in something that's a bit different than a big, buttery California Chardonnay."



Charles Puglia, Wine Director of Blue Hill at Stone Barns in Tarrytown, NY.
"It's a matter of slowly pushing people outside of what they normally drink from California. We have a big range of styles on the list—you'll find wines like Marcassin—but by and large the IPOB and similar-style producers get more real estate on our list. They mesh better with our food, in particular."



Jennifer DiDomizio is the owner of California Wine Merchants in NYC.



Christy Canterbury, MW.



Jeffrey Patten, owner of Flatiron Wines & Spirits, NYC.

lates to better food pairing. These are great 'stepping stones' to wines from the Old World, because the flavors aren't quite so obvious, the textures aren't so rich and the alcohol isn't so high. We have a big range of styles on the list—you'll find wines like Marcassin—but by and large the IPOB and similar-style producers get more real estate on our list. They mesh better with our food, in particular."

Bernard Sun is Brand Director, French Portfolio at Kobrand Corp. and a restaurant consultant. He oversaw the beverage program for the renowned Jean-Georges Restaurant Group for nearly ten years. "We had an international clientele," he offered; "guests came from all over the world. I liked to have a few IPOB wines on the list because they're a good option for Europeans. When they come here, they love to try American wines. They've heard all about them, but they're difficult to get over there. Usually, I'll ask 'Would you like something in a classic California style (buttery, oaky) or something more French or European (more acidity or minerality)?' IPOB wines have a more Old World palate."

Arnaud Tronche is Partner and Beverage Director at Racines NY, one of New York's hottest restaurants. "I have a few IPOB wines on the list. We're a French restaurant. Guests are used to domestic wines, but when they come, they want to try something French. We poured Sandhi Santa Rita Hills Chard by the glass. It worked very well; people loved it. It's not as big, and it's a good way to interest them in something that's a bit different than a big, buttery California Chardonnay." Arnaud liked the Copain DuPratt Chard 2013. However, for the same price, he felt the IPOB Chards were a bit too forward, ripe, and lacked the texture of Burgundies.

Christy Canterbury, MW found that, overall, most IPOB Chards showed "a lot of 'leesy-ness' that overtakes the expression of fruit, and sometimes the wines are lacking a bit of energy because they're not entirely balanced." Standouts were the Liquid Farms La Hermana 2013 and White Hill 2013, which showed "harmony, deliciousness, exuberance and balance." She also "loved the Sandhi Chards, which are always off-the-charts, brilliant and fantastic."

Tristan Prat-Vincent, Wine Director at the Park Hyatt New York, said, "I have a non-conservative list and a conservative clientele [who come from everywhere, at all ages and income levels]. There's something for everybody. My most expensive Pinot is \$200. I have a bunch of IPOB wines on the list. It's nice to introduce guests to IPOB wines, which have some California fruit but without the heaviness. These wines actually make it easier to sell more than one bottle. Wines with more moderate alcohol drink faster. Whether it's a Chardonnay or Pinot, if it's a three- or four-top, they're not just stuck at that one bottle that's so alcoholic and heavy that they're done. You can get that second bottle sale much more easily with these kinds of wines. They're much easier to drink with your meal. You can either have that expensive, high-octane \$200 bottle of Pinot or you can get two \$125 bottles with more moderate alcohol. At the end, the customer perceives a better value. They pay less and get more."

For the Pinots, the group found Copain "easy to understand," while Knez Anderson Valley, Demuth and Cerise Vineyard 2012s were "beautifully structured, with Old World textures, earthy and rustic." Alternately, Drew Gatekeepers, Morning Dew Ranch 2013s and Balo Vineyard 2012 were "very California, pure, forward, fresh and expressive," while Peay Sonoma Coast 2013, Scallop Shelf 2012 and Pomarium 2013 showed a "nice balance between New World fruit and Old World earthy-ness and acidity." Calera's Central Coast 2013 was "super accessible, charming and easy to like."

Finally, the group was encouraged by the IPOB style of California wines, which represents a different, potent option aside from the classic 'big flavor' to offer guests and wine consumers. Everyone left the tasting interested in continuing to follow the evolution of IPOB and its great potential to improve the quality of California wines. S