



WINE NOTES

By Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

POINTS OF ORIGIN

Reader Rob Kaplan of Santa Monica, Calif., wrote to complain about the 2006 vintage of Beringer "Founders' Estate" Pinot Noir. Last year, in a column about American Pinot Noir under \$20, one of our favorites was the 2005 vintage of that wine. In that same column, we added that "we were surprised to find Pinot Noirs from Camelot, Echelon and Beaulieu that looked just like they always did—except for the 'Vin de Pays' in small letters at the bottom of the label, which shows it's actually a French wine."

Mr. Kaplan recently went to his store to get a bottle of the Beringer Pinot and, when looking closely on the label for the new vintage, discovered that, unlike the 2005, it was made from Italian grapes. The label looks very much like it used to, except now it says "Provincia di Pavia" on the front and, on the back, says "Product of Italy." At some stores, both on the shelf and online, it is found among California wines.

There is an ocean of surplus wine sloshing around the world—so much so in France, for instance, that they're distilling some of it—and an increasing amount of it is headed to U.S. shores as bulk wine. Some of it can go into wines that are labeled simply as "American," because those wines can contain up to 25 percent foreign wine. And some of the wine is being finished and bottled in the U.S., often by big companies with international reach. That's the case with Beringer, which is owned by Australian giant Foster's Group.

A spokeswoman for Beringer told us

that the 2006 Founders' Estate on shelves might be from California, Italy or France. Beringer had such trouble finding enough Pinot fruit at an appropriate price point—Founders' Estate costs about \$10—that it quickly sold out of the California wine and then imported French and Italian wine in bulk. "At that price point, we couldn't get our hands on enough grapes to satisfy demand," she told us. The wine was finished here with an eye toward making the three bottlings consistent, with a "fruit-forward" style, she said. The French wine is from the Languedoc region and the Italian wine is from the Lombardy region. Both have some Syrah and Carignane.

So how is the Italian Beringer? It's quite light and, like Beaujolais, best with a chill. It's a pleasant-enough gulping wine, but somewhat watery and lacking the core of vibrant fruit of the 2005 from California. For the 2007 vintage, Beringer Founders' Estate Pinot was sourced from France and California, but not Italy, the spokeswoman said.

Other big wineries are also making lower-end Pinot from imported bulk wine and also using, with minor alterations, the traditional labels they've used for their California Pinot. It seems to us that if a wine store has a shelf that's clearly marked "California," you should expect that the wines there will be from California. But either because of a store's laziness or an intention to mislead, that may not be the case. So if you want to make sure the Pinot you're buying is made from California wine, be sure to look at the label closely.

Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column. Our email address is wine@wsj.com.

