

'Sideways' Gives Pinot Noir a Star Label

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The Pinot Noir repartee between the characters Miles and Maya — played by Paul Giamatti and Virginia Madsen — in the Oscar-nominated film "Sideways" has helped spur dizzying sales of the red wine during a lingering U.S. glut, according to wine experts.

U.S. filmgoers are salivating over the scene in which Giamatti's character — a neurotic, failing author — evangelizes Pinot Noir's subtle delicacy to Madsen's character in an attempt to wow her with his wine knowledge.

"People come in and immediately say, 'Where's the Pinot Noir?' " said Steve Villani, manager of Columbus Circle Liquors in New York. "After a while, we began to ask them if they saw the movie, and they laugh out loud and say yes."

As the box-office hit generated a buzz through the holidays, wine drinkers bought 22% more Pinot Noir in the four weeks ended Jan. 15 than the year before, ACNielsen data show. The big winner is **Constellation Brands** Inc.'s Blackstone Pinot Noir from California, with year-over-year sales jumping 147% in the 12 weeks after the film hit theaters Oct. 22.

"People have really latched onto the romance of the scene, which made Pinot the star, no doubt about it," said Phil Lynch, spokesman for Louisville, Ky., alcoholic beverage producer **Brown-Forman** Inc., which owns Fetzer Vineyards and Bolla.

The Pinot Noir grape, a Burgundy variety, requires a notoriously huge amount of attention from the grower, which makes getting the wine's taste just right extremely difficult — something Giamatti waxes about during the scene.

"People in the know graduate up to Pinot Noir as the ultimate red wine, but the buzz around this movie has helped infrequent wine consumers try it immediately," said Jon Fredrikson, president of Gomberg, Fredrikson & Associates, a Woodside, Calif., wine consulting firm.

Sales of Pinot Noir were up 50% after the movie's release for Napa Valley's Diageo Chateau & Estate Wines, a unit of **Diageo**, and up 10% for Brown-Forman. The companies wouldn't say whether the Pinot Noir sales hurt sales of other wines or affected bottom lines, but they welcomed any help from Hollywood that pulled grapes from the vine and put them into bottles.

U.S. wine producers have been hurt by a grape surplus, competition from Australian imports and

such inexpensive wines as the Charles Shaw label, popularly known as Two-Buck Chuck.

"Anything that moves cases these days is great," said Brown-Forman's Lynch. "This movie could help Pinot Noir replace Merlot as the new hot red wine."

Constellation planned to sell 25,000 cases of Blackstone Pinot in 2004, but instead sold 46,000, spokeswoman Lisa Farrell said.

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