

**No Scores,
Just Great
Noirs**

PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinoaficianado

Volume 5, Issue 22

February 3, 2006

On the Pinot Trail Again

Last week the Prince heeded the call and resumed his missionary work directed at finding great Pinot Noirs. Some refer to it as a search for the Holy Grail. I stocked my rented **PinoT** Cruiser with plenty of Pinot, stemware and copies of the *PinotFile* to pass out to converts along the way.

I had to score wines on a 100 point scale for the Pinot Noir Shootout. It was against my principles and I will be spending extra time in the confession booth in the coming Sundays. Sometimes you just have to do what you have to do.

I like what Tim Atkin MW wrote in *The World of Fine Wine*, Issue 7, 2005: "My feeling is that numbers should be treated with suspicion. They are not excathedra pronouncements, despite what some halfwits may claim. They are a subjective opinion given on a given day about a given wine. Nothing less, but certainly nothing more." Amen.



This trip took me north to the Russian River Valley again. Noted English wine writer Jancis Robinson declared at the International Pinot Noir Conference in New Zealand, "After France, the best Pinot Noir in the world is being grown in Russian River Valley." She's got that right. Maybe I would add the Sonoma Coast as well.

My base of operations was Sebastopol, a farm town that has it all for me. Oh there are many attractors for the more sophisticated towns of Sonoma and Healdsburg. But Sebastopol remains unspoiled and devoid of hordes of tourists on weekends. Sebastopol has everything a man could want: A great bistro (K & L) with an owner

who loves Pinot and stocks his wine list with numerous local Pinot jewels; a wondrous and unpretentious bakery (Village Bakery) that turns out the best pastries I have ever had anywhere including France (the bear claws are not for sissies and come from robust, healthy bears);



a real record store (Incredible Records) with vinyl LPs and a mini rock-and-roll museum; a gourmet market (Fiesta) and a great Mexican restaurant (Martha's Kitchen). Famous Pinot Noir vineyards and wineries are but a short bike ride away.



This trip was not all play, however. I had received an invitation from Barbara and John Drady (Affairs of the Vine) to join a testing panel for the 4th Annual 2006 Pinot Noir Shootout. The panel this year was made up of 15 women and 15 men including noted wine professionals Lynne Char Bennett, wine writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Virginie Boone, wine features writer for the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, Leslie Sbrocco, author of *Wine for Women*, Ellen Landis, sommelier at the Ritz Carlton Half Moon Bay, Alder Yarrow, wine writer for *Vinography*, Skip Hanson and David Jones, wine writers and educators for Wine Works, and Aaron Luna, wine buyer for Oakville Grocery, San Francisco. Nearly 250 Pinot Noirs from around the world were submitted for judging with the majority coming from California.

This year the Pinot Noir Shootout added a new twist. Judging was assessed to explore the reactions and preferences of women versus men with regards to Pinot Noir. Do women and men prefer different styles of Pinot Noir? I attended one of the six preliminary judgings at Barbara's house where 32 Pinot Noirs were tasted blind and deliberately over four flights of eight wines.



The final 64 Pinot Noirs were judged at the Warwick Regis Hotel in San Francisco on Monday, October 30. The 30 finalists will be showcased at a Passionate About Pinot Noir Summit at the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco on March 11, 2006 for consumers, press and trade. The results and comments and reactions to the judged wines will be delineated by gender on the Affairs of the Vine website (www.affairsofthevine.com).

Believe me, judging 64 Pinot Noirs in one day is a serious undertaking. Some Pinots were woodier than a witch's broomstick and others had more t 'n' a than a striptease by Dita Von Teese. Fortunately during the lunch break there was beer available and it tasted damn good. It is said that it takes a lot of beer to make great wine - I say it takes plenty of beer to taste wine. Kidding aside, the overall quality of the wines submitted for judging was stellar. I did have a few observations:

- * There is considerable bottle variation evident. Several bottles during the judging had to be replaced because of off aromas, TCA, and just plain weirdness. This explains how a wonderful drinking experience may be followed a week later by a disappointing one from the same Pinot Noir. Hopefully the 'best' bottle of a wine is available for judging but this obviously is not always the case.
- * Judges scores for the same wine can vary considerably. The wines in this competition were judged on a 100 point scale. It was not uncommon for scores to vary from 78-90 for the same wine from a group of eight judges. This is why wine scores from a single wine critic can be misleading for they only represent the preference of one palate one moment in time. More sensitive tasters (a larger percentage are women) have the volume turned up in the taste qualities of wine and they are hyper-sensitive to bitterness, preferring wines that are more mild in flavor. Less sensitive tasters need to turn the volume up, so they look for the big extracted wines.
- * Aromas are key to evaluating a large number of wines in one setting. The nose does not fatigue like the palate. It is difficult to evaluate the taste and texture or roundness of a wine after several wines because tannins and acids seem more prominent and the fruit seems more flabby. A wine that is high in tannins will linger on in the palate interfering with subsequent evaluations.

I did survive five days in the Russian River Valley quite nicely. I tasted nearly 150 Pinot Noirs overall and lived to tell about it. Upon arriving home, however, my wife looked at me strangely when I find myself sniffing, swirling, tasting and spitting all liquids including milk, juice and Pepsi. I may need help eventually.

During the Pinot Noir Shootout judging there were certain wines that stood out for me. These are not necessarily the favorites of the entire judging panel and the overall results will not be reported until March 11, 2006. A number of the wines are from the 2004 vintage and have not been released. Many will be generally available soon but several are produced in very small quantities and may not be around too long after this newsletter is published. I have divided the Pinot Noirs into two groups: "Heaven & Paradise" (Pinots to swoon over) and "Knocking at Heaven's Door" (Pinots that are close to great). The comments on each wine are from my tasting notes.

You will notice that I refer to some of the best Pinot Noirs as "complete wines." This is my ultimate badge of quality and my highest accolade. A complete wine has all of the following attributes.

Nose: A complete wine will have more than one family of aromas (fruits, flowers, forest floor, spices)

Taste: Taste is the progression of mouth sensations as the wine passes from the tip of the tongue to the back of the mouth and is swallowed or spat out. A complete wine will have more than one family of flavors. All of the flavors are in harmony.

Texture: Also called mouth feel, unctuousness and roundness (*moelleux*). It is the tactile sense of wine on the mouth, tongue and throat. Very hard to describe, but complete wines have great texture. For Pinot Noir a soft and smooth texture is frequently preferred. Silky textures give Pinot Noir its sexiness.

Finish: There are two kinds: aromatic referring to how long aromas last on the palate after the wine is swallowed or spat out and gustative indicating which taste (acidity, tannin, alcohol or roundness) leaves a lasting impression. A complete wine will have a long aromatic finish lasting several seconds and an appealing taste at the end.

Balance (Harmony): Balance refers to the relative levels of acidity, alcohol, tannins and roundness that are felt in the mouth. Aromas have nothing to do with balance. A well-balanced wine has all of these elements in equal amounts with no element sticking out. A complete wine has balance. If a wine is unbalanced at the start, it will always be so no longer how long you age it.

Aftertaste: Often confused with finish. An aftertaste is always a defect in wine. Some after tastes include metallic, bitter and sulfur. A complete wine has no aftertaste.



Heaven & Paradise

2004 Buena Vista Carneros Dijon Clones Ramal Vineyard Pinot Noir 450 cases, \$38. Wow, I love this nose which reminds me of a hot fresh-baked cherry pie flavored with cinnamon. The fruit is red and succulent. Perfectly balanced. Did some one slip in a La Tache?

2004 Casa de Caballos Vineyards Paso Robles Pinot Noir 63 cases, \$24. The fruits here are nicely presented. Crushed cherries and plums with some forest floor. Soft mouth feel. Finishes long with fine coating tannins.

2002 Copeland Creek Vineyards Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 450 cases, \$30. A pretty and assertive nose of strawberries and cranberries and nutmeg. Cherry flavors with a nice touch of Oriental spice. Finishes clean with good length. A complete wine.

2004 Davis Family Vineyards Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 800 cases, \$35. A provocative Pinot nose. Bright fruit flavors nicely composed. Balanced. Doesn't shout but hums nicely. Complete in every way.

2004 De La Montanya Christine's Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir <100 cases, \$38. The striking mouth feel is all velveteen and the wine finishes with a blast of fresh cherries and spice. A complete wine. Tasted in preliminaries and finals blind and picked out as a favorite both times. Also tasted in the winery's tasting room and I want to move in.

2004 Gary Farrell Russian River Valley Selection Pinot Noir 7099 cases, \$34. The nose is very sexy. Cherries leap out. Love at first sip. A hint of cola and spice. Finishes like greased lightning. A winner.

2004 Laetitia Estate Arroyo Grande Valley Pinot Noir 5000 cases \$20. Captivating nose of ripe cherries and Oriental spices. Really nice balance. Aromas last an eternity on the finish. Is that \$20 a misprint?

2003 Laetitia La Colline Vineyard Arroyo Grande Valley Pinot Noir 240 cases, \$60. Appealing nose of cherries, sandalwood and dust. The mouth feel is rich and full. A lingering finish. I wanted to swallow this one.

2004 Lost Canyon Winery Dutton Ranch Morelli Lane Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 410 cases, \$38. An elegant nose of red fruits that pulls you in. Lip-smacking fruits with a kiss of acid. A harmonious wine.

2004 MacPhail Pratt Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 235 cases, \$56. Hi-toned aromas of cherry compote and tea. Yummy red fruits on a balanced platform. Finishes with a long persistence and a final impression of freshness. A Pinot to envy.

2004 Patz & Hall Hyde Vineyard Carneros Pinot Noir 985 cases, \$55. A deep cherry nose that is all Pinot Noir. Luscious Pinot fruits. Finishes as smooth as a baby's bottom. Nicely balanced.

2004 Reynolds Family Winery Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 400 cases, \$45. Lovely cherry pie nose with a hint of sandalwood. A mouth-filling onslaught of Pinot fruits and spice with a tangy finish. Very cool.

2003 Williams Selyem Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 3020 cases, \$42. A classic RRV nose. Soft and silky texture. A fine example of what all the fuss is over RRV magic.

2003 Woodenhead Cellars Wiley Vineyard Anderson Valley Pinot Noir 310 cases, \$45. Cinnamon, spice and roses - Wow I'm in love. A complete wine with impeccable balance. Want to go steady?

Knocking on Heaven's Door

2002 Arcadian Fiddlestix Vineyard Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir 1200 cases, \$50. Dark fruits, earth and a kiss of smoke in the nose. Aromas make you want to stick your nose deep into the glass. A big style.

2003 Burrell School Vineyards & Winery Veranda Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir 675 cases, \$36. An appealing nose of flowers and dried fruits. Fine tannins. A well-schooled Pinot.

Balletto (Laguna Oaks Vineyards & Winery) Estate Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 1040 cases, \$24. A seductive Pinot nose is the wine's best feature. Both red and dark fruits are flavorful in this bigger and riper style of Pinot. The finish lingers.

2003 David Bruce Winery Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir 420 cases, \$45. A big fruit-dominated nose. A lengthy finish of deep dark Pinot fruits. A big wine not in my favorite style but stands on quality for what it is.

2003 Derbes Wines Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 210 cases, \$40. A pretty nose of spicy red fruits. Flavors of cherries, raspberry and subtle smoke presented on a soft pillow. A delicate style.

2002 Fort Ross Vineyard & Winery Symposium Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 290 cases, \$28. This wine is all about finesse and elegance. As silky as fine lingerie.

2004 Hagafen Napa Valley Estate Pinot Noir 1425 cases, \$32. A unique graham cracker nose. Decent palate of fruits with toasty oak overtones. A distinctive style that is well-fashioned.

2004 Halleck Vineyards 3 Sons Cuvee Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 648 cases, \$38. Lovely Pinot fruits including Bing cherry and Santa Rosa plum with a kiss of vanilla. Full mouth feel.

2004 Halleck Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 648 cases, \$38. Tres Pinot nose. Luscious red fruits slide down easily. Dusty tannins, good acidity.

2004 Lost Canyon Winery Saralee's Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 340 cases, \$38. Fresh strawberries leap out. Enticing flavors are still subdued in this young wine. Refreshing acidity. Nice to know you.

2004 La Crema Winery Anderson Valley Pinot Noir 2000 cases, \$29. A bigger style that is well made. A charming Pinot nose has a touch of alcohol. The acidity here sparkles.

2004 Lucas & Lewellen Vineyards Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir 972 cases, \$17. Attractive aromas of dark cherries, crushed raspberries and violets. The flavors duplicate the nose. A long, alluring finish. A steal.

2004 MacPhail Goodin Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 296 cases, \$54. Lovely aromas of cherries and cranberries. The same fruits are featured in the flavors along with blueberries and a kiss of oak. A lingering finish.

2004 Pellegrini Family Vineyards Olivet Lane Estate 2900 cases, \$24. Interesting nose of herbs, cola, spice and cherries. Attractive dried fruit flavors. The finish has plenty of zip and zing.

2004 Reynolds Family Winery Los Carneros Pinot Noir 580 cases, \$45. Perfectly ripe red and black fruits lead to a lip-smacking finish. Still a Lolita and a bit tannic on the finish. Well-crafted.

2003 Stephen's Cellar San Luis Obispo County William Cain Vineyard Pinot Noir 230 cases, \$1. A pretty and elegant wine. Flavors of juicy red fruits are ahead of the shy but enticing nose at this point.

2003 Tandem Winery Van der Kamp Vineyard Sonoma Mountain Pinot Noir 409 cases, \$48. Aromas of berries and roses. Plenty of ripe black cherry fruit well-integrated with toasty oak. Nice weight.

