

**PINO: Price is
no object**

PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinotphiles

Volume 6, Issue 54

March 3, 2008

Inside this issue:

Ambullneo	7
Cottonwood Canyon	10
Bianchi Winery	14
Kenneth Volk Vnyds	15
Small Sips of Santa Maria Valley	16
Pinot Briefs	18
Long & Winding Pinot Road, Part VI	20

Santa Maria Valley

In a quest to try to satisfy my pinotlust, I traveled recently to the Santa Maria Valley and discovered a region that is quietly, but quickly, becoming a major destination for wine enthusiasts. Located in the northernmost reaches of Santa Barbara County, it is an appellation that has been overshadowed by its neighbors to the south, the Santa Ynez Valley and Santa Rita Hills, whose popularity has been fueled by the post-*Sideways* Pinot craze. Part of *Sideways* was actually filmed on the Foxen Canyon Wine Trail in Santa Maria Valley but this has been largely unrecognized. To the north, the nearby Arroyo Grande Valley and Edna Valley in San Luis Obispo County have assumed more notoriety for cool-climate wine enthusiasts, in part because of a more publicized and established wine growing history, and in part due to the close proximity to the town of San Luis Obispo.

The Santa Maria Valley encompasses the cities of Santa Maria and Guadalupe and includes the unincorporated communities of Orcutt, Sisquoc and Tepusquet. The Valley is tucked between the Sierra Madre Mountains to the east and the Pacific Ocean coastline to the west. 25% of Santa Barbara County's population resides here and Santa Maria recently eclipsed its more famous neighbor to the south, Santa Barbara, in population. Moderate housing prices (median \$1.05 million in Santa Barbara, \$455,000 in Santa Maria) have driven young people to Santa Maria, only 75 miles to the north of Santa Barbara. Santa Maria is still clearly an agricultural town, but it is becoming a power center in Santa Barbara County.

Santa Maria was settled in 1975 and originally was known as Grangerville, then Central City. The name was changed to Santa Maria in 1885 because mail was being mistakenly routed to Central City, Colorado.

Perhaps the area is best known for "Santa Maria Style BBQ." Tri-tip is seasoned only with salt, pepper and garlic powder (no sauce) and cooked on an open grill over red oak wood. Spanish rancheros, who began cooking with red oak 100 years ago, discovered the unique flavor this wood imparts to meat. On any weekend, large barbecues are set up on many street corners in Santa Maria and tri-tip is offered with salsa and the regionally favorite pinquito beans.

The Santa Maria Valley is part of California's agricultural heartland, known for strawberry fields and vegetables (broccoli, cauliflower, celery and lettuce). Over the last 10 years, there has been a noteworthy growth in the local wine industry. Vineyard plantings have increased from about 20,000 acres in 1999 to the current total of 50,000 acres.

The contrast between the cities of Santa Barbara and Santa Maria are striking. People in Santa Maria drive pick-up trucks, in Santa Barbara they prefer German sports cars. Santa Maria's cuisine is BBQ and Mexican food, Santa Barbara's is California chic. Most notably, residents of Santa Barbara drink Pinot Noir, those in Santa Maria make it.

Modern viticulture in the Santa Maria Valley dates to the 1960s, when, according to Victor Geraci (*Salud! The Rise of Santa Barbara's Wine Industry*), Uriel Nielson and Bill De Mattei planted more than 100 acres of vineyards in the Santa Maria Valley. They were attracted to the cooler region I and II Santa Maria and Santa Ynez Valleys. By 1964 they had planted Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Johannisberg Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, and Sylvaner. The vineyard manager for their project was Bill Collins who believed the area could grow wine grapes to rival the Napa Valley. His prediction was born out when Christian Brothers Winery promptly contracted for the grapes shortly after the vineyard was developed. A number of other growers followed soon after including James Flood III (Rancho Sisquoc), George A. Lucas and Sons (Tepusquet Rancho lands), Jack Niven (Paragon Vineyards), and the Newhall family (Suey Ranch - 1,000 acres by the end of 1973). In 1971, the 90-acre Camelot Vineyard and the 533-acre Katherine's Vineyard were established on Santa Maria Mesa Road. Dijon clones of Pinot Noir were first planted in Santa Barbara County in the Santa Maria Valley.

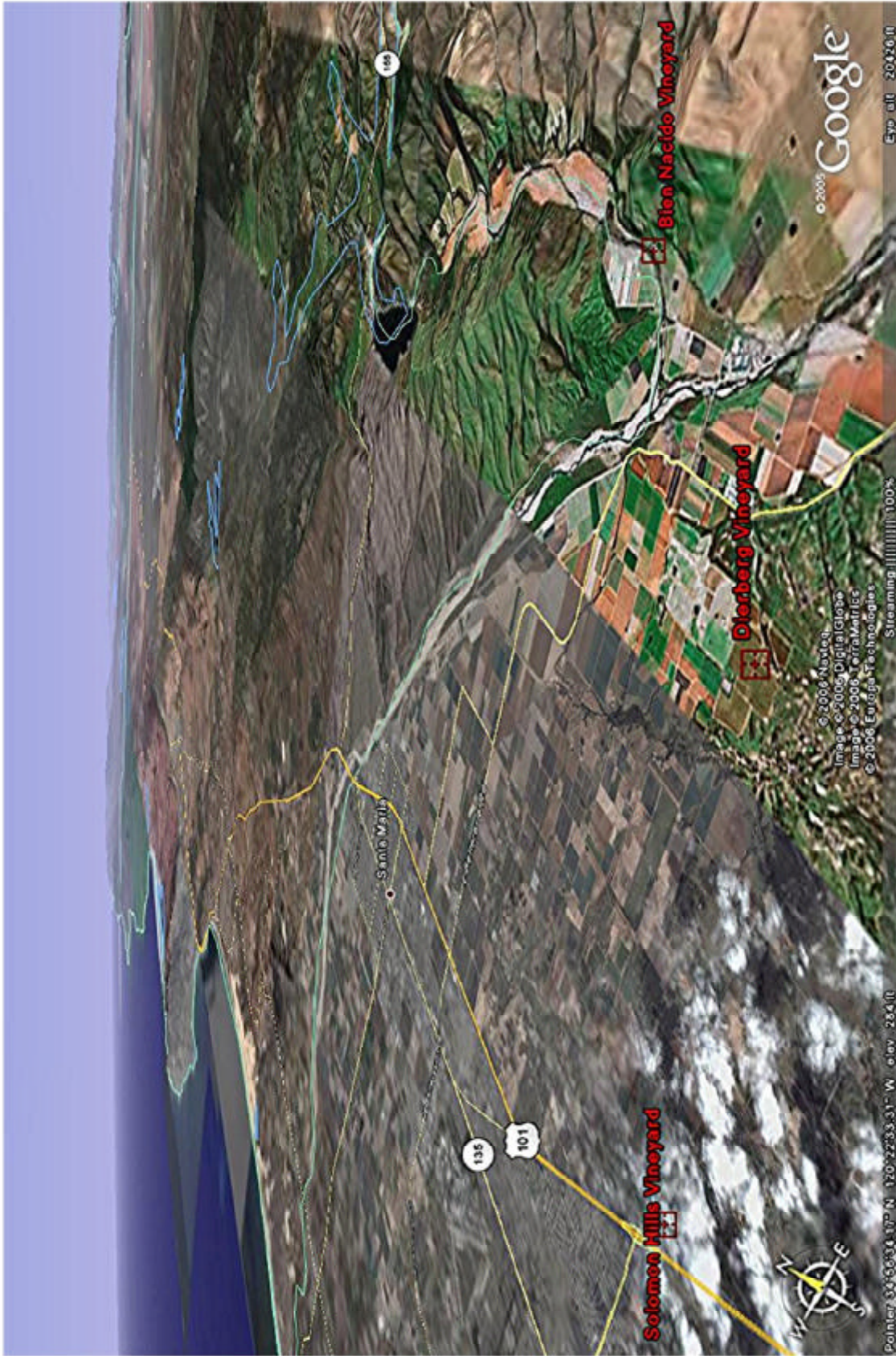
Bob and Steve Miller were fourth generation members of the Broome family who had lost much of their coastal agricultural holdings to military base expansions. They wanted to replace the family's land holdings and purchased the 35,000 Rancho Tepusquet from the Allan Hancock family in 1968. Initially they planted row crops on the land but as neighboring vineyard developments were prospering, they hired noted viticulturist Dale Hampton to plant 640 acres of Chardonnay, Merlot and Pinot Noir in 1972. Hampton pioneered the use of galvanized steel stakes and guide wires for trellising in vineyards and people began to call Tepusquet the "Cadillac vineyard." This eventually led the Millers to name their vineyard Bien Nacido, Mexican for "being born with a silver spoon in your mouth."

The Bien Nacido Vineyard became a source of premium wine grapes for multiple noted California wineries and to this day remains the most visible Santa Maria Valley vineyard. Many wineries built their reputation on the wines they produced from Bien Nacido Vineyard including Au Bon Climat, Hitching Post, Lane Tanner, Qupe, Richard Longoria Wines, Tantara and Whitcraft. Bien Nacido became a brand and a seal of quality. Steve Heimoff remarked in the *Wine Enthusiast*, "Bien Nacido is one of those vineyards that's so famous, it's almost a brand in itself."

The location of the Bien Nacido Vineyard proved ideal for cool-climate wine grapes (see Google map on page 4). Most of California's vineyards are shielded from the Pacific Ocean by the state's north-south coastal range of mountains. Just west of the Santa Maria Valley, however, a line of east-west mountains exposes the Valley to the maritime influence of the Pacific Ocean which lies only seventeen miles to the west.. The result is that temperatures are moderate in the summer, evenings and mornings are cool, and the grapes ripen slowly.

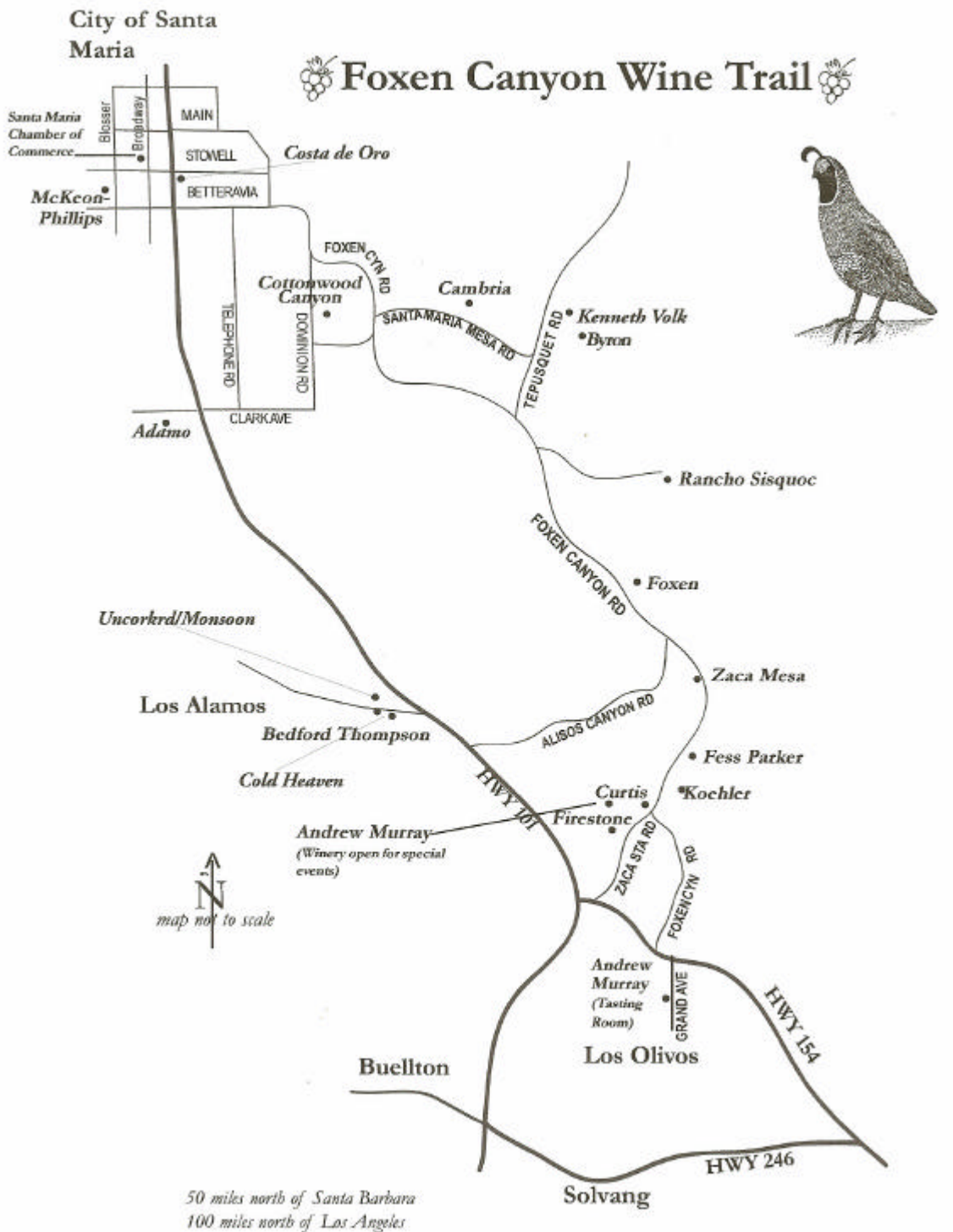
Bob and Steve Miller were astute businessman who developed a method of custom growing wine grapes for nurturing small winemakers. Bien Nacido now sells grapes to fifty-five wineries. Many of the winemakers lease the same rows and same blocks every year. There are 28 blocks of Pinot Noir, roughly 10 acres to the block, all planted with varying rootstock, clones, and planting patterns. Bien Nacido Vineyards has the largest California planting of certified mother vines from University of California Davis and is one of the major viticultural nurseries in the state for certified bud wood.

Four wineries have facilities on the Bien Nacido property (Au Bon Climat, Qupe, Tantara and Ambullneo). These wineries are not open to the public but look for their wines at restaurants in the Santa Maria area and tasting rooms in Los Olivos. The Bien Nacido Vineyard management also operates Central Coast Wine Services in Santa Maria where over twenty-five boutique wineries, such as Hitching Post, Lane Tanner, and Red Car, share equipment, storage and a laboratory. A similar facility is also open in Paso Robles (Paso Robles Wine Services). Bien Nacido Vineyards offers limited tours to groups (contact Nicholas Miller at 805-969-5803). Each year a Collector's Case of wines is offered from Bien Nacido Vineyard (and in 2007 its other two vineyard properties, Solomon Hills and French Camp). The 2007 Collector Case is now available (www.biennacidovineyards.com).



SANTA MARIA VALLEY SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

The Foxen Canyon Wine Trail (www.foxencanyonwinetrail.com) has been the biggest tourist draw to the region. Foxen Canyon Road winds itself through picturesque rolling hills from the town of Los Olivos in the south to Santa Maria in the north. This two-lane highway has 13 wineries dotting its length, many of which like Foxen, Zaca Mesa, Fess Parker, Byron and Cambria are household winery names.



Other than the wineries on the Foxen Canyon Wine Trail there has not been a lot to draw wine enthusiasts to Santa Maria Valley. However, as I hinted in the first paragraph of this feature, Santa Maria Valley is on the move and major changes are in the works to enhance wine tourism. Addamo Estate Vineyards was established on Clark Avenue in 2000 with the planting of 120 acres to six varietals. A tasting room and Bistro is open in nearby Old Town Orcutt (400 E Clark, hours 11-9 Tues-Fri and 11-7 Sat and Sun). I understand there are plans afoot to build a restaurant and hospitality center on the estate property in the future. The Pinot Noirs I have had from here are outstanding. Special events, tours and tastings are available (805-934-9830). Visit the website at www.addamovineyards.com. The Murphy family are partners in Ambullneo Winery and Matt Murphy is an assistant winemaker there. They have purchased a large property adjacent to Addamo Estate with magnificent views overlooking the Santa Maria Valley to the Pacific Ocean. The Pinot Noir vineyard is being planted this spring and in addition to a winery, there will be a tastefully situated tasting room and event center built on the property. Cottonwood Canyon (see page 10) will be constructing an ambitious new restaurant and events/hospitality center on the estate property.



Riverbench Vineyard and Winery is a new face in the Santa Maria Valley. The Riverbench Vineyard has been producing wine grapes for over three decades and was acquired by new owners in 2005, who have started their own boutique winery. A 1920s ranch house on the property is being renovated and converted to a tasting room which will open next month. Chuck Ortman (Meridian, Ortman Family Wines), joined Riverbench as winemaker in 2006. He had been sourcing Riverbench fruit for many years. Jim Stollberg, who also works with Dale Hampton, will be the vineyard manager. The website is www.riverbench.com.

The most visible figure in the Santa Maria Valley wine scene is James Ontiveros (photo below with hat). He is a ninth-generation California farmer and rancher who is currently the Director of Sales and Marketing for Bien Nacido Vineyard and Solomon Hills Vineyard in Santa Maria and French Camp Vineyard in Paso Robles as well as Central Coast Wine Services and Paso Robles Wine Services. He farms his own 8-acre Pinot Noir vineyard, Rancho Ontiveros, in Santa Maria Valley and consults on a number of other vineyards in the area. James knows the back roads and every nook and cranny in the Santa Maria Valley and many look to him for advice. He produces Pinot Noir under his own label, Native9, and is a partner with winemaker Paul Wilkins and Sao Anash in the Alta Maria Vineyards label.



Ambullneo Vineyards (rrruff!)

The Legend of Zorro is based on the life of Solomon Pico, a murderous bandit who camped in the Santa Maria hills. People still climb the Solomon Hills looking for treasure that Pico allegedly buried. Greg Linn, owner and winemaker of Ambullneo Vineyards, is Santa Maria's modern day Zorro. Camped out at Bien Nacido Vineyards, he is pursuing the quest for great Pinot Noir and stealing Pinot-loving hearts along the way.

Greg grew up in Jersey and you can still sense the accent. He moved to California and became a successful businessman in the mortgage business. Wine was always on the family table and when his discretionary income allowed, he began collecting Cabernet-based wines from California and France. Like many wine enthusiasts, Greg eventually transitioned from a cabphile to a burgphile and took to Burgundy seriously. His epiphany was a 1985 Domaine Romanee-Conti Romanee-St-Vivant. Now his personal wine cellar houses a large preponderance of white and red Burgundy with a little Barolo thrown in. Greg says that "If God had to select one wine to make, he would choose Pinot Noir."



Greg loves Pinot but he is also a dog fancier and the name of his winery reflects that. Ambullneo stands for **A**merican **BULL** Breeds and **NEO**politan Mastiff. The Ambullneo breed of dog is a cross between a bulldog and a European mastiff. This canine breed is fearless and powerful and moves with grace and agility. Like the Ambullneo dog, Greg's Ambullneo wine has great strength yet is graceful and is the perfect companion.

Ambullneo is a partnership between Greg and several investors, but Greg is the man in charge and makes all of the calls. He is a fanatic about quality. He says "There is more bad than good Pinot Noir and Burgundy," and he is clearly focused on the good. He spares no expense, declaring he is not interested in making "a fast, slapdash, budget wine." Greg does merciless green cropping in the vineyard, dropping fruit often on three separate occasions. Grapes are picked at 2:00 AM. After a moderate cold soak of five days or so, fermentation proceeds with native yeast and MLF with native bacteria. Whole clusters are included in a proportion relative to the fruit of the vintage. No press wine is used in Ambullneo wines. The cooperage is top-rate - tight-grain French oak costing \$1100 a barrel. Greg insists on special heavy glass bottles, lengthy, high-quality corks, and wax-dipped tops. He knows that his consumer base is sophisticated about wine and he is committed to provide them a memorable drinking experience. Everything about the winery and the wines exudes confidence and class.

Greg started out only making blended wines, believing that a blend of multiple vineyards provided more complexity in the finished wine. He has since relented as he has been able to source special vineyard fruit and unique blocks within vineyards and now produces both blends and vineyard designate wines. His first releases were "big-babe" Pinots that Greg said, "Ain't your grandma's Pinot." Since the 2005 vintage, however, Greg has mellowed and fine-tuned his style. He picks earlier (22.8-23.2 Brix) and alcohols have fallen as a result every year since 2002 (all of the 2006 vintage are between 13.3% and 13.7% alcohol). His wines have taken on more elegance and sophistication and are more akin to the Burgundies that he holds in such high regard.

I visited Ambullneo recently and tasted through the 2006 lineup of Pinot Noirs and one 2006 Chardonnay (my "chaser."). The Pinot Noirs were still in tank, awaiting bottling. I met Greg's assistants, South African Peter Conjra and Matt Murphy (Eric Bolton also assists). We sat in the winery on a gorgeous sunny day sampling extraordinary wines that as Greg says, "Have astonishing beauty."

2006 was a challenging vintage at Ambullneo, but the wines are clearly the most successful for this winery to date. Spring through early summer brought unusually high and prolonged humidity. It was a constant scramble to stay ahead of mildew and botrytis and frequent dropping of fruit was necessitated. Judicious picking and sorting further reduced the fruit that Greg considered optimal. Total case production was down as a result. Much of the wine was sold as futures in August, 2007, but check the winery for current availability. Allocations may be necessary for future vintages as popular restaurants in California and Las Vegas snap up a large part of production.



2006 Ambullneo Mastiff Carneros Pinot Noir 400 cases, \$79. 25% Hudson Vineyard and 75% Hyde Vineyard. 35% whole cluster, 14 months in 40% new oak. Greg says it is an incarnation of a fine Chambolle Les Amoureuses. *Shy aromatics of berries and spice. Glorious berry fruit, healthy structure yet soft tannins and lively acidity. Very elegant, charming and thoroughly seductive.* Note: since the wines came from tank my notes may understate the final brilliance of these wines.

2006 Ambullneo Bulldog Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 600 cases, \$79. Mainly Santa Maria Valley fruit with some grapes from Laetitia (Arroyo Grande). 35-40% whole cluster, 40% new oak. Greg

says it is reminiscent of a Romanee-St-Vivant. This is the winery's "flagship" wine. *Bright and lively with delicious dark raspberry, clove and pepper flavors. Fine-grained tannins and brisk acidity portend a long life ahead.*

2006 Ambullneo Canis Major California Pinot Noir 135 cases, \$95. Eight barrels from northern and southern California vineyards featured in the Mastiff and Bulldog. 40% whole cluster, 45% new oak. Greg says it recalls a Latricieres Chambertin. *Darkly fruited with a floral lift and a mineral streak, this is an immensely satisfying drink with great Pinot expression that explodes on the palate and leads to a huge, lingering finish. Sturdy yet suave in texture, this wine walks the walk.*



2006 Ambullneo Solomon Hills Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir \$95. This wine was bottled as a separate vineyard designate because of the stellar fruit in this vintage. There is more clone 667 and 777 in this wine. *Dark in color, this wine leads off with a nose of dark Pinot fruits with a hint of oak. On the attack it is rich and earthy, with plentiful black cherries, plums, and herbs. There is considerable potential here but time is need for integration.*

2006 Ambullneo Bien Nacido Vineyard Block One Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 135 cases, \$119. Old Bien Nacido vines on shallow soils which yield only 1.75 tons per acre. Mt Eden clone. Greg likens it to a Musigny. *Very dark ruby in color and the deepest colored wine in the lineup. The nose is flat, grapey and funky, withholding the charm to come. The attack is beefy and gamy with prodigious truffled dark Pinot fruits. The massive fruit is front and center, and although muscular, the mouth feel is soft and the tannins well integrated. Greg loves this one. This is a wine that demands sipping and contemplation and like Musigny, needs a number of years to round out.*

2006 Ambullneo Rim Rock Vineyard Arroyo Grande Pinot Noir 100 cases, \$119. A former Syrah 1-acre vineyard that has been replanted to Pinot Noir under the direction of viticulturist Greg Phelan. Greg says think Clos de La Roche. *I had difficulty getting a handle on this one. There is no doubt that there is a mass of dark fruit here but it is hidden and brooding. Earthy, tight and unwelcoming at present, there is noticeable tannin to shed. Good acidity indicates a long life ahead.*

2006 Ambullneo Rancho Ontiveros Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 135 cases, \$119. Greg's first 100% whole cluster wine that prompts thoughts of La Tache he says. 50% new oak. This vineyard seems to provide fruit that is perfectly suited to whole cluster fermentation. *This really is a charming wine that is very approachable now. Lovely floral and oak spiced aromas. Complex flavors of black and blue fruits, forest floor, Asian five spice, and toast. Excellent balance and length with a long, chewy aftertaste. A feast and one of my favorites.*

2006 Ambullneo Solomon Hills Chardonnay 13.4% alc., 100 cases. 100% oak fermentation, 80% MLF. *Impressive for its perfect integration of oak and lively acidity. Butter aromas and flavors are only hinted at making it a very sexy drink.* There are two other Chardonnays and all three of the Chardonnays are made differently. **Fang Blanc** (340 cases) has less oak than the Solomon Hills with more acidity. **Big Paw** (340 cases) is fermented in more stainless steel and neutral oak, again with more acidity than the Solomon Hills. The last two will be better with foods like shellfish, the Solomon Hills preferable on its own or with cream sauces.

Ambullneo Vineyards website is www.ambullneovineyards.com. The wines are sold on the website, via a mailing list, and through limited retail distribution. 805-474-5858.

Cottonwood Canyon: Age Worthy Pinot

Cottonwood Canyon wines are treasured primarily by a select following who have visited the winery. The wines are only sold at the winery and to the winery's Connoisseur Club members. A small boutique winery that specializes in Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, Cottonwood Canyon was founded in 1988 by the Beko family. When the 15-year-old property was purchased, there were 46 acres of Chardonnay planted. Replanting began in 2001 and currently the 78-acre estate has 25 acres planted to Pinot Noir and fewer than 18 acres to Chardonnay (5 acres of Syrah also). There are five Pinot Noir vineyards, with Sharon's Vineyard being the oldest (1991) and High Density Vineyard (2003) the youngest.



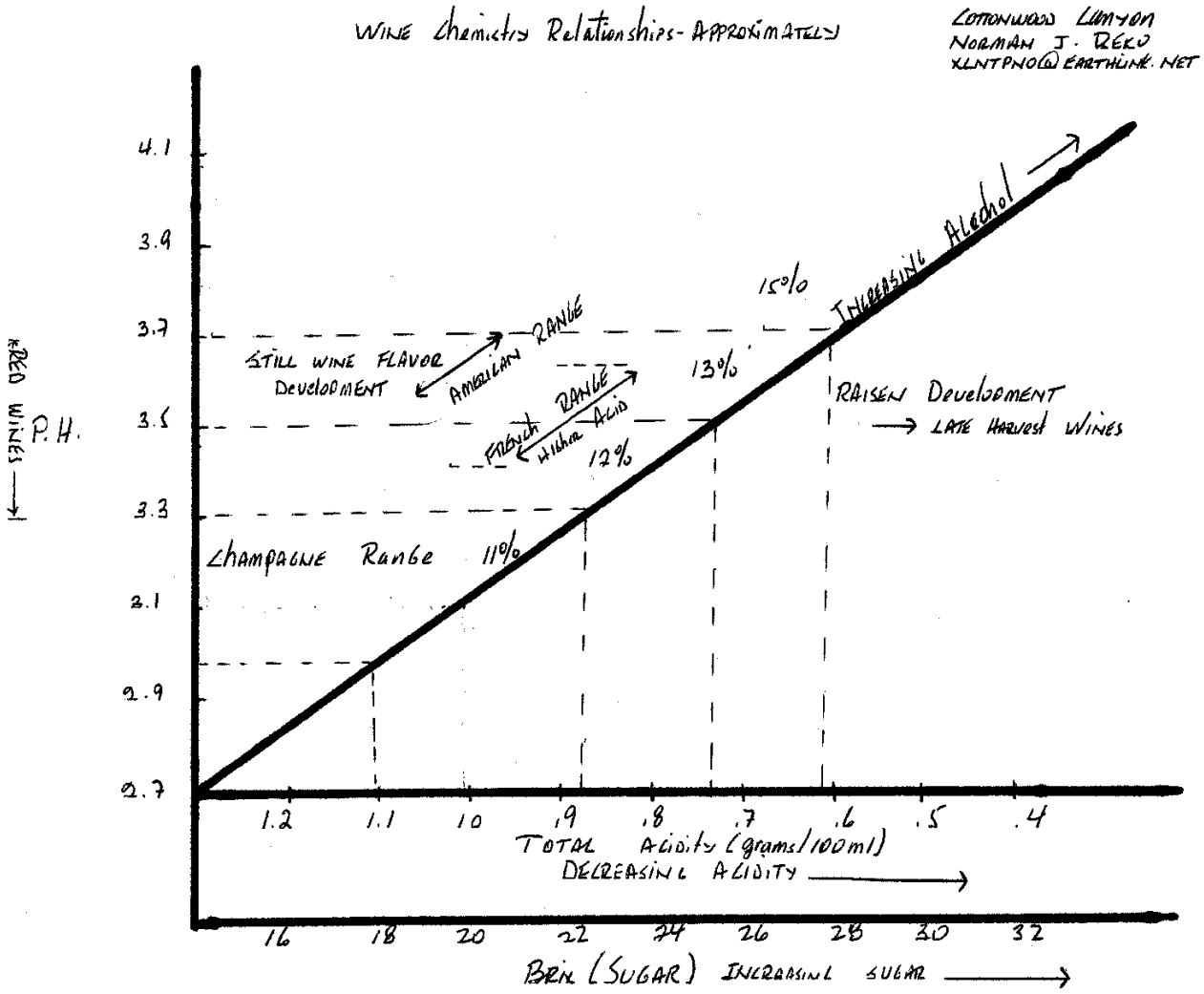
Cottonwood Canyon is located at the northern-most edge of the Foxen Canyon Wine Trail, just 19 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean resulting in significant marine climatic influence. The vineyard has cool ocean breezes throughout the day and morning and evening fog are trapped by the surrounding 7,000 foot San Rafael Mountains east of the estate. The estate vineyards sit on a flat expanse, facing in a north-south direction. The growing season is quite long, with bud-break in mid-February and ending with a mid-October harvest. Vine farming is "row-by-row and vine-by-vine," and is supervised by vineyard manager, Frederico Arredondo.

6,000 feet of caves have been carved into wall of a canyon formed by an ancient river bed. These are used for barrel storage as well as special events. A small winery and tasting room comprise the current estate buildings.



The winemaking philosophy of Norman Beko is oriented to the Burgundian paradigm of high acidity and age ability of wine. He is a staunch advocate of the fact that acid in wine is key for refreshment, food and aging. Picking commences when optimum fruit flavors are detected, usually around 24° Brix. The fruit is hand sorted in the field. The must is cold soaked for 4 to 5 days in small lots. The cap is punched down below the surface by hand. Natural yeasts drive the primary fermentation in open top bins and the wine is then transferred by gravity into French oak barrels for secondary fermentation. Due to the near perfect conditions inside the winery's high humidity/low temperature caves, there is virtually no evaporation of the wines as they age. The barrels are turned on their sides and rarely opened during the aging process which is typically 18 to 24 months. The fruit's natural high acidity in combination with cave conditions creates very long-lived and age worthy wines which develop over many years, reaching their nadir after 8 to 12 years.

The chart below is displayed on the Cottonwood Canyon website and shows the relationships between wine acidity, pH, sugar, and alcohol.



The most distinctive feature of Cottonwood Canyon is that Norman Beko believes in making wines that age and he holds back past vintages to allow his customers to taste and buy mature wines. This is highly unusual in today's wine business. I had written some remarks in the *PinotFile* back in 2007 about the fact that currently wines were being made for early consumption (an astonishingly high number of wines are consumed within 48 hours of purchase) and that there was a shrinking market for ageable wines. The idea of cellaring wines came from the popularity of Cabernet and Bordeaux twenty years ago, since these wines profited from maturing in a well-maintained cellar. Over time, however, the wine drinking public has demanded instant gratification, with little patience for holding onto wines for several years. Most wine enthusiasts have not consumed a significant number of aged wines and cannot appreciate and/or do not enjoy the secondary bouquet and flavors that develop. If they do want to drink an older vintage, they simply buy the mature wine on the secondary market. Norman wrote me and pointed out that his experience at Cottonwood has been that a significant number of his visitors find their way to his winery in order to have the opportunity to taste older vintages. The younger age group (under 30) is particularly interested, he says, because they are willing to experiment. He has noted an up tick in the ethnicity of his visitors, with more people of Hispanic, East Indian, Oriental, and to a lesser extent African American origin eager to sample wine.

The initial winemaker at Cottonwood Canyon was Kevin Volk of Wild Horse Winery fame who helped considerably in an advisory capacity. Norman has been the winemaker for the past seven years.

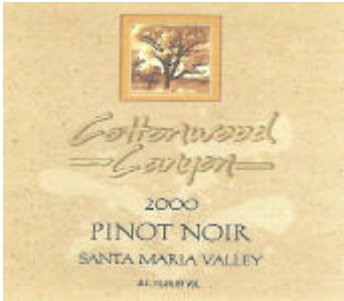
I recently visited Cottonwood Canyon and tasted through a number of Pinot Noirs starting with the 1991 vintage. The wines currently being poured in the tasting room are the 2000 Estate Pinot Noir, the 2001 Estate Pinot Noir, 2001 Elizabeth's Vista Pinot Noir as well as several library Pinot Noirs dating back to 1995. A 2000 Estate Blanc de Blanc, 2001 Estate Blanc de Noir and several Chardonnays dating back to 2000 were also available to taste. The Pinot Noirs were quite impressive for their age worthiness, all of them retaining good color and holding on to their fruit. The wines are crafted in a classic style of Pinot Noir with respectable elegance, fine textures, integrated tannins, and plenty of lift and lively acidity. The vintages beginning in 2000 show more refinement and sophistication, a reflection of the maturity of the vineyards and the winemaker's experience with his fruit. All in all, it was a very unique and gratifying experience for me. I have traveled and tasted extensively in California and I have never had the opportunity to taste such a lineup of mature Pinot Noirs like that offered at Cottonwood Canyon. Kudos to Norman and his staff!!

1991 Cottonwood Canyon Santa Barbara Pinot Noir 13.02% alc., \$65. 364 cases (750 ml), 192 cases (500 ml). Aged 19 months in 40% new French oak. Sierra Madre Vineyard. *Light ruby in color. Toast, oak and tobacco on the nose. Cranberry, red cherry and a touch of animale and funk compose the flavor profile. Palate-cleansing acidity on the finish. A dead ringer for an older Burgundy and to me the best of the older Pinots in the lineup. A treat.*

1994 Cottonwood Canyon Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 12.4% alc., 325 cases (750ml), 150 cases (500 ml). Sierra Madre Vineyard. 21 months in French oak. *A subtle hint of orange in the rim. Rich Bing cherry and spice aromas lead the show. The palate is all Pinot with red stone fruits, cranberry, herbs and green tomato flavors. The bright acidity gives the wine freshness and some residual tannins add structure. This wine is holding up remarkably well.*



1995 Cottonwood Canyon Sharon's Vineyard Estate Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 13.0% alc., \$58. *The wine has retained a pretty garnet color. The bouquet is typical for an aged Pinot Noir with shy cherry fruit complimented by oak, wet stone, spearmint and some minerality. Tart cherry and cranberry fruit flavors are a bit faded. There is crisp acidity and noticeable, but soft, tannins on the finish.*



2000 Cottonwood Canyon Estate Pinot Noir 14.37% alc., 600 cases, \$39. Sharon's Vineyard and Elizabeth's Vista Vineyard. Aged in 50% new oak. *Very slight orange-tinged rim. Bright crushed berries with a little raisin note make for pleasing aromatics. A bit rustic for me with soft berry and red stone fruits with a pastry dough and almond sidecar. Not my cup of tea.*

2000 Cottonwood Canyon Sharon's Vineyard Barrel Select Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir ? alc.. An illustration of Sharon's Vineyard by artist Michael Humphreys is on the attractive label. *Burnished red in color. A rich and heady nose displaying dark berries, raisin and new leather. Ripe cherries leap out on the palate with a hint of pepper and oak. I liked this wine a lot for its aged patina.*



2001 Cottonwood Canyon Estate Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 14.91% alc., 709 cases, \$39. The first entire vintage where the wine was left for 18 months on the lees in unopened French oak barrels. Aged for 20 months in barrel. From the estate's Sharon's Vineyard and Elizabeth's Vineyard. Just released! *Light ruby in color. Earthy scents of wet leaves, hay, charcoal, minerals and a little toast. Red stone fruits, earth and wood shed, smoke, pepper and spice and everything nice. Elegant with fine-grained tannins. An interesting and charming drink.*

2001 Cottonwood Canyon Elizabeth's Vista Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 14.2% alc., 228 cases, \$48. 18 months in French oak. Clones 2A and Freedom. *Herbs, light oak, wild berries and earthy notes in the nose are echoed in the flavors. Light in body with plenty of finesse. A lip-smacker that is easy to drink and easy to like.*

2003 Cottonwood Canyon High Density Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 13.4% alc., two barrels, 500 ml bottles. Wädenswil clone (2A). 10% Syrah used to top off barrels. *Dark purple in color. Plenty of racy red fruits and hints of vanilla and spice in the aromatics which carry through to the finish which adds a pepper note. Some unresolved tannins. Drinkable now but will only improve with time in the cellar.*

Cottonwood Canyon is located at 3940 Dominion Road, Santa Maria. The phone is 805-937-9063. The tasting room is open daily from 10-5:30. Cave tours are available regularly on weekends and by appointment on weekdays. Food pairing is offered with tasting. Several wine club options offer significant discounts on wines. The website is www.cottonwoodcanyon.com.

Bianchi Winery Pinot Noir

The Bianchi family has a winegrowing tradition dating back to 1974, when they produced wines from California's Central Valley. In 2000, Glenn Bianchi purchased 40 acres of vineyards on the east side of Paso Robles and built a beautiful winery and hospitality center on the property. The Paso Robles area has become widely known for the warm-climate grapes that thrive there, but Pinot Noir has only prospered in the western reaches of the Paso Robles AVA, close to the maritime influence of the Pacific Ocean. To produce an ultra-premium Pinot Noir as part of Bianchi Winery's Signature Selection lineup of wines from purchased grapes, Glenn Bianchi sought out grapes from the Encell Vineyard at the base of York Mountain in the western Paso Robles area. A second bottling uses grapes sourced from the Garey Vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley. Garey Vineyard is located on Garey Road, south of the city of Santa Maria and close to Bien Nacido Vineyard. Originally this vineyard was a Mondavi experimental planting and contains multiple clones. For the Bianchi Pinot Noir, low-yielding clone 777 was chosen from the vineyard.

I spoke with Tom Lane, the winemaker at Bianchi. Tom is a native of Pleasanton, California with 22 years of winemaking under his belt. He grew up playing in abandoned wineries and later helped local home winemakers make their Zinfandel wines. His educational background is quite impressive with a BS degree in biology and chemistry from Chico State, a MS degree in biology from Kansas State, and graduate studies in botany at Ohio State University. He eventually arrived at University of California Davis where he studied enology and did research on the aromatic compounds among twenty clones of Pinot Noir. His winemaking career began at Navarro Vineyards in 1985 and progressed to Concannon before arriving at Bianchi. He has won numerous prestigious awards including Dan Berger Winemaker of the Year in 1997 and Jerry Mead Winemaker of the Year in 1996.

I tried to find out Tom's secret because the 2005 Pinot Noir he crafted was very impressive. There was really nothing unusual except that he emphasized the good fruit he was able to work with. He used a little whole cluster, pre-fermentation cold soak, and employed Italian punch down tanks for submerging the cap. About 1/3 new French oak, tight grained with medium toast, was used for aging and the wine was coopered for a little over a year.

2005 Bianchi Signature Selection Garey Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 14.6% alc., \$25. *This wine wows you from start to finish. Great scent of fresh, ripe strawberries, raspberries and brown spice. Lovely deep flavors of strawberry jam, Damsel plums, vanilla, root beer, toast and spice. Nice full mouth feel without flabbiness. Balance is spot on. A generous and fruity Pinot that is everything one could hope for. Share this one with your lover.*



Bianchi Winery & Tasting Room is located at 3380 Branch Road, Paso Robles. The phone is 808-226-9922. The wines are sold through the website at www.bianchiwine.com. The **2005 Bianchi Encell Vineyard York Mountain Pinot Noir** is also available (not tasted, \$28). The tasting room is open from 11-5 daily. A vineyard house on the property is for rent to those visiting the Paso Robles area.

Update: I just returned from the Pinot Summit in San Francisco. I blind tasted the final 39 winning wines and picked the Bianchi Pinot Noir as one of my top two wines! Nice palate vindication.

Kenneth Volk - Central Coast Legend

Kenneth Volk has been a long-time proponent of Pinot Noir sourced from the Santa Maria Valley. As a fruit science major at California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo he became interested in winemaking. He followed up his early interest with multiple training classes in enology from University California Davis. He started Wild Horse Vineyards in 1981, eventually planting 33 acres in Templeton in San Luis Obispo County. He built his winery in 1983 and that same year crafted a Pinot Noir from Sierra Madre Vineyard in Santa Maria Valley that brought early notoriety and success to Wild Horse. He produced a wide range of other varietals and eventually reached an annual production of 150,000 cases. Some of his most memorable Pinot Noirs were released under the Cheval Sauvage label.



In 2003, Volk sold Wild Horse Winery for \$48 million to Peak Wines International and the winery was subsequently sold to Constellation Brands. Volk purchased the Byron Winery building on Tepusquet Road in Santa Maria (Byron moved to another facility) in 2004. He named the winery Kenneth Volk Vineyards and released his first Pinot Noir in 2006. He produces a Santa Maria Valley appellation Pinot Noir sourced from the Sierra Madre Vineyard that Bill Hampton manages and Volk leases. The vineyard is 2½ miles east of Highway 101. The climate here is quite cool (mean August temperature is 73°) and the soil is low vigor in type. The clone in this bottling is Pommard 4. He also sources Pinot Noir from Bien Nacido Vineyard, Garey Vineyard and Solomon Hills Vineyard, all in the Santa Maria Valley. Along with the Sierra Madre Vineyard Pinot Noir, he produces a Santa Maria Cuvee Pinot Noir (\$24) and a Garey Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$48) vineyard designate.

I recently had the opportunity to meet Volk and taste a vertical of Sierra Madre Vineyard Pinot Noirs from 2004-2006. He is a very likeable and congenial man with a wealth of knowledge about topography, climate, farming and winemaking. I found his Pinot Noirs to my liking, crafted in a more classic and elegant style. He crafts his wines to reflect the vagaries of each vintage rather than a searching for a consistent year-in year-out style. Volk de-stems his grapes, ferments in lined almond bins using dry ice for temperature control, and ages the wines in about one-third new French oak.

2004 Kenneth Volk Sierra Madre Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir \$36. 2004 was a warm, ripe vintage. *Lovely aromatics featuring rich black cherry, violets and a little good barnyard. Ripe dark Pinot flavors, veering a tad toward raisin notes.*



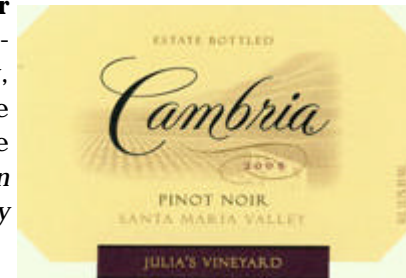
2005 Kenneth Volk Sierra Madre Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir \$36. 2005 was a cool vintage, picked late. *Pretty spice cherry scents leading to a clean black cherry and berry core. Medium bodied, silky, with a lively acid backbone.*

2006 Kenneth Volk Sierra Madre Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir Unreleased. *A very sensual nose similar to the 2004 vintage with crushed black cherry, violets and a touch of spice. The flavors echo the aromatics. Elegance to spare with a silk and satin texture. My favorite and in one word, excellent.*

Kenneth Volk Vineyards is located at 5239 Tepusquet Road, Santa Maria. The tasting room is open from 10:30-4:30 Friday through Sunday. The phone is 805-938-7896. The wines are sold on the website at www.volkwines.com. Volk produces a number of other varietals, including a superb Chardonnay. A second, value label, Aqua Pumpkin, includes a Pinot Noir (\$14).

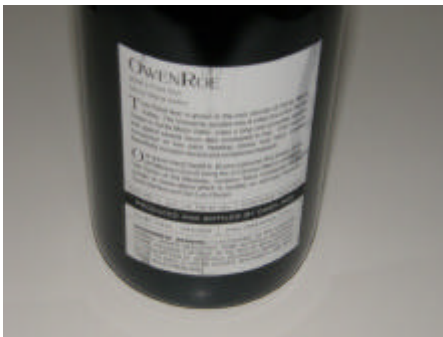
Small Sips of Santa Maria Valley

2006 Cambria Julia's Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 13.9% alc., \$20. The winery's signature Pinot Noir comes from a vineyard named after the owner's daughter. The label says, "cherry, strawberry, cinnamon, vanilla" and the label is right on. Multiple clones. Aged in 30% new French oak. The winemaker is Denise Shurtleff. *Red fruit driven wine that is light red in color and elegant in design. Plenty of strawberry flavor and attractive spice and vim. Easy and very approachable, this is a daily "go-to" meal time Pinot.*



Cambria Wines are well distributed in retail wine stores and supermarkets and can be ordered on the website at www.cambriawine.com. The tasting room, located at 5475 Chardonnay Lane, Santa Maria, is open daily from 10-5. The phone is 805-937-8091.

2006 Owen Roe Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., \$36. A Santa Maria Pinot Noir from an Oregon producer. Sourced from Bien Nacido Vineyard. The winemaker is David O'Reilly, one of the few Irish born American winemakers. The image of an old Mission Church along El Camino Real in California is on the label. Aged in used barrels. *Deep purple color. The nose is brooding with ripe plum, fig and barnyard aromas. Plentiful ripe black fruits drifting toward Syrah in heft and flavor profile. Full-bodied and smooth in texture. A big fruit-driven wine that lacks Pinot charm for me, but is the preferred style of this winemaker.*



Owen Roe is a partnership between David O'Reilly and Jerry Owen. Tasting is by appointment by calling 503-678-6514. The winery is located in the Willamette Valley near the town of Newburg. The website is www.owenroe.com.

2004 J. Wilkes Bien Nacido Vineyards Hillside Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir 14.2% alc., 290 cases, \$38. *Scents of violets, cherries, woodshed and barnyard. Medium-weighted flavors of cherry and strawberry with spice and pepper and a little woody bent. Easy and approachable with svelte tannins.*



J. Wilkes wines are available on the website at www.jwilkeswine.com, select retail outlets, and tasting rooms in Santa Barbara County. James Wilkes worked for years at Bien Nacido Vineyards and was a close friend of the Miller family who founded the vineyards. The phone is 805-899-2845. The 2005 vintage of the above wine is now released. He crafts an excellent Pinot Blanc as well.

2006 Alta Maria Vineyards Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., 2230 cases, \$. 100% Bien Nacido Vineyard, composed of clone 115 fully de-stemmed from N Block and Pommard clone partially whole cluster from Q Block. Final blend 25% whole cluster. Aged 11 months on original lees in 70% new French oak. *Aromas of black cherry and smoke lead off with a black cherry backbone buttressed by anise and oak spice. Silky in texture, fine-grained tannins and a fruity and aromatic finish that last 30 seconds. Plenty to like in this wine and recommended.*

Alta Maria Vineyards is a partnership between winemaker Paul Wilkins, James Ontiveros and Sao Anash. The wines are sold primarily through a mailing list at www.altamaria.com with some retail sales. The phone is 805-714-1732.



2004 Native9 Rancho Ontiveros Vineyards Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 14.5% alc., \$. *Dark purple in color. Deep, dark fruits including plums and raisin and even a touch of port anchor this wine's aromatic profile.. Healthy and robust in structure with flashy, plush fruit and ripe flavors veering toward root beer and port. The prodigious fruit and velveteen texture will be a crowd pleasure. This is the darker side of Pinot but I like it. One for early drinking as the lower acidity may not support the fruit over the long term.*

Native 9 is James Ontiveros's own label, the name signifying that he is the ninth generation of farmers in California. The Pinot Noir is from James's own 8-acre Rancho Ontiveros Vineyard and is sold through a mailing list at www.native9wine.com with limited retail distribution. 6525 Dominion Rd, Santa Maria.



Pinot Briefs

Perfect Pinot I was asked by a custom crush facility in Sebastopol the following question: “If you were to make your perfect Pinot Noir, what would it be?” My answer was as follows. Russian River Valley fruit from a vineyard farmed organically and/or biodynamically. Fruit picked early in the morning by hand at 23°-24° Brix with perfect fruit and phenolic ripeness. Clusters harvested with scissors, hand sorted in the field and again at the winery. 30-50% whole cluster. Basket pressed. Short cold soak. Native yeast and native MLF bacteria. Open-top stainless steel fermentors with temperature control and hand punch downs. Pommard, Swan clones. 13.6-14.0% alcohol. No de-alc or acidification. Gentle handling, no or very gentle pumping, gravity driven, no or single racking. Aged 13-18 months on the lees in 3 year-old seasoned French oak, 33% new, tight grain, medium toast. A little Hungarian oak ok. Aged in barrel in caves. Bottled in light weight environmentally-sensitive bottles with 2-21/4 inch real top grade cork. No additives, no monkey business. No wax on top! No added Syrah! No Brett! Powerful charm like Maria Sharapova. Winemaker’s name, case production, acidity, alcohol, vineyard source(s) readable on back label. Attractive, distinctive, stylish label with vintage and appellation clearly readable. 300 cases, priced at \$40-\$50.

Vineyard Tour with Gary Pisoni A vineyard tour like no other with Gary Pisoni on a wild jeep ride through Pisoni Vineyards is posted on the In Wine Country website (www.inwinecountry.com). Highlights of the six minute piece also include interviews and a family barbeque that prompts a happy dance over Jane Pisoni’s mouthwatering apricot pie. The Pisoni Vineyards video is also available as a free podcast via iTunes on www.nbc11.com/podcast/index.html in the Wine Country section.

Wineries Lack Marketing Skills I love the article Josh Hermsmeyer wrote in this month’s *Wines & Vines* (February, 2008) titled “Direct Packaging is Lame.” I could really identify with this criticism of direct-to-consumer wine packaging. I am sure you have had the experience of ordering a half a case of a special Pinot Noir priced at \$60 a bottle, only to receive a dented plain cardboard box with a partially fragmented Styrofoam shipper and nothing inside to indicate your order or a thank you note for your patronage. As Hermsmeyer says, “The message that the consumer receives is... ..once you’ve forked over the cash, we’d like to keep it in our pocket. Enjoy the wine, because that’s what you paid for, not some pretty package.” In defense of some producers, the lack of creative wine packaging is not universal. Some take the time to wrap the bottles in tissue paper to protect the label. A new producer, Fulcrum, even provides a paper wrapping for each bottle with an emblematic sticker underneath the stylish purple tissue paper which encloses each bottle (refer to photo). At Gypsy Canyon, the boxes come with a stylish embossed logo attached to the outer box with a tasteful cord sealing the box. Pisoni Estate wines come shipped in an embossed wooden box. As a consumer as well as a writer, I really appreciate the small touches some producers take to make their packaging distinctive and rewarding. Much of the enjoyment of wine is the presentation, the charisma, and the experience and this can in part be traced to the packaging that cradles the wine that arrives on our doorstep.



Big Bottles are Controversial I am not a big fan of heavy, wide-bodied bottles. Sure, they look cool and they convey a sense of exclusivity and shout “expensive stuff inside.” But they require two hands to manage and they do not fit into traditional single bottle wine cellar racking. Oz Clarke, speaking at the 2008 Climate Change and Wine Conference in Barcelona, Spain, said that the use of heavy bottles was a “big nonsense” and environmentally irresponsible. Standard weight bottles are preferable to me for a number of reasons including lower shipping costs and less glass waste.

X Publishing now Score Mongers A couple of years ago X Publishing, which is based in Santa Rosa, California, had a short publishing run of *Wine X Magazine* that was directed at the millennial wine-drinking group (“wine, food and intelligent slice of vice”). It was edgy and hep and the wine reviews were clever, avoiding scores and offering descriptive phrases like, “More body and spice than Tyra Banks on a Victoria Secret runway,” and “Fresher than a hickey from a strawberry blond.” The magazine ceased publication and now exists only in digital form on the website (www.winexmagazine.com). X Publishing has reversed their stand and turned to promoting scores as guidance for wine purchases. They send out a weekly e-mail blast called **justwinepoints**, “because nothing else matters.” (www.justwinepoints.com). They promote the fact that, “You never settle for less, and you’d prefer never to drink another wine that has scored less than 90 points. Don’t let your lifestyle be compromised by drinking sub-90s wines.” They only list wines with scores of 90 and above proudly touting “Numerical scores without all the flowery descriptive baggage.” The wines chosen are fine, but the scores are ridiculously high. For example, 2005 Amisfield Central Otago Pinot Noir (\$34), 99!, 2005 Bogle Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$13) 95!, and 2006 Kim Crawford New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc (\$17) 96!. The digitized *Wine X Magazine* is a hoot and worth reading for sure, but avoid the justwinepoints e-mail blast unless you can’t function without “90+ wines.”



Carneros Heritage Fest The 3rd Annual Carneros Heritage Fest will be held Saturday, May 31, 2008 at The Donum Estate (24520 Ramal Road in Sonoma) from 12-4. The Fest will feature the Carneros Lamb BBQ, tastings of Carneros Wine Alliance Premium and Ultra Premium Wines, a young chef competition, musical entertainment, shepherding and falconry demonstrations, vineyard tours, and sustainable agriculture exhibits. Participating wineries previously have included, Acacia, Artesa, Bouchaine, Buena Vista Carneros, Ceja Vineyards, Clos Du Val, Cuvaision Estate Wines, Etude, Gloria Ferrer Caves and Vineyards, Havens Wine Cellars, Madonna Estate, MacRostie Winery, Merryvale Vineyards, Nicholson Ranch, Patz & Hall, Ravenswood, Donum/Robert Stemmler, Saintsbury, Schug Carneros Estate Wines, Talisman Wines, and Toad Hall Cellars. The Friday evening before the event, May 30, a series of dinners will be held at wineries and restaurants throughout the region. Multi-course lamb courses will be paired with Carneros wine selected for the dinners. For information and tickets, visit www.carnerosheritagefest.com, or call 707-253-2678

Ceja Vineyards Opens Tasting Room Ceja Vineyards was founded by Napa’s first generation of Mexican-American producers. The winery opened a tasting salon in Downtown Napa on February 9 at 1248 First St. The family-owned winery produces more than 10,000 cases of multiple varietals including Pinot Noir. The website is www.cejavineyards.com.

Recycling Corks in Oregon ReCork America is a program sponsored by supplier Amorim Cork America in association with Willamette Valley Vineyards and SOLV that plans to recycle 1 ton of natural wine corks this year. Cork collection sites have been set up in Oregon at wineries, retailers, restaurants and markets. There are a number of potential uses for recycled corks including flooring, insulation and green building materials, craft materials, soil conditioner, and sports equipment. More information is available at www.recorkamerica.com.



PrinceofPinot.com

Hope to see you at upcoming
World of Pinot Noir

**PINO: Price is no
object**

© 2008
PinotFile is a Registered
Trademark

Biodynamic Farming

Ted Lemon, writing in his recent newsletter, spoke clearly about the goals of biodynamic farming.

“A biodynamic vineyard (BD) takes the philosophy of organics to another level. In a BD vineyard, the goal is not only to use only organically certified materials, and as few as possible, but to generate as many of the farm’s needs as possible *on site*. If *on site* isn’t possible then as close by as possible. The farm is a self contained organism which seeks to achieve a natural stasis with its environment. This balance will minimize, but not eliminate, pests and diseases. They will be reduced to a level which both plant and farmer can live with. The farmer works with celestial rhythms to further harmonize the farm with its environment. A good BD farm is a bit like a monastery: a self-contained, self-supporting unit. It is our experience that with rigorous winemaking, wine from a well managed BD vineyard expresses terroir like no other.”

The Long and Winding Pinot Road, Part VI

It was the early 1990s and liking Pinot Noir practically labeled me an eccentric. To most wine lovers of the time, Pinot Noir was an afterthought - a weak substitute for Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. For me, Pinot Noir was the Holy Grail, the most sensual of all wines, and I was bound and determined to pursue my love affair with it.

Burt Williams and Ed Selyem were able to produce magical Pinot Noirs out of a small garage on Fulton Road in Santa Rosa. There had been significant press since 1985 touting the quality of the Pinot Noirs they crafted from magical vineyards like Rochioli, Allen, Hirsch and Olivet Lane. It was a 1992 Williams Selyem Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir that had such a powerful punch for me that even today I can taste the wine, and clearly believe it was the greatest California Pinot Noir I have ever had in my life.

I reached my 50th birthday in 1993 and decided to have a celebratory degustation dinner at The Pacific Club in Newport Beach, California. My friend and sommelier extraordinaire, Rene Chazottes, planned the food to accompany my wine choices. It was Rene who made me understand that wine, alone above beverages, is part of food and neither exists in even half its glory without the other. As Renee used to say, “Wine is made for drinking with food and when you have the perfect match, that is it, the experience will bring you to your knees! I still wax nostalgically about the wines served that night: 1990 Domaine Ramonet Bourgogne Aligote with Crème de Casis (Kir), 1989 Zind Humbrecht Riesling Brand Grand Cru Vendage Tardive, 1989 Williams Selyem Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir (magnum), 1985 Comtes Lafon Les Caillerets 1er Cru Volnay, 1982 Chalone Reserve Pinot Noir, 1943 Cheval Blanc, 1982 Cheval Blanc, 1984 Silver Oak Bonny’s Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (magnum), 1990 Williams Selyem Martinelli Vineyard Zinfandel, 1989 Gaston Huet “Cuvee Constance” Vouvray, and 1982 Laurent Perrier Cuvee Alexandra Rose Champagne. It was probably the last big dinner I planned where I drank varietals other than Pinot Noir or Chardonnay. I was hopelessly hooked on Pinot Noir and this led to the “Super Bowl of Pinot Noir.” To be continued... ..