

# PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinot Noir

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## Hang Time Madness

Now that we are in the middle of March Madness, it is apropos to talk about hang time. By definition, extended hang time is leaving grapes on the vine beyond 24 degrees Brix (the sugar level of the grapes at which they are fully ripe). In some cases, grapes are left on the vine until sugar levels reach as much as 30 degrees Brix. Often referred to as "physiological ripening" (a misnomer, see page 2), extended hang time leads to higher sugars and concentrated flavors which produces high-alcohol, fruity red wines - a style many wine critics and consumers seem to prefer. As Jim Clendenen has said about the high-ripeness style of wine: "It's what they want to make, what consumers want to drink, and is supported by perceptions of quality in the media."

The subject of hang time is very controversial among wine growers and vignerons. Here is a summary of recent published information about the hang time issue including the conclusions of a recent seminar on the subject held by the Napa Valley Grape Growers and published in *Wine Business Monthly* (March, 2005). In the spirit of the college basketball season, both team's viewpoints will be presented by those in favor ("slam dunk") and those opposed ("foul"). Git on the ball.

Issue: Leaving grapes on the vine for maximum ripeness leads to better wines.

**Slam Dunk:** The wines made in this over-ripe style have more appealing upfront flavor, more sweetness, and less acidity. If it tastes great, who cares what the hang time or alcohol level is.

**Foul:** There is very little research to support that extended hang time leads to improved wines. Richard Smart (a well-known Australian viticulturist) has stated that there is no evidence that delaying harvest improves wine quality. Jim Clendenen feels that the high-ripeness wines may have more flavor but is it better flavor? Wines made in this style are not as good with food and don't age as well.

Issue: Longer hang time damages the vines.

**Slam Dunk:** Extended hang time farming can have negative effects if the vines are also stressed. The result can be long-term damage limiting vine production and decreasing vine life.

**Foul:** There is no solid evidence that delaying harvest harms the vines. Wild vines that are left unpicked in nature and studies on vineyards where the vines were unharvested, show no untoward effect. Most attendees at the Napa Seminar think not.

(cont'd)

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BEVE IL PINOT**

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Seth Kunin of Kunin Wines feels that "more ripeness is just muddying the individuality of wines."

Richard Smart "thinks grapes left on the vine are more like an Amarone harvested from de-hydrated grapes," and suggests we call them "California Amarone"

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**Issue:** High sugar levels require the addition of water during fermentation.

**Slam Dunk:** Adding water during fermentation dilutes the sugar concentration, controls alcohol levels and rehydrates the grapes, and is common practice in warm grape-growing regions where sugars are high. It is legal in California “to facilitate fermentation”. Water helps the yeast to take off better during fermentation and avoids stuck fermentations. There is no limit on the amount of water that can be added and no reporting necessary for use of this practice. Diluting the flavors some by adding water is acceptable since there usually is excess flavor components anyway.

**Foul:** The French consider adding water fraud and the practice has been illegal in France since 1907. Critics say that with proper organic farming and reducing the vigor of the vine by cropping and canopy management, the ripening can be managed so that the grapes are brought in at perfect balance to make a wine of 13.5% or so alcohol. No addition of water is then necessary and the wine reflects exactly the composition of the grapes.

**Issue:** Growers lose money with long hang times.

**Slam Dunk:** New contracts can be used to compensate growers for the loss of tonnage caused by dehydration of grapes left on the vines for extended times. Vintners can purchase grapes by the acre.

**Foul:** Long hang times, particularly when the later stages of the growing season have no rain and little or no irrigation, cause water to evaporate from fruit and can reduce the amount farmers are paid when they are paid by weight. Even more upsetting to growers is the practice of adding back water during winemaking.

Linda Bisson, a UC Davis Professor, concluded the recent Napa seminar on hang time by stating that there was no perfect measure of optimal flavor maturity and much research needed to be done to answer this dilemma.

## What's In Your Bottle?

All wine labels must include the alcohol content of the wine inside. The amount is usually displayed on the front label in very tiny print that challenges the presbyopic wine buyer. Here, in summary, is what the figure actually means:

<14% = there can be a 1.5% point variance in the labeled alcohol content allowed, but the level cannot be greater than 14%. For example, a wine with 13.9% alcohol can be labeled 12.4-13.9%

>14% = there can be a 1.0% point variance. For example, a wine with 15% alcohol can be labeled as low as 14%.

Almost always, the producer labels the wine at the lowest possible alcohol levels to avoid the stigma associated with high alcohol. Remember that a wine labeled as 14.5% alcohol can actually be 15.5% and that is why such a wine can send you sideways after a glass or two.

## Richard Smart's Winegrowing Myths

Richard Smart, an Australian viticulturist known as “The Flying Vine Doctor” is probably the most influential vineyard consultant in the New World. He speaks of a number of winegrowing myths: (1) Small berry size is important for wine quality (actually what makes berries small is important, not the size itself). (2) Old vines make better wines (you can make the best wine from virgin vines— certainly a very controversial statement). (3) Low yields make better wines (again, the conditions that lead to low yields really matter). (4) Hang time improves wine quality (there is no evidence that delaying harvest improves wine quality). (5) One can taste grapes and predict the optimum date of harvest (sounds romantic, but it just isn't true— personal preference comes into play here and when you taste ripe fruit the high sugar masks many other flavors). (6) Physiological ripening is a marketing term that makes no sense (what is non-physiological ripening?).

## Tasting the Latest Chalone Lineup

In January of this year it was 7 years since the unfortunate death of Richard Graff in a plane crash near Salinas, California. It was Graff who founded and then brought into prominence in the late 60's, Chalone, a 160-acre vineyard in the remote Gavilan Mountains 150 miles south of San Francisco. Chalone was a unique vineyard first developed by a Frenchman before World War I. He had been searching California for soil that contained the limestone of Burgundy. At some point, American William Silver bought the property and it is said by wine historian Leon D. Adams, that his Pinot Noir grapes were so good that both Almaden and Wente Bros paid premium prices for them in the 1940's and early 1950's. The property was taken over in the 50's by Philip Togni. He struggled to farm the vineyard as water had to be trucked in and a generator had to be used to run what little equipment he had. After proposing marriage, his wife-to-be took one look at Chalone and Togni left immediately for a job at E & J Gallo. Rodney Strong, who went on to create Rodney Strong Vineyards, a well-known Sonoma winery, leased Chalone. He came by car on weekends to work the vineyard. One of Strong's backers was Richard Graff's father, who knew his son was unhappy working at a bank. Strong gave Richard Graff weekend work at Chalone and Graff fell in love with the place. Graff studied enology for a year, and in 1965 bought Chalone with a loan from his parents.

Richard Graff found that Chalone had soil unlike any other California vineyard at the time— basically volcanic underlain with limestone. The wines produced here developed a uniqueness in struggling to survive in the sparse, rocky, limestone-laced soil and dry climate (less than 15 inches of annual rainfall compared to 35 inches in the Napa Valley). Small crops of intensely-flavored fruit were common. Chalone's Pinot Noir and Chardonnay quickly developed a cult following which included myself during my formative years of my love affair with Pinot Noir. Some of my fondest memories of great Pinot Noir were Graff's Reserve Pinot Noirs of the late 70's and early 80's. The first Reserve Pinot Noir at Chalone was made in 1978 from older vines on the property. Chalone went public in 1984 and I was one of the early shareholders. The Chalone Reserve Pinot Noirs were sold primarily to shareholders. Retrospective tastings of all of the Reserve bottlings organized by me in 1992 and 1998 confirmed that these wines aged gracefully and were a revelation.

As Richard Graff became less involved with the winery in the 90's, the sparkle came off the legend, the winery focused on varietals other than Pinot Noir, and the Pinot Noirs were at times forgettable. By 1999, however, Chalone showed a renewed commitment to Pinot Noir and the quality improved. The 1999 and 2000 Chalone Pinot Noirs were reviewed very favorably in the *PinotFile* (Feb 17, 2002). The quality noticeably improved at Acacia (Carneros-Napa Valley) and Edna Valley, and a new inexpensive Pinot Noir from Santa Lucia Highlands, Echelon, became a consistently good value, and a Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, Orogeny, was added to the lineup. See the accompanying map for the location of these Chalone properties. A book is available for those who wish to read more about the history of Chalone: *Chalone: A Journey On the Wine Frontier*, Gregory S Walker and Phillip Woodward, Carneros Press, \$17.

Recently Chalone merged with Double Wines, Inc., a subsidiary of Diageo North America, Inc., and the shareholder's stockholder's program will be replaced by the "Shareholder Cellars" club which offers members discounts on Chalone group wines and other wines from Diageo Chateau & Estate's portfolio, an annual Cellars Celebration at one of the wineries, VIP tours, and special wine allocations. Contact the winery at 797-254-4250 or Chalone WineGroup.com for information and registration.

Tasting notes are on page 5





**2003 Orogeny Vineyards Sonoma County Green Valley Pinot Noir** 14.2% alc., 2,964 cases, \$30. This Pinot Noir is my pick of the Chalone litter. It is blended from five small vineyards in the Green Valley subappellation of the Russian River Valley and one vineyard in the Russian River Valley. The history of upheavels, or “orogenic” episodes, in this area is the source for this wine’s name. This Pinot gem leads off with an inviting nose of cherries and plums, a hint of vanilla, and a whiff of roses. The accent is on cherries and spice with a very soft mouthfeel and a finish that is full and clean. The wine thinks it is a Chambolle Musigny. (A side note: I tasted the 2002 vintage of this wine on two different occasions and there was no comparison– the 2002 had a dampened nose with a slightly cooked flavor to the dark fruits and a short finish. The 2003 is far superior), Winemaker is Dan Goldfield



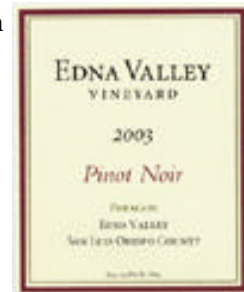
**2002 Chalone Vineyard Estate Pinot Noir** 14.4% alc., 11,800 cases, \$25. In 1997 Chalone began a replanting program for its estate Pinot Noir. The 2002 vintage is the first Chalone Pinot Noir produced solely from the new plantings and thus truly reflects the unique terroir of this vineyard which has proven over the years to be a great site for Pinot Noir. A hefty wine with aromas of smoke, oak wood, and blackberries. The chewy dark fruits are on the ripe side. The mouthfeel is velvety and the wine finishes soft and fruity. Unique and quite different from the other Chalone offerings. Winemaker Dan Karlsen.



**2003 Echelon Central Coast Pinot Noir.** 13.9% alc., 55,000 cases, \$10. An astonishing good Pinot Noir considering the very large production and the price. The name of the wine echoes the word Chalone and actually means “a series of levels or grades,” such as vine rows aligned in a vineyard. It also commonly refers to a higher level of value within a group (ie upper echelon). The wine is a blend of vineyards primarily located in the Santa Lucia Highlands. This Pinot Noir is not meant to be taken too seriously. It is light and very quaffable. There is decent raspberry fruit in the middle and the finish is clean. It is not made in the high-extracted style of many Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noirs. A great starter Pinot and a perfect Pinot to serve summer guests outside by the BBQ. This wine is like some of the girls you may have dated in college– not too demanding and a lot of fun for an evening, but not enough complexity to hold your interest forever. Winemaker Tom Westberg.



**2003 Edna Valley Vineyard Paragon Pinot Noir** 13.8% alc., 17,500 cases, \$16. The Edna Valley AVA is in San Luis Obispo, just five miles from the Pacific Ocean. The vineyard is located in an east/west-oriented valley that is very unusual in California. The initial Pinot Noir vines were planted here 30 years ago. In 1997, the vineyard was expanded to include newer clonal selections. Although the Edna Valley is best known for its excellent Chardonnays, the newer clonal plantings have elevated the quality of the Pinot Noirs. This Pinot Noir has a damp leaf nose but the generous berry fruit flavors are initially appealing. Unlike the other wines in the lineup, this one faded after an hour and lost most all of its charm and interest. Winemaker Harry Hansen.



**2003 Acacia Carneros Pinot Noir** 14.4% alc., 24,000 cases, \$20. Although many winemakers have come and gone at Acacia, year in and year out this winery has been a reliable source for Pinot Noir. In recent years there has been a concerted effort to replant and upgrade the 90 acres of Pinot Noir planted on the estate surrounding the winery. Eight other vineyards close to the winery also supply grapes for this bottling. I just couldn’t warm up to this wine. Too dry and astringent for me. For serious Pinot lovers, look for the **2003 Acacia Beckstoffer Las Amigas Vineyard Pinot Noir** (\$45), **2002 Acacia St. Clair Vineyard Pinot Noir** (\$38), or the **2002 Acacia Field Blend Estate Vineyard Pinot Noir** (\$38). These three wines are far superior with more interesting and complex aromas and flavors buttressed by concentrated, sweet fruit.



**The Mirassou family is America's oldest winemaking family. In 1854, David Mirassou's great-great-great grandfather Pierre planted Pinot Noir in Santa Clara County using cuttings he had brought from his native France. During the boat trip, the captain told him he could no longer use up the ship's water for his grapevines, so he bought the ship's entire supply of potatoes. He then inserted the grape cuttings into the potatoes to keep them moist and was able to keep the grape cuttings alive and become the first to import Pinot Noir from France. The Mirassou Winery recently released its 2003 Monterey County Pinot Noir, marking 150 years of winemaking in California.**



## Wine Talk on the Radio

There are a number of wine programs on the internet that are very informative and best of all, free!

**Vino! Wine Radio** can be accessed at [www.vino.com](http://www.vino.com). The program, Wine Radio Network, is a one-hour weekly radio show with host Spencer Christian. There are interviews with vintners, winemakers, chefs, and other notable folks in the wine industry, as well as industry news, highlights, tastings and events.

**Grape Radio** originates from Orange County, California and can be found at [www.graperadio.com](http://www.graperadio.com). It is easy to relate to the three hosts, Leigh Older, Brian Clark, and Jay Selman, who are wine enthusiasts with a laid-back informative approach. A recent two-part series featured Brian Loring of Loring Wine Company and futures shows include interviews with Robert Foley (Pride Mountain), Doug Shafer (Shafer Vineyards), and Steve Tanzer (*International Wine Cellar*). Grape Radio was recently featured on CNN television.

Regular radio also has spawned wine-related programming.

**The Tasting Room With Tom Leykis** airs from 3 to 5 PM on Saturdays on KLSX-FM (97.1) in Los Angeles (the same station that runs his nationally syndicated talk show every weekday afternoon). Leykis is a Cabernet lover, but he started out with sparkling wine. He is a frequent visitor to California wine regions and plans to do future shows from the road. He brings in guests every week such as sommeliers and winemakers to discuss various wine-related topics. In the future he hopes to have celebrities who are into wine on the show. Wouldn't it be great to hear Clint Eastwood discussing hang time or tannins some day?