

PinotFile®

The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinot Noir

Hang Time Wars

Synopsis: One year Post-Sideways (PS), the noble winegrowers have been leading the Jedi Lights, an army of winemakers and French traditionalists into a world-wide battle against the evil Ultraripe Empire of wine writers, wine competition judges, and consultants. When Emperor Robert Parker unveils a 50-year-old plot to rule the world and ruin the health of grapevines by favoring rich and opulent wines made from long hang times, traditional wine as we know it crumbles and from its ashes rises the evil Ultraripe Empire. When Jedi hero, Richart Smart, is seduced by the dark side of the Empire to become the Emperor's new apprentice, the Jedi are decimated. The only hope for the world are Richard Smart's own offspring— twin children born in secrecy who will grow up to become Luke Foodwiner and Princess Terroir.

The trend toward big, intense wines has divided the wine industry. Phrases like "syrah wannabe", "fruit bomb", "high-extraction", "ultracalifornian", and "sipping wine", are becoming part of the everyday vernacular of wine speak. Conferences are being organized to debate hang time, high alcohol levels, extraction, and use of oak with reference to the ultraripe style of wine that seems to be preferred by consumers and wine judges today. I asked a couple of experienced wine people, one a sommelier and wine retailer and the other a wine writer and winemaker to comment on the style of winemaking currently in vogue.

Andy Tan is based in Singapore where he recently opened his own wine retail cellar-warehouse, Auric Pacific Fine Wines Pte Ltd. He has been intimately involved in the wine industry as a sommelier, wine writer, and wine importer. He currently publishes an informative newsletter (phone— 65-6291 1947m, e-mail— andytan@auric.com.sg). "Some of the modern wines crafted today reflect the interest of the winemaker rather than the uniqueness of the vineyard. Many of the new generation winemakers have the goal of making an early statement for themselves and have been encouraged to manipulate every aspect of winemaking to make highly expressive, extracted wine. They have many tools in their repertoire: -stressing the vines (high density, severe cropping) and selecting clones -extra hang time (late picking) to obtain overly mature grapes (*sur-maturite*) -environmental yeast in both primary and secondary fermentation (instead of inoculated yeast) to delay fermentation, obtain more glycerol,

A Great Pinot Noir Transcends Wine Itself

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"A new style wine was born: thick as chocolate pudding, an explosion of fruit as cheeky and unexpected as the ambush spritz of a perfume girl in the aisle at Macy's. A standout in tastings, this wine garners big numbers and impressive reviews. Known as "sipping wine," its high alcohol and intense flavors simply won't pipe down enough to blend in with the harmony of a meal."

...Jennifer Rosen, "Putting 'hang time' in a bottle," *Rocky Mtn News*, May 4, 2005



further oxidation, and soften the must

- extend maceration and lees contact (stirred lees) to soften tannins and improve the mouth feel (texture)
- malolactic fermentation in brand new oak barrels to give the wine a more creamy oak element (toffee, tar)
- 100%, sometimes 200%, new oak aging

In the past, the common flaws in wine were TCA, PCA (TCA from barrel), and excessive SO₂. Now the technical flaws are Brettanomyces (Brett for short), and volatile acidity. Use of the above noted winemaking techniques excessively expose the wine to air during its upbringing. In addition, the current preference for harvesting “physiological ripe” fruit (measuring from the skin ripeness instead of the sugar level) has resulted in harvesting overripe, low-acid grapes. Making wine with a minimum or no dosage of SO₂ further exposes the wine to spoilage, with resulting problems such as Brett and volatile acidity.

The modern trendy wine emphasizes power over elegance, richness over refinement. The wines often have an inviting palate of lush fruit, but often fail to reflect terroir and show individualism. Excessive alcohol and oak treatments give wine the illusion of intense sweetness and high alcohol tends to suppress the fine details and focus of a wine.”

Wine writer, wine grower, and winemaker Don Baumhefner of Copeland Creek Wines (formerly Pfendler Vineyards, 707-765-5997, pfendlervineyards.com). Responded to my request. I like Don’s style of wines which are elegant and on the lower side of alcohol compared with the current trendy wines. He feels that wine writers and wine competition judges have “fallen into the trap of preferring big, robust, alcoholic fruit bombs over more subtle, delicately flavored, lower alcohol wines. More traditional wines do not win awards, nor are they rated very highly by the well-known wine journals or wine writers. They do not receive a 90+ rating on the accursed 100 point scale and therefore, they do not sell well, no matter how good they are. Winemakers in California have learned that to obtain these coveted ratings, they need to let the grapes remain on the vines until they are almost raisins. The result is the elevated level of sugar in the grapes, and consequently, much higher alcohol levels in the wines. Don goes on to point out that “harvesting grapes at higher sugar and lower acid levels has made wine much more drinkable in its youth, but also has removed the possibility of aging it for even ten years. Also when highly alcoholic wines are tasted as a part of a meal (which is the idea after all), neither the wine nor the food benefits. My simple advice is, if you are going to consume a bottle of wine with a meal, do not buy a bottle that states it is higher than 13.9% alcohol.”

Warren Winerski, co-founder of Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars, at a recent seminar on hang time stated that “ It is possible to make beautiful wines under 13% alcohol. He used as an example a 1941 Inglenook Cabernet Sauvignon which he recently drank– the alcohol level was 12.5% - and the wine drank beautifully after 60 years. I don’t believe high alcohol wines will age like this.”

Grape grower Andy Beckstoffer has been an outspoken critic of high alcohol wines. He feels that excessive hang time has a deteriorating effect on the health of the vines. Randy Dunn, of Dunn Vineyards, has been a long-time advocate of lower alcohol wines. He said recently, “I think that in the not too distant future, there’s going to be a turnaround. High-alcohol wines are shooting themselves in the foot.”

Dr. Richard Smart, the “flying wine doctor” and author of the book, *Sunlight Into Wine*, is a critic of prolonged hang time. He has asserted that hang time (the amount of time grapes are allowed to remain on the vine after reaching normal ripeness) is in the “winemaker’s imagination” and “ what we are really talking about is psychological ripeness.”

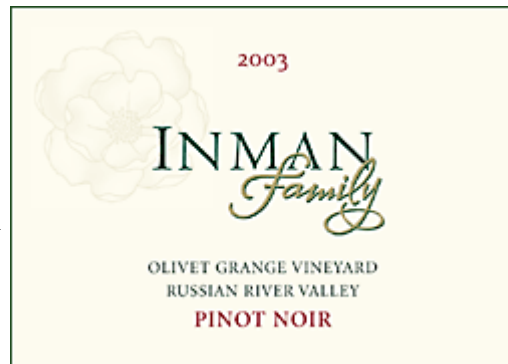
But what does the consumer have to say? Robert Steinhauer of Beringer-Blass asserts that “the riper, the better, for consumers continue to support high-alcohol wines.” His assertion seems born out by a recent study by John Gillespie and Christian Miller of Wine Opinions and reported recently at the Hang Time II seminar in St. Helena. Consumers preferred darker wines and descriptors like “dark color” and “jammy fruit.” 43% of young females were drawn to the phrase, “jammy fruit” and young males preferred “heavy and full-bodied wines.” 55% of high-end wine drinkers would purchase a wine described as “bold and ultraripe.” The battle rages on. Will the Ultraripe Empire win out in the end?

Inman Family Wines

The Brits have always had a fondness for Burgundy, so it is no surprise that Kathleen and Simon Inman left their comfortable life in England to pursue their passion of producing a premium Pinot Noir in California. Simon's love for Pinot Noir was sparked by time spent in Nuits-St-George and the surrounding villages of Burgundy. Kathleen had been working a summer job at Napa Creek Winery and met vacationing Simon in the tasting room. They carried on a long-distance romance and two years later were married. During the fifteen years their family lived in England, they both developed a taste for good Pinot Noir. In 1998 they pulled up stakes and moved to settle in California and make wine. A year later, they discovered a family farm for sale on Olivet Road in the Russian River Valley. The mixed farm had been owned by the Greeott Family since early in the last century. The Inmans bought the property and dubbed it Olivet Grange Vineyard, a name combining the farm's location on Olivet Road and their English country home named The Grange at Elvington.

In 2000, the Inmans planted a vineyard on the 10-acre property combining 7.2 acres of Pinot Noir (clones 114, 115, 667, and 777) and some Pinot Gris (clone 146). The farmhouse was lovingly restored and is used as a vacation rental. The agricultural heritage of the property has been retained with the addition of orchards and a kitchen garden. Sustainable farming is practiced, and although not certified organic, all fungicides and weed control products used are organic certified. Kevin Hamel is the consulting winemaker.

2003 Inman Family Olivet Grange Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14% alc., 503 cases, \$45. The inaugural release is an impressive debut. The decision to pick the grapes was decided by the physical maturity of the vines and grapes, rather than waiting for ultraripe flavors associated with longer hang time and higher sugar levels. The result is a seamless Pinot Noir with alcohol, tannins, and fruit in concert. The wine exhibits an attractive smoothness and finesse that is unmistakably Pinot Noir.



2003 Siduri Olivet Grange Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.7% alc., 162 cases, \$45. This is the second release from the Olivet Grange Vineyard for Siduri. All of the clones were fermented and barreled down separately and kept apart until the final blend was determined. If the Inman Family version of the Olivet Grange Vineyard Pinot Noir is "feminine" in style, then this wine is contrastingly "masculine." The color is dark, dark ruby and the nose is heady with dark fruits. Full-bodied, it speaks fruit and more fruit. This Pinot holds its alcohol well and the landing is soft and cozy.

Kathleen Inman was recently involved in making **APSARA Women Winemaker's Russian River Valley Pinot Noir** half barrel along with Susan Doyle from MacMurray Ranch, Melissa Stackhouse from La Crema, and Merry Edwards from Merry Edwards Wines. The wine was made as an auction lot to benefit Kathleen's daughter's school, the Sonoma County Day School in Santa Rosa. At the auction, the half barrel of Pinot Noir went for \$15,000 or about \$1,250 per case. Last year Rudy Von Strasser had coordinated a half barrel of Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon along with five other Napa Valley producers including Spottswoode, Cakebread, Viader, Fisher, and Far Niente. The Cabernet half barrel was auctioned for \$10,000. This year's Pinot Noir produced a 50% premium over the Napa Valley Cabernet. What does that tell you about the current popularity of Russian River Valley Pinot Noir and the impressive results from the Valley's talented group of "girl power" winemakers?

Inman Family Wines is headquartered in Healdsburg. To purchase, go to inmanfamilywines.com. A small portion of the Inman Family wines are bottled with screwtops. The Siduri wines enjoy fairly wide distribution, but can also be ordered directly by phoning 707-578-3882.

Two Big Hitters from Miner Family Vineyards

Miner Family Vineyards are well-known for their Chardonnays and Cabernets from their Oakville Ranch in the Napa Valley. However, their Pinot Noir program, using grapes sourced from the Santa Lucia Highlands, has been equally impressive for several years. The focus of the winery is on producing high-end, reserve style wines that reflect their specific vineyard designations.

The winery is a close-knit family operation owned by Dave and Emily Miner and his parents Ed and Norma. Founded in 1998, the Miner label has a distinctive wing image which bears homage to family, heritage (Persian), and place. The label is based on an ancient Assyrian relief image of a Winged Sun God who represents abundance and prosperity.

The winery, pictured to the right, is a must-see facility on the Silverado Trail. The beautiful underground aging caves are not only functional, but are the site for many social events for the community and supporters.



2003 Garys' Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir 14.3% alc., 970 cases, \$50. Garys' Vineyard is named after partners Gary Francioni and Gary Pisoni who planted this 50 acre vineyard in 1995. The rumor for years is that the plantings here are in part "suitcase clones" from DRC. This wine is flat-out great. From the gate there are terrific aromas of framboise, earth, and milk chocolate dust. The flavors of cherry, cinnamon, nutmeg, chocolate, and cocoa cascade over the palate with a creamy mouth feel. The finish is like Cher's Farewell Tour— it goes on and on. The best Pinot Noir from Gary's Vineyard I have ever had.

2003 Rosella's Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir 14.3% alc., 500 cases, \$50. This 50 acre vineyard is only a stone's throw from Garys' Vineyard. Owned by Gary and Rosella Francioni, the vineyard was planted in 1996 using the "Pisoni" clone (suitcase clone from DRC) and some Dijon clones. As the name implies, fruit from this vineyard is uniquely feminine. The Rosella's is also a charmer, like a classy sister to the Garys'. Raspberries and purple fruits are featured with nice overtones of pepper, Oriental spices, and musk. A little less density than the Garys', but plenty of exotica to hold your interest.

The two wines have good retail distribution in California. Also visit the website at minerwines.com or to order directly, Miner_Family_Vineyards@mail.vresp.com.

Best Pinot Noir Ever?

Those of you that receive John Kapon's *Vintage Tastings* by e-mail know that he tastes a phenomenal number of older Burgundies provided by serious collectors at various events. Recently he reported on a dinner where he tasted wines from the 1960s that most of us only dream about: 1966 Vogue Bonnes Mares, 1966 DRC Grands Echezeaux, and 1962 DRC La Tache among others. At this dinner, he tasted the greatest wine he ever had: the **1945 DRC Romanee Conti**. His comments were "...one wine which became a nuclear bomb for the evening, destroying every wine in the room once it was open, and changing my personal history of wine forever. I have been blessed to taste many of the greatest wines made over the past hundred years, but this wine took the cake. The aromas, the texture, the flavors, the finish— all of its components were flawless, and the wine was amazingly fresh, but decidedly and deliciously mature as well. It is my first 99+ point wine."

What won't they think of next file. An Australian composer, Tony King, has created a CD, *The Wine Music*, that features exclusively sounds made by Riedel wine glasses, popping corks, blowing and tapping bottles, wine barrels, and other implements having to do with wine. Surprisingly, the effect is quite beautiful, soothing and appropriate for a candlelight dinner. Tony King remarks that "I was staggered to discover a virtual orchestra in Wine sounds... ..It was like discovering a new species of music." The project took two years to complete. On the website, www.winemusic.biz, you can listen to samples from the CD and order the album of "wine music."

You Can't Just Call Terminix Pest Control

Between 1998 and 2000, Pierce's Disease destroyed over half of the 3,000 acres of grapevines in Temecula, California. There is no known method to eliminate Pierce's which attacks wine, table and raisin grapes as well as almond and citrus trees and oleanders. Pesticides have proven futile. Fourteen southern and mid-California counties in California, primarily Riverside, Kern, Ventura, and Tulare are extensively infested. There is spot infestation in northern California counties and the disease seems to be marching northward. Several glassy-winged sharpshooter egg clusters were discovered in Napa and Sonoma counties in February and March. There has never been so many viable egg clusters detected in Napa and Sonoma wine country in such a short period of time.

The latest attempt to corral the pest is the introduction of a tiny parasitic wasp from Minnesota. Known as biological control, the idea is to use one insect to kill another. The wasp, known as *Anagrus epos*, and pictured to the right, is one-thirty-second of an inch long and is a hearty predator that is deadly to the sharpshooter. The wasp lays its eggs in the eggs of the sharpshooter and after killing the sharpshooter nymph, the emerging wasps mate almost immediately and fly off looking for more sharpshooter eggs, and the process starts all over again. The troubling question is whether the Minnesota wasps can adapt to the California environment and survive the heat. The initial release of wasps is to be in Riverside, Kern, and Ventura counties.



California has already released more than one million parasitic wasps of other species as part of the eradication effort spearheaded by the Pierce's Disease/Glassy-winged Sharpshooter Board, which is overseen by the CDFA. In addition, about \$166 million has been spent in state and federal funds for research and close monitoring of nursery plant shipments to northern California.

What is at stake? Only California's \$45 billion wine grape industry.