



# PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinotphiles

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*Pinot Noir  
is the  
Chosen One*

## Clos Pepe

**A Grape named Pinot, A Vigneron, a Facilitator, a Dead Head,  
a Dog named Bud, and a Horse named Charlemagne**



The Clos Pepe story begins with a familiar ring. Stephen P. Pepe grew up in northern New Jersey in a second-generation Italian American family whose love of *vino* was ingrained in their heritage. His grandfather had emigrated from a village destroyed by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius and was a respectable home winemaker. Stephen developed an interest in the grape as well, dreaming of one day owning his own vineyard. Years of education intervened as well as a successful career as a partner in an international law firm. Eventually his new found discretionary income allowed him to collect and drink wines of the Cabernet Sauvignon persuasion, but he was to soon develop a higher passion for the “infant terrible” of the wine kingdom, Pinot Noir. In 1990, Stephen married Catherine Hagen, another partner in the law firm at which Stephen worked, a seminal event that was to take the Clos Pepe story on an adventurous path to the fulfillment of Stephen’s dream.

Catherine and Stephen moved into a small and unimposing house in Long Beach, California, an improbable site for the birth of Clos Pepe. Stephen’s marriage had inspired him to pursue his lifelong dream to be a vigneron. He said, “For many people, and I must be one of them, love and marriage provide just the inspiration and impetus one needs to fulfill what was once merely an elusive fantasy.” The plans for a vineyard in the backyard were hatched with Catherine’s unwitting blessing. The vineyard’s name originated from the cinder block wall surrounding the yard (“clos” means enclosure in French). Undeterred by the fact that there was no historical record of a viable vineyard in Long Beach, and possessing only the rudiments of viticultural knowledge, the Pepe’s planted 24 Sauvignon Blanc and 30 Pinot Noir vines in their backyard. The first harvest in 1991 yielded a grand total of four bunches of grapes. The experience, however, had the Pepes hooked on winegrowing.

Undaunted, the Pepes brought in noted vineyardist, Jeff Newton, of Coastal Vineyard Care, to consult on Clos Pepe. This was tantamount to asking the Pope to stop by your house to read you some scripture. Once Jeff had recovered from his amazement upon visiting Clos Pepe and tendered some advice, he told the Pepes that the Lompoc area of the Santa Ynez Valley on Highway 246 or Santa Rosa Road would be an ideal region for

growing Pinot Noir. Stephen had visions of a commercial vineyard which would keep him challenged and interested, yet providing him a place to eventually retire and find time to travel. He knew he wanted to grow Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, and the western Santa Ynez Valley seemed to be a perfect fit.

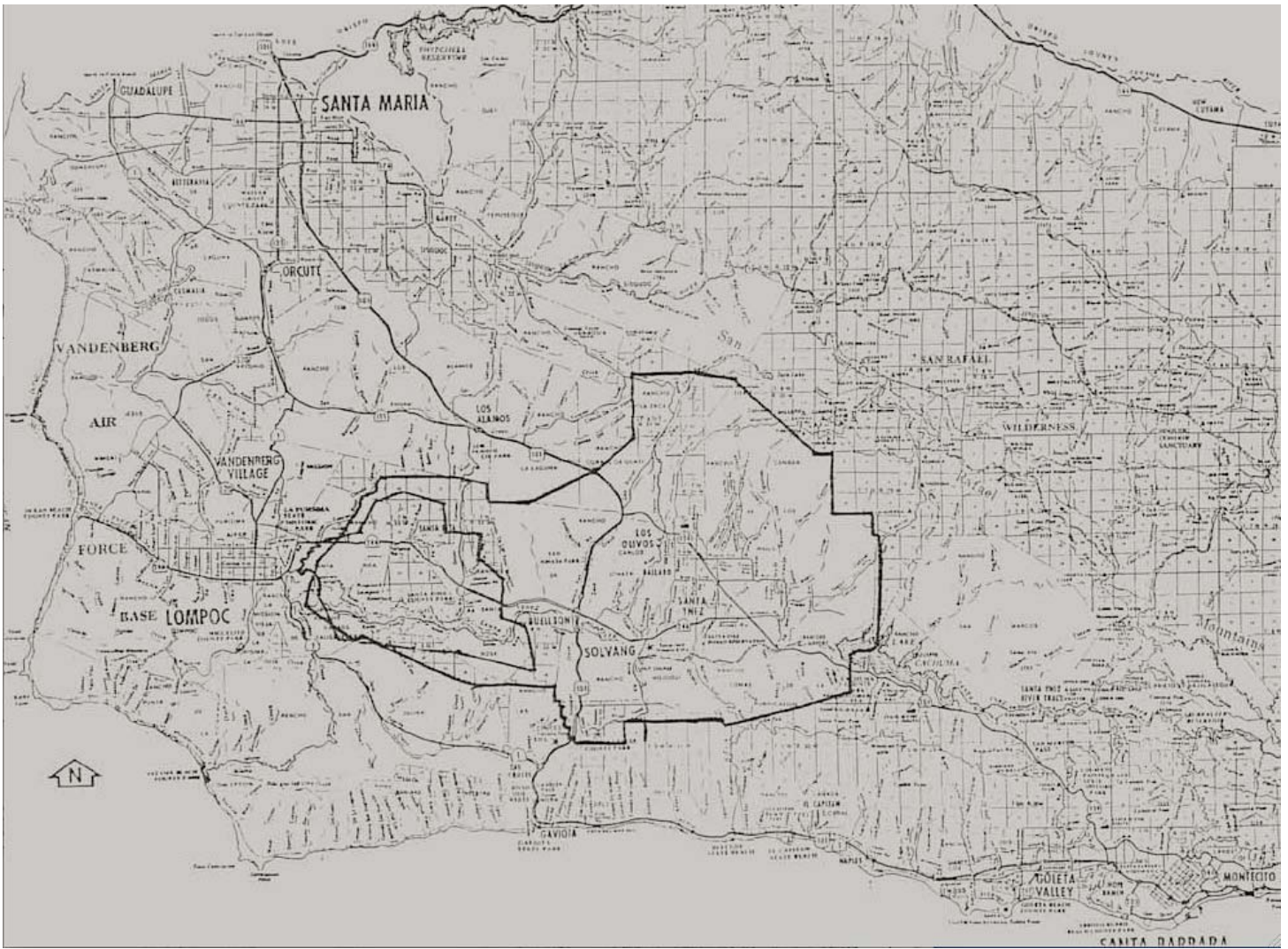
When Stephen and Catherine began a search in earnest for property in the early 1990s, there were just three wineries and five growers in the Lompoc area. The region, known as the Santa Rita Hills, was not to become an approved American Viticultural Area until 2001. Several properties became available in the viticultural area but for various reasons either seemed unsuitable or the Pepes were outbid by others. These properties became Zotovich Family Vineyard, Rozak Vineyard, Ampelos Cellars and Melville Winery. Serendipity would eventually shine on the Pepes, who acquired a 40-acre horse ranch in Lompoc located just west of Babcock Winery on Highway 246. Escrow closed on December 7, 1994, one day before the Pepes' fourth wedding anniversary. The property was enclosed, albeit by a horse fence, so the name Clos Pepe could still be invoked. The property's wide-body trailer was suitable for temporary living and a large horse barn had the potential to be converted into a permanent home. A dream that began as a tiny backyard vineyard in Long Beach, would become Clos Pepe Vineyards and Estate Wines.

The superficial soils at Clos Pepe were ideal for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, composed of well-draining calcareous shale with some sandy loam (the region had been under the ocean at one time). Unbeknown to the Pepes, there was a hard pan located several feet from the surface which would deter vine roots from penetrating deeply, discovered after an attempt to grow pumpkins on the property failed. This potential obstacle was circumvented by deep ripping of the soil before planting. For a full discussion of the soils and microclimate of Clos Pepe Vineyard, consult the Clos Pepe website at [www.clospepe.com](http://www.clospepe.com). Under the direction of Jeff Newton, fourteen acres of Chardonnay went into the ground in 1994 using four clones: Davis 4 and 5, Dijon 76, and Wente. Two years later, fourteen acres of Pinot Noir were planted to four clones: Dijon 115, 667 and 777 and Pommard using an 8' x 4' spacing. Because of poor ripening, in 2001, 10 acres of Chardonnay planted to Davis clones 4 and 5 were budded over to Dijon clones 115 and 777 of Pinot Noir leaving 4 acres of Chardonnay and 24 acres of Pinot Noir. 650 Tuscan olive trees were added to embellish the landscape and provide the source for olive oil which would become the source for an award-winning commercial product along side Clos Pepe Estate wines.

The Santa Rita Hills is a western sub-appellation of the much larger Santa Ynez Valley viticultural appellation located between the towns of Buellton and Lompoc in Santa Barbara County. The eastern edge of Sta. Rita Hills is about four miles west of Highway 101 in Buellton, and continues to the western boundary, about two miles east of Highway 1 in Lompoc. The southern boundary is the North side of the Santa Rosa Hills, with the northern boundary the South side of the Purisima Hills. Officially, the Santa Rita Hills appellation is Sta. Rita Hills, since Vina Santa Rita, a 123-year-old winery in Santiago, Chile, threatened to file suit in 2001 to stop California vintners from using the Santa Rita Hills name. The name, Sta. Rita Hills, was officially adopted in 2006, and is pronounced the same, but reads a little awkwardly. The Sta. Rita Hills appellation is the only region along the Pacific coastline where the mountains run true east-west instead of north-south. The two east-west oriented valleys centered by Santa Rosa Road and Highway 246 create a gap that allows cooling Pacific Ocean winds to flow inland. When it is hot in Santa Ynez which is forty miles to the East, it is 20 degrees cooler in the western Sta. Rita Hills. Fog hovers over the vines until mid morning, and the temperature barely rises above 75 degrees in the western reaches of the appellation. Mid day cooling winds off the Pacific Ocean are common, often gusting at 20 to 30 miles-per-hour.

The Sta. Rita Hills appellation spans 30,720 acres (100 square miles), making it one of the smallest viticultural appellations in California. Over 2,000 acres are planted to grapes, mostly Pinot Noir with smaller amounts of Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Gewurztraminer, Riesling and Syrah.

A map of the Sta. Rita Hills appellation with locations of important vineyards and wineries is on the Sta. Rita Hills Winegrowers Alliance website at [www.staritahills.com](http://www.staritahills.com). The map below, taken from the Clos Pepe website, [www.clospepe.com](http://www.clospepe.com), shows the outline of the larger Santa Ynez Valley viticultural appellation and the enclosed smaller Sta. Rita Hills viticultural appellation.



In 1994, Catherine's second son, Wesley (pictured below), had moved onto the property as a caretaker while the Pepes continued to make the many weekend trips from Long Beach to Lompoc. His official title was "Scholar-in-Residence," as he was a graduate of the University of Redlands with a degree in English and had set about writing the Great American Novel. His musical interests veered to the Grateful Dead and his drink of choice was beer (Stephen notes, "He didn't know the difference between Grand Cru Burgundy and root beer"). In 1996, wine had begun to pique Wes's interest and he offered to assist Stephen with his home winemaking career which dated back to the 1991 vintage. Stephen had acquired grapes each harvest from various Santa Ynez Valley sources and produced both forgettable and unforgettable Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines through these formative winemaking years.



Wes worked the 1996 crush at neighboring Babcock Winery and this experience convinced him that he wanted to pursue a career as a winegrower and winemaker. As fate would have it, Jeff Newton was heavily involved in distant vineyard projects and no longer could manage the Clos Pepe Vineyard, departing in 1996. The Scholar-in-Residence put aside the Great American Novel, and stepped in to become the vineyard manager and winemaker for Clos Pepe.

Wes's aspirations were fueled by the success of a 1997 vintage Cabernet Sauvignon sourced from Knight's Valley and Edna Valley which won a Best of Show Award at the Orange County Fair Wine Competition, and the Clos Pepe Chardonnay he made in 1998 from the vineyard's fourth vintage. Wes experienced a revelation in 1998 when he accompanied Stephen to a tasting of the 1995 vintage wines of Domaine de la Romanee-Conti put on by the Chevaliers du Tastevin in Los Angeles. Stephen was to reminisce, "Wes spent most of the evening furiously scribbling pages of notes and, when there was a pause in the conversation, peppered Mr. de Villaine with questions. Wes gushed about the wines for several days."

By 2003, Stephen and Catherine had tired of commuting to Clos Pepe north in Lompoc from Clos Pepe south in Long Beach each weekend and made a permanent move to their Sta. Rita Hills estate. Catherine set about directing the conversion of the property's horse barn to a Tuscan-styled villa while maintaining her position with the law firm until 2005 to provide the capital for the undertaking. Her needlepoint pillows and wall decor became a central theme of the interior decor. "Theme park" embellishments were added to the property over time, including the first bocce court in the Santa Rita Hills, a basketball court, a horseshoe pit, a skateboard ramp, and a roller skating rink.



Stephen set off to learn more about viticulture, attending courses at University of California Davis with Wes. Stephen would be the first to admit that he was "winging it" when it came to many viticultural decisions at Clos Pepe, but he gained invaluable experience which was to lead to ultimate success.

Over time a menagerie of animals found a home at Clos Pepe, including six dogs: Bud and Samson, both Dalmatians, Winston, a pug, Rosa, a border-collie, and Indy and Tiva, both greyhounds. It was Bud that was most special since he had been with the Pepes since their days in Long Beach. Bud was obsessed with catching the ducks that lived on the pond of the property but in eight years of trying he was never successful. Stephen described the dog's frustration, "The ducks had a clever strategy in which the male ducks would circle around the females, then one male would peel off as a lure to Bud, who would go after him. Unfortunately, Bud's doggy paddle was no match for the mallard's ducky paddle. If Bud got too close, the decoy duck would simply take wing and fly about 10 feet to safety. Bud voiced his protest at this 'fowl play' by barking furiously at the injustice of it all."



The 2000 vintage brought two significant developments. The inaugural commercial release from Clos Pepe Estate was warmly received by wine critics, and Wes got married. Wes met his wife, Chanda, at concert where a Grateful Dead-wannabe band called Family Dog was playing. She had a bottle of wine in hand, and the two hit it off immediately. Before long she and her horse, Charlemagne, had taken up residence at Clos Pepe and the couple were married in the midst of Clos Pepe Vineyard on a sunny and blissful September day.

The Pepes found an eager market for their grapes and the demand was a source of pride for the Pepes. Clients for Chardonnay included Babcock Winery, Hartley-Ostini Hitching Post Winery (vineyard designated and sold at the Hitching Post Restaurant), Brewer-Clifton Winery (now bottling Clos Pepe Chardonnay under the Diatom label), Longoria, Ojai Vineyard, and Roessler Cellars. As the Pinot Noir vines came into production, demand for Clos Pepe grapes was also exceedingly high. Wineries sourcing Pinot Noir over the years have included A.P. Vin, Arcadian, Bonaccorsi Wine Company, Brewer-Clifton Winery, Carr Vineyards, Copain, Ken Brown, Kenneth Crawford, Hartley-Ostini Hitching Post Winery, Loring Wine Company, The Ojai Vineyard, Roessler Cellars, Siduri and Tyler. Today, Clos Pepe sells 75% of the grapes, retaining 25% of their output for their own estate wine program.

In early February of 2010 I joined Stephen Pepe, Wes Hagen, and Eric Anderson (Grape-Nutz and Grape Radio) at Stephen's home for a horizontal tasting of all the 2007 Pinot Noirs produced from Clos Pepe Vineyard in 2007. The tasting was quite informative because the ten wines were tasted in chronological order according to when the grapes had been picked during harvest, from the earliest pick (Ojai) to the latest pick (Loring). The wines were noteworthy for showing the marriage of high natural acidity and moderately high natural alcohol, typical of Pinot Noir from the Sta. Rita Hills. The early picked wines showed crisp and juicy cherry and raspberry fruits with prominent minerality and were more terroir driven. The later picked wines displayed more blue and black fruits, sweet and sappy flavors, notes of tar and creosote, were less nuanced, and were more barrel and style driven.

Winemaking at Clos Pepe Estate is non-interventional and dictated by the work that goes into growing grapes that allows picking at optimal ripeness. A cold soak of 2-3 days is followed by fermentation in small open-top fermenters initially with native yeasts followed by inoculation with RC-212 yeast. The wine is raised in 25% to 50% new French oak barrels, aged for 11 to 19 months, and minimally fined with little or no filtration.

Production of Clos Pepe Estate wines is as follows: 800 cases of Pinot Noir, 75 cases of Vigneron Select Pinot Noir, and 150 cases of Chardonnay. In drought years production is reduced by 50 to 100 cases and in wet years like 2005 production is higher by the same amount. In 2008, two-thirds of the vineyard crop was lost due to frost resulting in a yield of two-thirds tons per acre. Because there were a dozen or so extra uncommitted barrels, a second label called Axis Mundi was started using Syrah from Sleepy Hollow Vineyard in the Santa Lucia Highlands. This is a food-friendly wine that avoids the trap of high oak, high tannin, high alcohol and over ripeness found in many California Syrahs. 300 cases were produced. The Syrah was so well received, the wine was also produced in 2009. In 2010 a white wine from Chenin Blanc grapes is being contemplated.





**2007 The Ojai Vineyard Clos Pepe Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 14.0% alc., \$37.40. 100% Pommard clone. Beginning with the 2009 vintage, Ojai will be replaced by Arcadian. *A delicate style which is immensely pleasing. Flavorful red strawberries and raspberries framed by bright acidity and gossamer tannins. Minerality is prevalent throughout.*



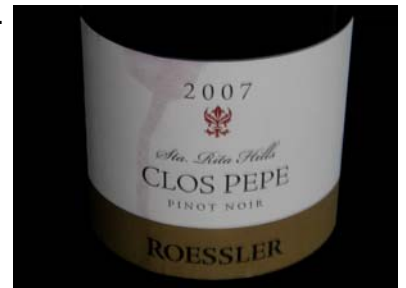
**2007 Clos Pepe Estate Clos Pepe Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 13.9% alc., 550 cases, \$54. 50% 115, 25% 667, 25% 777. Beginning in 2008, Pommard clone will be added to the Clos Pepe Estate Pinot Noir bottling. *Lovely aromas of fresh-picked berries, plums, grape must, and a hint of mint and floral bouquet. Discreetly concentrated core of mildly sweet red and black fruits, with flavors of saffron, tea, soy and oak adding interest. A vein of minerality adds to the pleasure. Smoothly textured with some persistence on the finish.*



**2007 Ken Brown Clos Pepe Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 14.7% alc., \$50. 100% Pommard. *Lightest in color of the lineup of wines. Demure aromas of cherries and berries. Well-flavored red and blue fruits with lively acidity on the bright finish. Less tannic and more elegant than past Clos Pepe bottlings from Ken Brown and more to my liking.*



**2007 Roessler Clos Pepe Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 14.7% alc., \$50. *Alluring scents of darker Pinot fruits with hints of herbs and violets. Mouth-coating and persistent flavors of plums and blackberries with round, restrained tannins. A riper style that is well composed. Very good.*



**2007 Clos Pepe Estate Clos Pepe Vineyard Vigneron Selection Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 13.9% alc., 72 cases, \$59. A tank bottle (from bottom of tank). Favorite barrels in the cellar. *Off scent and flavor which largely resolves over time revealing shy aromas of black cherries, raspberries and blackberries which carry over in the flavor profile. Soft and smooth in the mouth, with the fruit well caressed by balancing tannins and acidity. Not up to the bottle I sampled in May 2009 which was exceptional. Good.*





**2007 Copain Clos Pepe Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 14.1% alc., \$50. *The berry aromas are shy but charming. Rich and full-flavored core of lovely plum and blackberry fruits. Harmonious and thirst-quenching, this wine is a perfect marriage of finesse and powerful flavors.*



**2007 Siduri Clos Pepe Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 14.1% alc., 241 cases, \$50. *The nose offers aromas of dark berries, oak and creosol. Rich and fruit-driven, and somewhat linear. Very smoothly textured with caressing tannins and acidity. Good.*



**2007 A.P. Vin Clos Pepe Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 14.7% alc., \$40. 100% clone 115. *The nose lacks interest offering primarily aromas of herbal oak and little fruit. Rich, even sappy, blue and black fruits with aggressive rough tannins. A simple, husky wine that may be going through a dumb phase. Decent.*



**2009 Brewer-Clifton Clos Pepe Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 15.4% alc., \$65. The only wine in the lineup with significant (100% in this case) stem inclusion. Because the fruit is picked late, the stems raise the acidity to balance the prodigious fruit and tannins. 100% Pommard. *Quite distinctive with a heavily perfumed nose of cut flowers and spice. Plenty of mouth coating sweet red and black fruit augmented by prominent spice flavors. The tannins are restrained and well-integrated. An enjoyable sipping wine. Very good.*



**2007 Loring Wine Co Clos Pepe Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 14.9% alc., \$45. Clones 115 and 667. *Bright aromas of dark berries, brown spice and fresh-cut flowers. Riper flavors with an underlying riff of tar and earth framed by bold tannins. Fruit-driven and flashy. Good.*

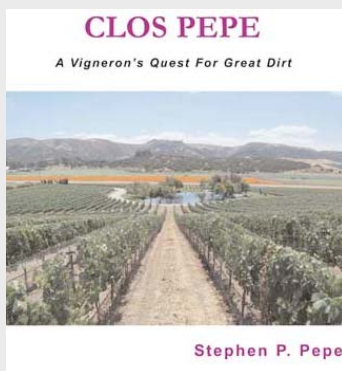


The 2008 vintages of Clos Pepe Estate Pinot Noir were recently tasted at home in my usual fashion.

**2008 Clos Pepe Estate Clos Pepe Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 14.2% alc., 235 cases, \$54. Multiple frost events led to a tiny crop of less than a half ton per acre in some places. *Subdued aromas of dark berries with a hint of smoke. Bright and juicy mineral-laden flavors of red and blue berries. Vibrant and refreshing with a smooth mouth feel and some persistence. A promising wine that is still undeveloped and will require time for full oak integration. More delicate than the 2007 version, but will certainly rival it with more time in the bottle. Very good.*



**2008 Clos Pepe Estate Clos Pepe Vineyard Vigneron Selection Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 14.2% alc., \$59. Three favorite barrels aged in 66% new French oak. *Noticeably lighter in color than the 2007 version of this wine. Don't be put off by the color, however, as the wine is well-structured and full-flavored. Oak char is dominating the nose at this stage and underlies the flavor profile as well. Delicious strawberry and cherry flavors peek out which are vivid and satisfying. The tannins are restrained leading to a pleasingly soft mouth feel. Immature and closed, this wine will need at least two years in the cellar. Slightly better the next day from a previously opened and re-corked bottle. Very good.*



Stephen Pepe has penned a book that is a compilation of the humorous newsletters that he sent to friends during the years of 1991 to 1997. He had initially intended to keep friends apprised of his and Catherine's winegrowing escapades that began with a very modest backyard vineyard in Long Beach, California in 1991. Starting from scratch with literally no viticultural experience, the couple eventually established Clos Pepe Vineyards and Estate Wines in the Santa Rita Hills region of Santa Barbara County.

As a lawyer who had written considerable volumes of legal briefs, Stephen felt that the portrayal of his story needed to be more succinct and appealing to the casual reader. He enlisted the services of Susan Duff, a New York writer from whom he borrowed the editorial expertise to complete the book. As he notes, "While the story is mine, its readability is Susan's."

Stephen bares all in this slyly amusing story, exposing the many mistakes and miscalculations along the way that endears the reader to his remarkable, and in a number of instances, dumb luck success. Like the sharecroppers in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, but blessed with much less impoverishment, the Pepes set out in search of land, risking the reality that the prospects ahead might not be what they had hoped for. Remarkably, fifteen years after acquiring a 40-acre horse ranch, Clos Pepe has become one of California's most highly regarded vineyards and a sought-after source of premium Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Cozy up with a glass of Clos Pepe Pinot Noir and enjoy this fascinating story that will keep you smiling to the end. A great read for wine novices and wine connoisseurs alike.



Clos Pepe Estate wines are available through a mailing list and the winery's online store at [www.clospepe.com](http://www.clospepe.com). Of interest is that the label art is changed for each vintage. The artists are asked to spend a day or two at the vineyard to soak up some "Clos Pepe-ness," and then create a piece of art that represents the vineyard to them. A Rosé is also produced and is superb. The 2009 Clos Pepe Estate Extra-Virgin Olive Oil is a Tuscan-styled blend of several varieties of olive trees and priced at \$25 for a 250 ml bottle. Stephen Pepe's book is available for \$25 through the website. I would urge you to schedule a tour of this beautiful property where you will be warmly received, and taste with Stephen or Wes (805-735-2196). Wes can talk for hours about the geology of the Santa Rita Hills so you may have to reign him in, and don't let his English-degree-driven wine-descriptive vocabulary intimidate you.

# Whole Cluster Fermentation: A Wild Card

In winemaking there are no absolute truths, no universal approach, no proven methodology. This is what makes wine so interesting, so variable in its expression, so endearing to the consumer. One man's whole cluster triumph is another's green garden atrocity. The use of whole clusters in fermentation is, as winemaker Michael Browne of Kosta Browne states, "A bit of a wild card depending on site and vintage. When it works it affects aromatics and flavors, sometimes in an earthy sense, sometimes in a vegetative sense, and sometimes in both ways. Some of the aromas and flavors I see are clean earth, green tobacco, unlit cigar tobacco, black or white pepper and snap peas. Sometimes even cologne or agave. I tend not to like the snap pea or green profiles."

Michael Browne's concerns are widely held, for the unpredictability of whole cluster fermentation can result in a wine that is herbaceous, vegetal or green. On the other hand, if the stems are mature and the clusters are never crushed, pumped or damaged in any way to avoid the release of juice from the stems into the wine, the resulting wine can be enhanced by whole cluster inclusion.

Whole cluster fermentation refers to the fermentation of intact clusters of grapes (Dijon clusters are pictured) as they are picked from the vine with no intervention of machines leaving all berries and stems (the part of the stem which holds the grapes is called the rachis) intact. Traditionally, red winemaking begins with crushing of the grapes to start to release the contents of the berries and de-stemming to remove the grapes from the rachis. A mechanical crusher/de-stemmer is often used. The stems are often removed in red winemaking before fermentation since the stems have a high tannin content and when unripe, stems can give the wine a green aroma due to extraction of 2-methoxy-3-isopropylpyrazine which has an aroma reminiscent of green bell peppers. With Pinot Noir, even if the clusters are de-stemmed, the grapes are usually left uncrushed ("whole berry") to encourage the development of desirable aromas through partial carbonic maceration (fermentation within the grape coincident with fermentation of the juice which seeps out of the grape).



A recent tasting I did in the cellars of Freestone Vineyards with winemaker Theresa Heredia started me thinking about whole cluster inclusion and how it can affect the aromas, flavors and tannin structure of a finished wine. We tasted together three samples of 2008 Pinot Noir from barrel that had no stem inclusion (100% de-stemmed), 30-40% stem inclusion and 100% stem inclusion. I could clearly taste a step up in aromatic and flavor complexity with increasing amounts of stem inclusion along with a more bold and lengthy tannin structure. When ripe stems are properly managed, it was clear to me that their inclusion produced a superior Pinot Noir.

The Burgundians have practiced stem inclusion for centuries, as historically they had no de-stemmers. Today, many notable Domaines are advocates of whole cluster such as Dujac and Domaine de la Romanee-Conti. The New World has largely moved away from whole cluster fermentation or limit it to 10% to 30% of the clusters. There are, however, some devotees who use as much as 100% whole cluster in selected wines (Ambullneo, Freestone Vineyards, Native9, Tantara, and Windy Oaks among others) with favorable results.

I polled a number of prominent Pinot Noir winery owners, winemakers and a Professor at University of California Davis to ask them about their understanding of the contribution of whole cluster fermentation to Pinot Noir. None could elucidate the exact biochemistry involved as this has apparently not been clarified, but their responses shed considerable light on the role of whole cluster fermentation in Pinot Noir winemaking today. I have excerpted their comments for brevity.

## Pro Whole Cluster

**Kevin Harvey, Owner, Rhys Vineyards** "I have not studied whole cluster fermentation from a chemical standpoint. My evaluation of stems has been almost entirely organoleptic. I love the complex spicy, rose petal aromatics and soft silky texture. I do know that the whole berry fermentation and resulting intracellular fermentation produce the rose petal aromatic. In addition, the stems add some forest floor elements from the rachis which become integrated spice with time in the bottle. The tannins also differ in that stems contribute

some tannins (which is often silky smooth midpalate tannin) while preventing the harsh seed tannin from being released since the grape remains encapsulated longer.”

**Jeff Brinkman, Winemaker, Rhys Vineyards** “While I have never seen a biochemical analysis of whole cluster ferments, I think you could infer the presence of several groups of organic compounds. I would look into the terpenes, terpenoids and isoprenoids. As you know, the terpenes are responsible for the abundance of floral aromas in wine. My personal feeling is that since commercially terpenes are extracted from tree resins, especially conifers, the residual sap in stems may contribute some of the floral aromas and the distinct pine sap aroma that can be found in whole cluster ferments. Some of the floral aromas are not very different chemically from those that give pine sap their aroma. Another class of organic compounds, the acetate esters, may be involved as they form many of the aromatic compounds in wine. I don’t know any of this for fact, its just what I think about when I am laying awake at 3:00 A.M..”

**Theresa Heredia, Winemaker, Freestone Vineyards** “Like the grape skin, stems contain phenolic components, including tannins. Not removing the stems can help improve the phenolic structure of Pinot Noir since it is a thin skin grape and has little tannin naturally. The stems also contain pyrazines so if the stems are not ripe enough, they can cause herbaceous characteristics in the wine. However, the combination of the pyrazines and tannins, along with the many other natural components that stems contain, can add plenty of lovely spice characteristics to the wine. The riper the stems, the spicier the flavors. The greener the stems, the more herbaceous the wine can become.”

**Jim Schultze, Winemaker, Windy Oaks Winery and Vineyards** “I have always liked an element of whole clusters in our fermentations, but our 100% Whole Cluster Pinot Noir release has been a real eye opener. Of all of our nine 2007 Pinot Noir releases, the 100% Whole Cluster clearly would have the most tannin, yet it is the smoothest and most approachable at a young age. I don’t think this is a coincidence!”

“Grape stems contain large amounts of phenolics, particular tannins and flavonols, and other flavor compounds. The key, though is physiological ripeness since immature stems can provide a significant hit of green flavors. While seeds also contain high amounts of tannin, it is hard to extract. Moreover, stems contain many other flavor compounds not found in seeds.”

“It is the unusual vineyard that can reliably produce physiologically ripe stems each year. When our fruit is starting to ripen, I taste the stems on a regular basis. I find that they hit a point where the tannic harshness disappears and is replaced by a very pleasant smooth flavor. Stems can then contribute these flavors to the wine.”

“Another dimension to whole cluster fermentation is prolongation of fermentation. I find consistently that our 100% whole cluster fermentations last much longer than our other fermentations. This past fall, our 100% whole cluster fermentations averaged more than 35 days, while our other fermentations (which were partial whole cluster) lasted around 30 days. I think the reason is that at the beginning of whole cluster ferments, some of the fermentation is taking place inside the grapes (carbonic maceration). Over time, the skins begin to break down and the juice is released, resulting in a more typical fermentation. I have also found that our fermentation temperatures are lower with the 100% whole cluster fermentation, no doubt extending the fermentation, but also resulting in a different flavor profile.”

**Michael Browne, Winemaker, Kosta Browne** “Whole cluster fermentation affects the tannin structure. It can be a subtle effect or quite grippy. When used as a blending component it can work very well concerning texture. I found when a bottle is allowed to age, the texture from whole cluster can add a dense velvety character, but when you omit whole cluster, this character can be a bit more aggressive. I ferment whole cluster as 100% whole cluster lots so I can then blend just the right amount into the finished wine. More popular now is to add whole clusters to the fermentation with de-stemmed fruit. Nothing wrong with this but this is not how I choose to ferment. I find the site has an impact on how the wine reacts as does the vintage. I test a few lots early in the vintage to see how the vintage will affect whole cluster ferments and I then adjust the rest of the program accordingly.”

**Jeff Fink, Winemaker, Tantara** “I am in the midst of assembling the 2008 Pinots and my palate is now acutely dialed into the merits and downside of stem inclusion. Starting with fruit selection, certain vineyards are better and more consistently able to achieve riper stems. That begs the question: What constitutes stem ripeness? The following things are important: (1) Color of the stem. We look for a darker green. Bright lime green indicates harsher and more astringent tannins, (2) Aromatics of de-stemmed stalks. We look for sweet rather

than overtly herbaceous aromas, (3) Stiffness. We avoid rubbery stems, (4) Lignification. There should be preferably an inch of woody material where the stem connects to the stalk. This can be more or less but the whole stem is never entirely lignified, (5) Where the berries connect to the stalk should have a dark color and the berry should be easily removed leaving little pulp. This is all linked to fruit ripeness but certainly there can be ripe fruit on under ripe stems. In the Central Coast, our extremely long growing season is certainly a benefit in helping to achieve stem ripeness.”

“What do stems bring to the vinification? We normally ferment about 10% of our lots with some percentage of stem inclusion. In our small fermenters that hold up to 1.5 tons or 3 picking bins of grapes we might add a bin of carefully sorted whole clusters and then cover that with a bin of de-stemmed fruit. This protects against the formation of volatile acidity that can occur in uncrushed exposed grapes. We will also do some 100% whole cluster ferments. These need to have a juice covering also and we release juice by the traditional method of pigeage or by foot. We harvest our grapes cool, then cold soak until they reach the temperature where fermentation naturally starts and we either inoculate with yeast or allow them to ferment on the native yeast. We find that whole cluster fermentations seem to ferment cooler, longer, and are markedly different in aroma and flavor. We think this is due to the significant amount of unbroken berries. The stems are the best vehicle for ensuring a higher percentage of whole berries. We notice no reduction in pigmentation and, in some cases, the wine may be darker following whole cluster ferment. The whole cluster wines can have more of a green and chalky astringency when young. For this reason, we tend to avoid stem inclusion from vineyards that produce naturally more herbal or tannic wines. In riper fruit, we think stems may avoid the production of higher alcohol and over ripe flavors but we have never quantified this.”

“I am a big fan of the things that whole cluster fermentation can bring to the finished wine. The aromatics can be thrilling and literally spine tingling. There can be a purity, depth and freshness to the bouquet that almost defies description. I suppose the case could be made that these wines are stylized. It could also be argued that these wines represent more of the site and are more minimalist.”

“We typically find that with new world palates it can be harder to achieve an acceptable balance of fruit, aroma and structure so we have never commercially released a 100% whole cluster Pinot. However, we do bottle them and as we evaluate how they age that could change. Also, our most expensive wine, Evelyn, has been the wine with the highest percentage of stem inclusion. This year our proposed final blend will be about 30%.”

“In conclusion, stem inclusion brings depth, texture, fragrance, age ability and that mysterious element of intrigue that all great Pinot should have and aspire to. In 2009, we vinified our first Garys’ Vineyard with stem inclusion. At this point the results are stunning both aromatically and on the palate. We plan to continue our study and evaluation of stem inclusion.”

**Ted Lemon, Winemaker, Littorai** “The most basic chemical fact is that when you add stems to a wine, you increase the pH and decrease the TA compared to a completely de-stemmed wine. The implication of this is obvious. If you add a large percentage of whole clusters, you may, depending on region, vintage and ripeness at picking, have to acidify the resulting wine unless you are comfortable with very high pHs. That is the downside from a chemical perspective.”

“There is a difference between just adding stems back (which basically no one does) and doing a percent of whole cluster, because, the whole cluster brings a dimension of carbonic fermentation to the resulting wine. Besides the carbonic effect, there is also the sensory effect of the stems themselves. They can lend aromas which range from vegetal to menthol to wintergreen to cinnamon and spices. Stems can also have a dramatic affect on flavors. They can lend astringency and bitterness. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of stems is their effect on the tannic impression of a wine on the palate. Some people claim that stems make a wine more tannic. I would argue the other way. Due to the increase in pH and the presence of a partial carbonic maceration, whole cluster wines tend to be softer than de-stemmed wines (depending on the region, vintage and percentage of whole cluster).”

“In summary, the effects of whole cluster fermentation are wide ranging and dynamic and reflective of the region, vintage and percentage of whole cluster. Over the years, my philosophy has evolved to the following:

1. If the vintage and region lends itself to some percentage of whole cluster, I like to use whole clusters. I find it adds an extra dimension to the palate and aromas of a wine.

2. Importantly, I find that adding a percentage of whole cluster adds aromatic freshness to older Pinot Noirs. A Pinot Noir that is ten years old and has a percentage of whole cluster will be more aromatically complex than the same wine 100% de-stemmed.

3. Region and vintage are the deciding factors. There are some regions where stems do seem to retain an aggressive green character and therefore it is difficult to do much whole cluster. By the same token, there are regions which seem to benefit dramatically from a percentage of whole cluster as the added complexity really changes the wine. An example is Central Otago, where some of my favorite producers do whole cluster and where we are doing quite a bit at Burn Cottage Vineyard, my client there. The Central Otago fruit seems to really benefit from whole cluster.

4. Stem ripeness varies dramatically from vintage to vintage and this is an important consideration. Ripeness is in the eye of the beholder. I will never forget a tasting with Henri Mayer in his cellar in around 1984 when he stated emphatically that there are never ripe stems in Burgundy.

5. Over the years I have been personally more committed to making wine with no additives except SO<sub>2</sub>. For example, at Littorai we use no cultured yeast, yeast nutrients, cultured MI bacteria, bacteria nutrients, enzymes and, importantly, no acid additions. Therefore, I am very careful that we do not add so much whole cluster that it would require us to acidify. The final decision on the percentage of whole cluster becomes reflective not only of region and vintage, but also of the desire to stay true to the path of “natural” winemaking.”

## No Whole Cluster

**David Lloyd, Winemaker, Eldridge Estate, Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, Australia** “I recently attended a tasting of winemakers’ experiments. Some of the experiments looked at tannins and whole cluster. The summary of the discussion was as follows. De-stemming and adding back the stems in layers gives coarse tannins because of cell damage occurring during the de-stemming process. Whole cluster requires earlier pressing to make sure sappy tannins are not extracted. One experiment involved foot stomping. One batch was divided into 3. Batch 1 was whole berry de-stem only with 14 day pressing. Batch 2 had 1 hour of foot stomping about a week after de-stemming to make a soup and was pressed after 14 days. Batch 3 was similar to batch 2 except pressing occurred after 21 days. Everyone preferred Batch 1 indicating tannin extraction encouraged by foot stomping is quite different to what happens without it.”

“The problem with whole bunches is that it varies from season to season. In a year where the stems are ripe, the wine can gain body and an element of tannin that goes well with secondary fruit flavors ten years down the track. The green edge is very hard to predict. I have seen yanks and yocals carry on how they have a test or that they can chew the stems to determine ripeness, but my observations are that years of experience helps but it is still hard to get right.”

“The off feature is a green, herbal element that goes from an edge to a dominating feature. Some areas can risk it more often than others but my feeling is that you don’t want to fight terroir. Generally, my Pinot Noir is about pretty fruit flavors and elegance. Stems will either give me a green edge to that, or too much tannin or a very herbal feature, so after five years of experiments, I gave up.”

“Many places in Sonoma, for instance are fine, but if they choose to pick less ripe I wonder whether they too will have greenness as a feature rather than an edge. Burgundians have largely moved to 100% whole berry and sometimes add back stems or add a percentage of stems at a selected point in the ferment. Someone has done work on the green feature versus the time stems are added, and I have a vague memory that a green edge develops if whole bunch is present during cold soak and does not develop if stems are added back when the ferment is under way.”

**Jesse Lange, Winemaker, Lange Estate Winery (Oregon)** “Ahh, whole cluster fermentation. We don’t employ that technique here at Lange Estate for the most part. I do, however, try to have a percentage (75%) of whole berry going into the fermenters. Most of those berries will be broke in the first few days, to avoid a heavy percentage of carbonic maceration, but I like the varying rates of “mini-fermentations” within the must. Most of the whole cluster trials we have done here indicate that, on the whole (pun intended), it doesn’t fit our style, especially when it comes to texture. Stem ripeness is the largest factor for whole cluster and trying to locate that moving target can be tricky for sure. The wood tannins can certainly add some structural backbone, but they can also influence texture and mouth feel in a negative manner. When I worked at Santa Barbara Winery in 1996 and 1997, I liked whole cluster ferments for some of our lots of Pinot Noir and Syrah, and not so much for others. The stems in Santa Barbara County seemed to be far more advanced in lignification than those here in the Willamette Valley.”

**Wes Hagen, Winemaker, Clos Pepe Estate Vineyard and Estate Wines** “Whole cluster fermentation is a Burgundian affectation that I have experimented with. While I agree that it adds some tannin and mid palate mouth feel to young wines, the broccoli stem/veggie/soy sauce character it seems to add to a young wine is not a flavor I enjoy in Pinot Noir. I spend considerable time with canopy management to get the veggie out of Clos Pepe fruit and not sure why I would want to put the flavor back in via stem inclusion. When asked why I don't use stems in Clos Pepe wines, I usually give two answers: #1 I grow grapes to make wine, not stems, and #2 If you need better mouth feel out of Pinot Noir, structuring the wine with a little more acidity seems to be a better solution than letting the grapes get too ripe and flabby and then using stems to put a bit of bones back onto the flesh.”

“Stem inclusion does seem to integrate in a bottle-aged Pinot Noir, say 4 to 5 years down the line, just like oak, but at that point the tannins are mostly polymerized anyway, and the contribution to mouth feel is likely minimal. I believe taking Burgundian production techniques and applying them to California Pinot Noir is antithetical to developing our own regional identity - like bringing Hinduism to Salt Lake City. You may start with a few adherents, but eventually you will be talking to yourself.”

### **An Academic Viewpoint**

**Roger Boulton, Stephen Sinclair Scott Professor of Enology and Chemical Engineering, University of California at Davis** “The contributions of whole cluster fermentation are at least due to two aspects: the intact berry aspect of the whole cluster, and the extraction and adsorption properties of the stems. The first would be similar to that of whole berry effects, which make small contributions normally seen in carbonic maceration. The berry cells undergo a biochemical modification internally, partly fermentation like, but with significant modification of monomeric phenols that results in the carbonic maceration aroma character. This is generally released and most obvious at pressing when it is mostly released into the surrounding wine. The second aspect is thought to be minor, even insignificant from a sensory point of view. While stems can have higher tannin concentrations than berries, there is little evidence that it is actually extracted under winemaking conditions. In fermentations with dry, woody stems, there can be a herbaceous aroma contributed, even a black tea or cedar character. The trials of stem additions that resulted in the tea and cedar character were when stems which had been removed from the berries were added back and not whole cluster fermentations as such. Similarly, there might be some components that would be adsorbed to the stem tissue, but I know of no data that establishes this, either positive or negative.”

“There are some questions whether these practices developed from reliable sensory trials, or rather came about by people going back to minimal handling at the point of cluster to juice, and how much whole clusters and intact berries survive the first days of punch downs, treading, or pump overs. I do not know of any well-controlled trials that have shown significant and reproducible effects, despite considerable anecdotal opinion.”

“There are questions regarding Pinot Noir flavor and aromas versus treatment and other contributions due to style. There will always be the question of expression of terroir and whether stylistic practices mask it or not.”

# Kalin Cellars: Courting Unami

Microbiologists Dr. Terry Leighton and his wife Dr. Frances Leighton founded Kalin Cellars in Marin County in 1977. Terry was the original winemaker at Domaine Laurier in the 1970s before launching his own label. Over the ensuing years, the Leightons have labored in relative obscurity shunning publicity while producing some of the most interesting California wines that only wine critics and wine geeks loudly testify to. The winery is located in an undistinguished warehouse in Novato, California, where the eccentric couple craft wines of unique character, age ability and individuality.

The name Kalin (KAY-len) is a local Indian word for ocean and the Leightons chose this name because it was the only Indian word they could pronounce. The mantra behind the label is the use of traditional, hands-on, labor-intensive methods that do little or nothing to disrupt the character of the wine. In other words, "Produce no wine with less character than yourself."

Terry was the pioneer of unfiltered, sur lie-aged white wines in California dating back to 1981. The Leightons have used their background as research scientists to conduct studies on yeasts and chose yeasts that are very slow fermenters, believing slow fermentation is key for the evolution of flavors in wine, particularly the fifth taste, unami. Described as savory, pungent and meaty, unami is secondary to glutamates common in aged cheeses, meats and wines. The Leightons believe that most wines are not capable of acquiring unami because they are made quickly, sold shortly after each vintage, and consumed long before the fifth flavor is attained. The Leighton's therefore release no wine before its time.

Their style of winemaking produces wines that are not even close to being ready for at least five years. Unheard of in the modern business model of wine sales, they follow no set vintage sequence. The wines are released to the market when the Leightons feel they taste good, usually between 5 to 10 years after the vintage! The current releases of Pinot Noir are the 1998 Cuvée DD Sonoma County and the 1994 Cuvée Billion (Cuvée Rare) Sonoma. A 1997 Potter Valley Sauvignon Blanc Reserve and a 1994 Cuvée LD Sonoma County Chardonnay, a 1994 Cuvée DD Sonoma Chardonnay, and a 1994 Cuvée W Livermore Valley Chardonnay are also current offerings. Essentially every wine Kalin Cellars releases is a library wine! Check previous issues of the *PinotFile* for reviews of the 1990, 1994 and 1995 vintages of Pinot Noir. My favorite of all the Kalin wines may be the Semillon which is worth a search.

The Kalin Cellars Pinot Noirs are for connoisseurs and lovers of aged wine. They offer secondary bouquets and flavors that drinkers accustomed to young wines may find unpalatable. Look for notes of earth, forest floor, meat, soy and leather set off by racy acidity.

Most Kalin wines are uniquely designated by letters which are shorthand for identifying specific vineyard locations and signifying cuvées. Prices are quite reasonable (\$30-\$45) considering the wines have been cellared for years before release. The quirky website lists currently available wines for sale. Production is roughly 7,000 cases annually. To order wines, fill out the online order request form. A few select retail outlets ([www.klwines.com](http://www.klwines.com), Bristol Farms markets in California) and wine savvy restaurants offer the wines as well. Terry will be making a rare appearance at the Redwood City K&L Wines store on Friday, March 19th from 5:00 to 6:30 P.M. for those who live in the Bay Area. The winery is not open for tasting or tours. You can contact Terry ("Dr. Fermento") by e-mail at [tjl@ix.netcom.com](mailto:tjl@ix.netcom.com). 415-883-3543.

## **1996 Kalin Cellars Cuvée Sonoma County Pinot Noir** 13.7% alc., \$45.

*Moderately deep reddish-purple color with a golden rim in the glass. Much better color than the 1998 vintage. Aromas of beef stew, marzipan, and bacon fat with a hint of smoke, ash, nuts and latrine. Many subtle and highly nuanced flavors including blackberries, plums, beef, braised meats and a lingering hi-strung citrus note on the snappy finish. Still possesses some rich fruit on the mid palate and the mouth feel has become plush and inviting. Has held up extremely well with considerable interest and intrigue and will perform nicely at the table. Very good.*



**1998 Kalin Cellars Cuvée Sonoma County Pinot Noir** 13.8% alc., \$45. *Deep reddish-brown, even mahogany color in the glass. Subdued aromas of macerated strawberries, brown spices, leather, roses and green garden. Performs better as it opens in the glass. On the palate, the berry fruits are complimented by flavors of brown sugar, bacon, smoke and grapefruit. A lively grip of acidity highlights the finish. Good.*

# Carr Vineyards & Winery: Urban Winery with a Wine Country Soul

There are some wineries that just exude class and when you visit the Carr website or look at their handsomely appointed wine bottles, you understand the people behind get it. The winery (pictured below) is located in a 1940s Quonset Hut in downtown Santa Barbara, but the wines are rooted in Santa Barbara County wine country soil.



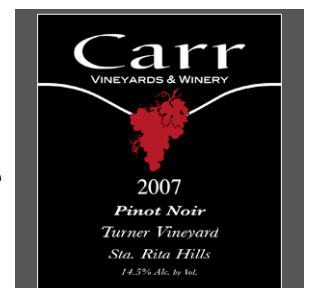
Carr Vineyards is also a vineyard management and development company that currently supervises over 100 acres of vineyards spanning Santa Barbara County. Ryan Carr is the man in charge and he insures that the grapes for his wines are grown to his exact specifications. He wears many hats as the owner, winemaker and grower for Carr Vineyards & Winery. The winery's first vintage was in 1999, consisting of a whopping ten cases produced in Carr's home garage. Currently the Carr Winery produces over 2,500 cases of multiple varietals including Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Grenache, Syrah and Cabernet Franc. The winery's focus is on the Sta. Rita Hills viticultural appellation.

The Carr urbantasting room at 414 N. Salsipeudes St. in Santa Barbara is open daily from 11:00 to 5:00 with the Wine Bar open Thursday through Saturday from 5:00 PM to 12:00 AM. The Carr wines are sold through the web-site's online store at [www.carrwinery.com](http://www.carrwinery.com).

**2007 Carr Vineyards & Winery Three Vineyards Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 14.5% alc., 303 cases, \$40. Sourced from Turner, Yard and Lindsay's vineyards, all located in the Sta. Rita Hills AVA. Clones 114, 115, 777 and Pommard. Aged 12 months in 15% new French oak. *Aromas of darker cherry and berry fruit with notes of marzipan. Juicy core of black cherry fruit with underlying forest floor and earthy flavors. Bright acidity and softly toned tannins with some persistence of pleasing dried cherry on the aromatic finish. Good.*



**2007 Carr Vineyards & Winery Turner Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 14.5% alc., 299 cases, \$40. This vineyard was established by Dennis Turner in 2000 and planted and cultivated by Ryan Carr, consisting of 15 acres of Pinot Noir, 3 acres of Pinot Gris and 3 acres of Syrah. Fourth harvest yielding 2 tons per acre. Aged for 12 months in 20% new oak. *Pleasing aromas of berry jam, cherries, spice and nutmeg gathering intensity with time in the glass. Delicious essence of black cherries with hints of red licorice and minerality leading to a tangy and lengthy finish highlighting bright cherry aromas. The slightly grainy tannins are well integrated and the lively acidity provides refreshing drinking. A well composed and impressive effort that really shows off the purity and vividness of Sta. Rita Hills fruit and acidity.*





# Benziger Pinot Noir Program Now Shines

Benziger Family Winery has achieved a well-deserved reputation for pioneering sustainable, organic and Biodynamic© winegrowing in Sonoma County. In the past, Pinot Noir was not the winery's main focus, but if you visit the website home page now, you will see Pinot Noir prominently touted including a special 3rd Annual Winemaker Pinot Noir Cellar Dinner on March 6, 2010 in the Benziger Wine Caves. At this dinner, winemakers Mike Benziger and Rodrigo Soto are to lead the attendees through a collection of limited production, single vineyard and estate Pinot Noirs.

The Benziger family has been growing grapes on Sonoma Mountain for close to thirty years. In the mid 1990s, Mike Benziger befriended Alan York, one of the leading international experts on biodynamic farming. The resulting transition to biodynamic farming resulted in a higher caliber of Benziger wines.

Chilean-born Rodrigo Soto joined Benziger as director of winemaking in 2006 and manages the Signaterra winemaking program. The Signaterra wines are premium vineyard designated varietals including Pinot Noir, Sauvignon Blanc, and a Bordeaux blend. Soto's experience with biodynamic farming dates to his work as winemaker at Matetic Vineyards in San Antonio, Chile. He works in tandem with Mike Benziger who acts as General Manager and primary winemaker for the Tribute line of Benziger wines.

The newest vintage of Pinot Noirs are wines you can really get your teeth into and are highly recommended. All four of the wines reviewed below are charming and beautifully balanced, and picking one out for special merit is really just a matter of personal preference. Winemaking is traditional for Pinot Noir. After de-stemming, the whole berries are fermented in open top fermenters and cold soaked for 5 to 6 days. Native yeast powers primary and secondary fermentations

Benziger wines are available online at [www.signaterra.com](http://www.signaterra.com) and [www.benziger.com](http://www.benziger.com). The Sonoma Mountain tasting room is open daily and special estate vineyard tours and tastings are available by appointment (707-935-4527).



## 2007 Signaterra Benziger Bella Luna Vineyard Russian River Valley

**Pinot Noir** 14.1% alc., pH 3.50, 1,350 cases, \$49. The Bella Luna Vineyard is one of the coolest vineyards in the Russian River Valley. Clones 115, 667 and 777 are planted in Goldridge soils and the vineyard is now in transition to official Demeter Biodynamic© certification. Aged 11 months in 35% new French oak. *Moderately dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Haunting aromas of darker berries, oak vanillin and toast. Very tasty panoply of purple fruits with hints of cranberry and pomegranate. Rich and persuasive on the palate filling the mouth with pleasure and leaving a smooth and soft imprint on the pleasing finish. A fruit driven style with restrained tannins and a hint of lemon peel on the lively finish. A lovely wine that will find many fans.*



## 2007 Signaterra Benziger Giusti Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir

14.1% alc., pH 3.47, 825 cases, \$49. From a 7-acre vineyard planted in 2000 to clones 667, 115 and 777. The vineyard is located in one of the warmer areas of the Russian River Valley, nicknamed the "banana belt" of the appellation. Certified sustainably grown. Aged in 35% new French oak for 11 months. *A fruity nose displaying aromas of Bing cherries, strawberries, raspberries, cut flowers and herbs. Delicious black cherry bombast that is discreetly concentrated and embellished with notes of dark chocolate, cola, spice and edible flowers. Silky and delicate, this wine is quite charming with respectable length on the pleasing finish. Very good.*

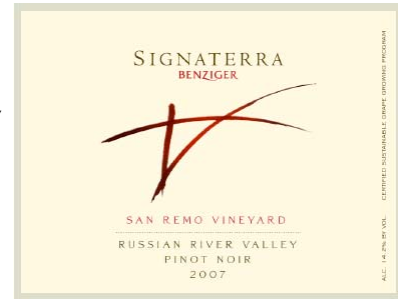




**2007 Signaterra Benziger San Remo Vineyard Russian River Valley**

**Pinot Noir** 14.2% alc., pH 3.62, 650 cases, \$49. 5.24 acres planted to Dijon 115, 667 and 777 in Goldridge series soils. Farmed sustainably.

Aged 11 months in 35% new French oak. *I just loved the nose of delicately spiced cherries. Lovely and generously flavored dark red cherry, strawberry and rhubarb fruit with the faintest underpinning of oak, loamy earth and spice. Juicy and bright with the fruit-forwardness that has made Russian River Valley Pinots so desirable.*



**2007 de Coelo Benziger Quintos Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir**

14.1% alc., pH 3.48, 475 cases, \$69. Sourced from an estate vineyard located in the Freestone Occidental area five miles from the Pacific Ocean. 25 acres, Demeter Certified Biodynamic©, at the edge of where Pinot Noir will grow. Yields 2 tons per acre. Aged 18 months in 50% new French oak.

*Distinct from Russian River Valley Pinot Noirs for its more savory, mineral-driven and earthy core. Aromas of wild dark berries, sweet pipe tobacco, forest floor and oak char. Intense and dense on the palate featuring the pure essence of dark red and black berries robed in sweet oak with a hint of citrus in the background from zippy acidity. Very smooth in the mouth with restrained tannins. Will need time to fully integrate the oak. This wine will appeal more to lovers of savory tones than fruity intensity. Very good.*



# On the Pinot Trail: Recent Winery Visits

## Freestone Vineyards

I recently reviewed a number of current releases from this newer Sonoma Coast winery (Volume 8, Issue 7, [www.princeofpinot.com/article/810/](http://www.princeofpinot.com/article/810/)). Here are some additional bottled wines I recently reviewed and some impressions from several 2008 barrel samples.

I continue to be very impressed by the consistent quality of the Freestone Vineyards wines. Admirably, the winery has lowered their prices in response to the economic conditions. The Fogdog wines represent the entry level, value-priced wines in the portfolio but they are very good wines in their own right. A fogdog is a bright or clear spot that appears in breaking fog and is often observed in the Freestone area.

The estate Chardonnay clones include 2A (Wente), Mt Eden, 548, Dijon 76 and suitcase selections. Pinot Noir plantings include Dijon clones 115, 777 and 828, and heritage selections. The Calera selection of Pinot Noir really shines in the Freestone plantings.

**2007 Fogdog Sonoma Coast Chardonnay** 13.5% alc., \$35. Sourced from Dutton Ranch Mill Station and Sullivan vineyards. Aged 15 months in 60% new and 40% two to three-year-old French oak barrels. *Demure aromas of lemon meringue tart and white stone fruits. Bright and crisp on the palate featuring flavors of peaches, lemon curd and grapefruit with the faintest oak. The fruit gives a delicate impression of sweetness. Good.*



**2007 Ovation Sonoma Coast Chardonnay** 14.0% alc., \$45. A mix of estate vineyard fruit (61%), Dutton Ranch (21%) and Bacigalupi (18%). Aged 15 months in 60% new and 40% two to three-year-old French oak barrels. The lees are stirred frequently during primary fermentation (once a week) but not during secondary fermentation. Meant to be a rich, full-bodied California styled Chardonnay. *Light golden yellow in color in the glass. Delicate but pleasing scents of lemon curd, pear, white peach, tropical fruits, and steely minerality. Delicious core of citrus and pear flavors with a hint of caramel and baking spice all underlain with a crushed rock minerality. A citrus tang lifts the bright finish. A highly nuanced wine that aims to please. Very good.*



**2007 Fogdog Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** 13.5% alc., \$35. 100% estate grown. A mixture of several Dijon clones and several heirloom selections. Aged 15 months in 40% new and 60% two to three-year-old French oak barrels. Slow fermentation with 20% whole clusters. *Dark and dense reddish-purple color in the glass. Lovely aromas of intensely perfumed wild berries, raspberries, and plums with a hint of exotic spice box and oak. Remarkably rich for an entry level wine flaunting a flavor palate of macerated berries, plum and pomegranate. Restrained, slightly grainy tannins and a zippy, refreshing finish that features citrus peel and dried berries. A good food wine with the right mix of intensity and delicate balance. Very good.*



**2007 Freestone Vineyards Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** 13.5% alc., \$55. 100% estate grown fruit. Aged 15 months in 65% new and 35% two and three-year-old French oak barrels. 43% whole cluster. *Nuanced aromatics featuring scents of berry tart, sandalwood, and barnyard. Spicy, tenacious palate of wild berries and plump cherries set off by notes of savory herbs and sweet oak. Rich and generous, yet offering style and grace. Just when you are content, it wows you some more with a memorable spice box finish. Very good (+).*

The 2008 vintage was hot in Freestone with temperatures exceeding 100°F on Labor Day requiring that Pinot Noir be picked quickly over a one week period. Some of the grapes exceeded optimum ripeness levels and were not included in the Freestone Vineyards or single-vineyard bottlings. The Chardonnay grapes held up fine. Whole cluster fermentation is part of the winemaking regimen for Pinot Noir but the amount used is variable and depends largely on the vintage. Overall handling of the fruit in 2008 was the same as 2007 so the vintage differences are quite noticeable.

**2008 Freestone Vineyards Ovation Sonoma Coast Chardonnay** Barrel sample. *A solid wine with discreet richness and appealing flavors of pear and citrus backed by bright acidity.*

**2008 Freestone Vineyards Sonoma Coast Chardonnay** Barrel sample. Composed of best barrels in the cellar. *A step up in complexity and expression. Pleasing minerality. Amazing aromatic persistence on the generous finish.*

**2008 Freestone Vineyards Pastorale Vineyard Sonoma Coast Chardonnay** Barrel sample. From a single 500L oak puncheon. *Strikingly nuanced with aromas of yellow stone fruits, spice and petrol. Rich and mouth filling white peaches, tropical fruits and citrus combine with subtle oak highlights to produce a beautifully composed wine that will be special when bottled.*

**2008 Freestone Vineyards Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** 13.5% alc.. Barrel sample. *Wow! The aromatics really pop with scents of wild berries and cherry tart replete with baking spices. Rich and ripe, fruit-forward and attacking.*

**2008 Freestone Vineyards Quarter Moon Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** 13.26% alc.. 100% whole cluster fermented in an oak open-top fermenter. *Hi-tone aromas of well-spiced red fruits. The layered fruits are vivid and juicy accented by notes of earthiness and savoriness. Despite the whole cluster fermentation, no sign of a green edge. Still has tannins to shed. The acidity is bright. More forward than the 2007 vintage.*

**2008 Freestone Vineyards Pastorale Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** 14.0% alc.. 100% whole cluster fermented. Calera and 828 clones. *Deep, dark color. Flush with dark stone fruits and dark chocolate on the nose and palate with more extraction, ripeness and tannin than the Quarter Moon bottling or the 2007 bottling of this wine.*

Visit the winery website at [www.freestonevineyards.com](http://www.freestonevineyards.com) to acquire. The winery's guest center in Freestone is open on weekends. Significant discounts are offered to wine club members.

## Paul Lato Wines

I recently stopped by Central Coast Wine Services in Santa Maria to check out Paul's new digs. He has moved into a more spacious spot and now has room for a large barbecue for cooking (Paul is a chef as well). I have never met a winemaker that exudes more passion and enthusiasm for his craft than Paul. In a newsletter sent at the end of 2009, Paul wrote, "Great wine is supposed to first inspire you, but then it's supposed to disappear. Because after the wine is poured, then it's just about friendship, about communication, about love, wonderful things that happen between friends. Truly great wine is not shy. It is well balanced and harmonious, and knows that it is a vital part of the moment. Yet it doesn't have to scream. It doesn't have to be constantly present. Instead, it becomes the intermediary, the facilitator of conversation and feelings that we share as friends. That's the message in the bottle."

I tasted through barrel samples of Paul's 2008 Pinot Noirs which were in tank scheduled to be bottled in the following day or two. After Paul speaks so eloquently about each wine and gushes with fatherly pride, it is difficult not to like the wine. You feel like hugging him, hugging the tank, jumping up and down, and whooping it up. Paul says the 2008 wines are the best he has made to date (I know, you always hear this from winemakers, but I will pass it on anyway). He likens the 2008 wines to Julia Roberts: charming but plenty of structure in the right places.



The 2008 vintage wines will be released at the end of February and include a Chardonnay and four vineyard-designated Pinot Noirs from Fiddlestix, Gold Coast, Pisoni, and Solomon Hills vineyards. 2008 is the first year for a Paul Lato Pisoni Vineyard Pinot Noir. Paul is sourcing from a small parcel from a 25-year-old block that Gary Pisoni has always kept for his own Pisoni Estate Pinot Noir.

These wines were also sampled out of barrel in May 2009 after the World of Pinot Noir event in Shell Beach, California ([www.princeofpinot.com/winery/446/](http://www.princeofpinot.com/winery/446/)).

**2008 Paul Lato “Le Souvenir” Sierra Madre Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay** 150 cases, \$50. Barrel sample. Sourced from the Sierra Madre Vineyard in Santa Maria Valley. 11 year-old Wente clone vines. 70% new oak, 100% MLF, aged sur-lie, native yeast fermented, only first pressing, lightly filtered. *Attractive scent of lemons and roasted nuts. Delicious flavors of citrus and creme brulee with the faintest hint of oak. Think Aubert Chardonnay brought down a notch. Very good (+).*

**2008 Paul Lato “Duende” Gold Coast Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** 100 cases, \$60. Barrel sample. Aged in 50% new French oak barrels. Martini clone, 14 year-old vines. *Light in intensity and highly aromatic in the fashion of a Chambolle Musigny. Dark fruits, underlying earthiness and edible flower. Well-structured to last. Down the road will become even more savory. Very good.*

**2008 Paul Lato “Matinee” California Pinot Noir** 75 cases, \$35. Barrel sample. This is Paul’s first attempt at a blended wine using barrels from Solomon Hills, Pisoni and Gold Coast vineyards that didn’t fit the vision for the single vineyard bottlings. Inexpensively priced as a thank you to customers and possibly a good fit for restaurant by-the-glass programs. *A simple, delicately composed wine featuring dark Pinot fruits with a healthy tannic backbone and a somewhat shallow finish. A perfect daily drinker. Decent.*

**2008 Paul Lato “Suerte” Solomon Hills Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** \$65. Barrel sample. Clones 115, 667 and 777. *Appealing scents of spiced dark fruits and wet leaves. Moderately rich essence of blue and black fruits with a spicy, earthy underpinning. Impressive persistence on the generous finish. The tannins are well proportioned. Still very young but superb potential. Very good (+).*

**2008 Paul Lato “Sine Cera” Fiddlestix Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** \$70. Barrel sample. Clones 115, 667, 777. *Moderately dark reddish-purple color. More tannic, loamy and savory than the other wines in the lineup. The well-hung core of dark fruit is brooding which is not surprising as this wine is typically slow to evolve. Big but not at all jammy. Develops increasing charm with time in the glass. Very good (+).*

**2008 Paul Lato “Lancelot” Pisoni Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir** 75 cases, \$75. *Paul tried to invoke his trademark elegance with this wine but it is still BIG. It is stacked and packed with blackberries, black raspberries, black plums, and cola, with a woody, toasty and grilled meat character. It is a formidable wine that lacks charm and is not open for business at present. Judgment is out on this one until the wine mellows some through bottle aging. Paul Lato unplugged.*

Paul Lato wines are sold through a mailing list at [www.paullatowines.com](http://www.paullatowines.com). Since production is so limited, public tastings are not offered except at certain events such as the World of Pinot Noir.



## Costa De Oro Winery

Though born into a farming family, Gary Burk's first love was music. After earning his business degree from Cal Poly at San Luis Obispo, he moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career as a musician. During his time in Los Angeles, Gary's father Ron Burk partnered with Bob Espinola and planted the 30-acre Gold Coast Vineyard located six miles east of Santa Maria on Foxen Canyon Road. This sparked an interest in grape growing in Gary and he began selling Gold Coast grapes to winemakers from his Los Angeles base.

In 1993 on a visit home to Santa Maria, Gary shared a dinner with Au Bon Climat's Jim Clendenen and Dominique Lafon of Domaine des Comtes Lafon in Burgundy. After that evening, Gary was hooked. Amazing what a great glass of Meursault will do! In 1994 he was invited to work harvest at the Au Bon Climat/Qupe facility and was hired full time in 1995. He left in 2002 to devote all of his energies to Costa De Oro. Burk crafted one barrel each of Gold Coast Vineyard Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in 1994, and slowly increased production each year under the Costa De Oro label to the current level of 4,500 cases annually. He currently produces his wines at the Central Coast Wine Services facility in Santa Maria where Paul Lato lends a hand.

I tasted three barrel samples of 2008 Costa De Oro Pinot Noirs that are scheduled for release in the summer of 2010. These are unique wines sourced from the Martini clone, a traditional California clone that is widely planted in the Gold Coast Vineyard along with more recent plantings of Dijon clones 115 and 667 in the same vineyard. The Martini clone typically exhibits an underbrush and floral aroma and flavor along with the earthiness, spice and brininess common in Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noirs.

**2008 Costa De Oro Estate Gold Coast Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** \$32. Barrel sample. Primarily Martini clone. Grapes were de-stemmed, cold soaked for 3-6 days, inoculated with Assmanshausen yeast, manual punch downs, pressed to barrel at dryness and aged in 25% new Francois Freres French oak barrels for 14 months. Lightly egg-white fined, unfiltered. *Bright purple fruit with accents of spice box, clove and earth. Substantial tannins with impressive persistence on the pleasing finish. Good.*

**2008 Costa De Oro Estate Reserva Oro Rojo Gold Coast Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** \$50. Barrel sample. A barrel selection with extended barrel aging and more new oak. 75% Martini clone, 25% Dijon clones 115 and 667. *Aromas and flavors of wild blackberries and black raspberries with notes of white pepper, spice and loamy underbrush. Delicious and persistent in the mouth with caressing grainy tannins. A special wine deserving of the reserve designation. Very good.*

**2008 Costa De Oro Estate Dijon Clones Gold Coast Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** *Strikingly aromatic and fruity. Very smoothly textured with soft, supple tannins. Very good.*

The Costa De Oro wines are available online ([www.cdowinery.com](http://www.cdowinery.com)), through limited retail distribution, and in the tasting room located astride Highway 101 in Santa Maria (open daily).



## Gypsy Canyon

Deborah Hall and her husband, William, bought a 290-acre property in the Santa Rita Hills in 1994 as a retirement ranch with the goal of farming and producing Pinot Noir. Unfortunately, William passed away before they could enjoy their property and in 1997, Deborah sold 160 acres, keeping 130 acres to herself. The 6-acre Gypsy Canyon Santa Rita Creek Vineyard is planted to 4 acres of clones 115 and 777 of Pinot Noir and 2 acres of Pinot Gris (she co-ferments the Pinot Noir with Pinot Gris). Farming has been a challenge, and in 2007, her entire first crop was devastated by deer. She harvested the second crop and sold it off as bulk wine. The site has an exceptionally cool microclimate compared to other vineyard sites in the Sta. Rita Hills appellation. Farming is largely by hand and both organic and biodynamic. Additional plantings of Pinot Noir are planned.

The first commercial release of Pinot Noir was in 2004. She has had two bottlings of Pinot Noir: a fall release of Santa Rita Creek Vineyard Estate Pinot Noir and a spring release of Lot 2 Santa Rita Creek Vineyard Estate. A second wine, Angelica, is a dessert wine fashioned from 10 acres (1,000 vines) of very low yielding Mission grapes at the Gypsy Canyon Dona Marcelina Vineyard, which is the oldest producing vineyard in Santa Barbara County. Mission grapes originated in Spain and were first planted by the Franciscan padres as they established the chain of California missions. Today, there are less than 700 acres of the Mission grape left in California and most of these plantings are curiously located in the Gold Country of California, far removed from the coastal chain of missions. The Mission grape does not produce a fine still wine because of high tannins and low acidity. The biggest challenge Hall faces is getting the Mission grapes to ripen adequately. Future plans call for grafting some of the Mission vines over to Pinot Noir which should prove to be an interesting experiment.

The Gypsy Canyon wine packaging shows a nod to early California history and is quite unique. Deborah uses hand blown glass bottles of historically correct shape with an embossed glass seal, a handmade paper label, and a beeswax seal. Each bottle is numbered and signed by Deborah. The magnums are particularly impressive adding significant appeal to the wine inside.

I recently caught up with Deborah at Central Coast Wine Services in Santa Maria where she crafts her wines. I tasted her 2008 spring release Pinot Noir from barrels. Named "Trois," production consists of three barrels of

of purchased grapes from an unnamed but prestigious Sta. Rita Hills vineyard and 3 barrels from the estate Santa Rita Creek Vineyard. The finished wine will be a 50/50 blend of the two lots.

**2008 Gypsy Canyon Trois Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 150 cases, \$95, some magnums. I tasted barrel samples from a neutral oak barrel, a two-year-old oak barrel, and a new barrel. The two-year-old barrel really stood out. *Very aromatic with lifting notes of cherries, berries and spice, leading to a discreetly concentrated core of black cherry fruit offering impressive finesse and drinkability. Impressive potential.*

**NV Angelica Sta. Rita Hills Mission Desert Wine** 17% alc., 9% residual sugar, 50 cases, \$130 (375 ml). 7th bottling of this wine. A blend of one barrel each from the 2005 and 2006 vintages. 130-year-old vines. Raised two years in neutral barrels during which time the color changes from a rose to an amber shade. *A highly unique and immensely pleasing sipping wine offering flavors of root beer, caramel and nuts. Very smooth on the palate and leaving more of a dry than sweet impression on the finish. A perfect accompaniment to five-year aged gouda cheese. This is one of the most distinctive and limited meritorious wines produced in California today. Very good (+).*

I recently sampled the two Gypsy Canyon Pinot Noirs from the 2006 vintage. These wines are already taking on secondary aromas and flavors. They will appeal to connoisseurs looking for a unique drinking experience.

**2006 Gypsy Canyon Santa Rita Creek Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 13.5% alc., \$75. *Moderate garnet color in the glass. Initially the nose offers delicate red fruits, savory herbs, oak and hay progressing over time to notes of dried fruits, green tea and dark chocolate. Ripe fruit flavors with accents of chocolate, green tea and finishing dry with a hint of citrus peel. Medium-weighted with admirable elegance and balance. Good.*



**2006 Gypsy Canyon Lot 2 Santa Rita Creek Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** 13.5% alc., \$75. *Moderate garnet color in the glass. Aromas of roasted stone fruits, smoke and pork belly. Ripe flavors of currants, marzipan and root beer. Silky textured with welcoming finesse and a dry, aromatic finish. Good.*



Production is quite limited and sold through a mailing list at [www.gypsyncanyon.com](http://www.gypsyncanyon.com). Tasting with appropriate cheeses is offered in a historic barn on the property (\$25). 805-737-0204.

## Kenneth Volk Vineyards

Kenneth Volk is a long time veteran of Central Coast winemaking. He started Wild Horse Vineyards in 1981, eventually planting 33 acres in Templeton in San Luis Obispo County and building a winery in 1983. The same year he crafted a Pinot Noir from Sierra Madre Vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley that brought early notoriety and success to Wild Horse. The winery eventually reached an annual production of 150,000 cases. In 2003, Volk sold Wild Horse Winery for \$48 million to Peak Wines International who later sold it to Constellation Brands. In 2004, Volk bought the Byron Winery building on Tepusquet Road in Santa Maria after Byron had moved to another facility and launched his eponymous winery, Kenneth Volk Vineyards. He now produces multiple Pinot Noirs, both appellation blends and vineyard-designates primarily from various vineyard sources in the Santa Maria Valley.



The following wines were tasted from bottle with Kenneth Volk at his winery in February 2010. The 2007 wines are to be featured at the World of Pinot Noir in March and released the same month. The single-vineyard Pinot Noirs are sold in 6-packs.



**2007 Kenneth Volk Vineyards The Shivering Rooster San Luis Obispo County Pinot Noir** 15.8% alc.. Sourced from the Gallo Ranch located on Highway 1, the coldest site in San Luis Obispo County and very late to ripen. Several clones including 2A, 667 and 777. *Aromas of dark purple fruit and oak toast. Intense and Syrah-like blackberry and black raspberry essence with fine-grain tannins. The alcohol is well integrated. A showy, sappy wine that will find fans despite the heat it packs. Decent.*

**2007 Kenneth Volk Vineyards Julia's Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** 14.4% alc.. *Shy cherry and berry aromas and flavors. Smooth and harmonious with supporting touch of oak and earthiness. The tannins are reigned in and the wine is quite drinkable now. Good.*

**2007 Kenneth Volk Vineyards Nielson Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** 14.4% alc.. Clones 2A and Pommard. *Expressive and charming nose of fresh cherries and strawberries. Fruit flavors tend toward the redder spectrum. Lighter-styled and enticing. Very good.*

**2007 Kenneth Volk Vineyards Sierra Madre Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** 14.4% alc.. *Lovely scents of red fruits, roses and spice box which carry over in the flavor profile. Loaded with charm, the fruit is vivid and focused. The finish has remarkable persistence. Very good.*

**2007 Kenneth Volk Vineyards Garey Ranch Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** 14.2% alc.. Primarily clone 777. *The nose is quite savory with scents of soy and oak. Pleasing core of berry and plum fruit encased in soft, dry tannins. Good.*

**2007 Kenneth Volk Vineyards Solomon Hills Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** 14.4% alc.. Clones 2A, Pommard, 23. *Deeply colored. Plenty of hi-tone blackberry and black cherry fruit on the nose. A muscular wine with thick dark fruit, almost inky in style. Plenty of tannin to shed. For fans of big-boned Pinot. Good.*

The Kenneth Volk Vineyards tasting room is open Friday through Sunday at 5239 Tepusquet Road in Santa Maria. The wines are also sold through an online store at [www.volkwines.com](http://www.volkwines.com). The 2007 Pinot Noirs reviewed above will be priced in the \$48 range when released. Volk produces a number of other varietal wines, including a superb Chardonnay. A value-priced Pinot Noir from Santa Barbara County is released under the Aqua Pumpkin label (\$18). 805-938-7896.

## Ambullneo Vineyards, Greg Linn Wines



Ambullneo is the passion of winemaker Greg Linn. Greg is a dog lover as well as wine aficionado and the name of his winery reflects that. Ambullneo stands for AMERICAN BULL Breeds and NEOpolitan Mastiff. Greg is fanatical about quality and spares no expense in achieving his goals. A Burgundy lover at heart, Greg looks to Burgundy for inspiration, but his wines are impressive expressions of California Pinot Noir.

Greg started out making only blended wines under the Ambullneo label, believing that a blend of multiple vineyards provided more complexity in the finished wines. Ambullneo always will be a "cuvée house." He also recognizes the value of expressing the special terroir of unique blocks of fruit he has been able to source from some of California's most notable vineyards, so he started a vineyard designate wine program under the Greg Linn Wines label. These are wines of place. A third label, Zito Family, offers interesting varietal wines that are more reasonable priced.



Greg is not a bashful guy and his first releases were "big-babe" Pinots. In recent years he has fine-tuned his style, picking earlier resulting in lower alcohols, and the wines have taken on more sophistication more akin to the Burgundies that he holds in such high regard. The wines are still packed with flavor and he likes to say that his wines, "Ain't your grandma's Pinots." He is a proponent of whole cluster fermentation and his Pinot Noirs have up to 100% stem inclusion. He believes this adds aroma and flavor nuances and provides the tannin structure for long term aging. The result is that the wines are not easily approachable when released, needing a few years for tannin integration to reach the optimum heights of enjoyability. He also ages his wines longer than most producers, up to two years in barrel is not unusual.

Greg is currently crafting his wines in Lompoc. He is not a believer in pouring his wines at crowded festivals where very little serious tasting of wines occurs. He prefers to offer more intimate and focused tastings which he offers in his home in the Central Coast by appointment and through small gatherings. I attended a tasting of fourteen of Greg's wines, both Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, primarily from the 2007 vintage, in March at the Pacific Club in Newport Beach, California. This was an intimate affair attended by twenty-five wine enthusiasts as well as Master Sommelier, Rene Chazottes, who offered much salient commentary.

Each wine was sourced from Dijon clones. Several of the single-vineyard Pinot Noirs are 100% whole cluster fermented. (see discussion of whole cluster in this issue). Alcohols were all under 14% except the Syrah (14.3%), ranging from 12.8% to 13.6%. The wines are aged in anywhere from 50% to 100% new French oak barrels. The barrels are all three year air dried from four top coopers. The Pinot Noirs offered at the tasting were impressively endowed wines that were still tight and showing tannins in abundance (the wines were tank samples recently sulfured and scheduled to be bottled soon except for the 2008 Pinot Noirs which are still in barrel). The impressive breeding of the fruit sources was clear, however, and these are serious wines that will appeal to the Pinot Noir connoisseur, especially those who enjoy the aromas and flavors offered with whole cluster fermentation. Only native yeast and native malolactic fermentations are employed and the wines are unfinned and unfiltered. The Chardonnays are sourced from various Santa Maria Valley vineyards and all display bright acidity making them perfect accompaniments to food.

My tasting notes are brief as the time spent with each wine was of necessity limited. I plan to revisit these wines after 3 to 6 months in bottle. The aromatics had noticeably improved over the course of the three hour evening tasting.

**2008 Greg Linn Wines White Hills Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Sauvignon Blanc** 125 cases, \$39. Styled in the image of Didier Dagueneau wines, an iconoclastic Loire Valley winemaker. Raised in oak, 50% MLF. *Bright, juicy and layered pear and citrus flavors, with a discreet richness and backbone ending with a refreshing hi-strung finish. Very good.*

**2007 Ambullneo Vineyards Big Paw Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay** 200 cases, \$49. Crafted in 100% stainless steel. *A big, Chablis-styled Chardonnay with brioche and crushed rock on the nose, and crisp flavors of lemon curd and white stone fruits. Hi-tone acidity. Will give any 1er Cru Chablis a run for its money. Good. Pair with veal, cream sauces.*

**2007 Ambullneo Vineyards Fang Blanc Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay** 250 cases, \$49. Aged in 25% new French oak barrels. 100% barrel fermented. *Moderately rich with lovely flavors of white peaches, pear and honey with a supporting note of oak. Very good (+). Pair with white fish.*

**2007 Greg Linn Wines Grangerville Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay** 250 cases, \$49. Grangerville is the original name of Santa Maria. Aged in 100% new French oak barrels. *The richest Chardonnay in the lineup with the oak offering caramel and spice accents to the flavors of white stone fruits and creme brulee. Finishes with a refreshing grip of lime peel. Good. Pair with fish with lemon.*

**2007 Ambullneo Vineyards Bulldog Pinot Noir** 400 cases, \$69. A cuvée from several vineyard sources and the Ambullneo flagship wine. 100% whole cluster. *Pretty core of berry, cherry and plum fruit with a faint spice box and herbal edge. Restrained tannins and bright acidity. Good.*

**2008 Ambullneo Vineyards Bulldog Pinot Noir** 250 cases. 25% whole cluster. *More forward than the 2007 vintage taking on more charm with time in the glass. Plentiful juicy berry and cherry flavors with a touch of spice and pine pitch. Harmonious tannic backbone. Very good.*

**2007 Greg Linn Wines Hudson Vineyard Carneros Pinot Noir** 150 cases. 20% whole cluster. *Typical of Carneros, this wine displays more earthiness and animale. The rich core of dark and nicely spiced Pinot fruits really impresses from entry to finish. Very good.*

**2007 Greg Linn Wines Le Bon Climat Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** 100 cases. 100% whole cluster. *Deep, dark color. Very tight but offers hints of greatness. Layers of dark fruits are evident highlighted by notes of Asian plum sauce and black currants. A hint of green tomatoes surfaces on the nose. Showing daunting tannins that will need time to resolve. Good now but will want to revisit in a couple of years when the wine is more open for business.*

**2007 Greg Linn Wines Rim Rock Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** 100 cases. 100% whole cluster. Clones 115 and 667 planted on their own roots. Greg is the only producer from this site (a "monopole"). *Knock out nose featured macerated wild berries with a hint of spice, herbs and soy. Delicious cherry and berry core wrapped in healthy ripe tannins. Has an appealing exotic riff to the flavorful fruits. Very good (+).*

**2008 Greg Linn Wines Rim Rock Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** 60 cases. 100% whole cluster. *Tight aromas of dark fruits, cut flowers and green beans. Chunky and immature, with substantial tannins. The fruit core is delicious and the smooth texture is heavenly. Good.*

**2007 Greg Linn Wines Grangerville Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** 300 cases. 100% whole cluster. *A big, intense and concentrated wine which is packed and stacked with beautiful black cherry and blackberry fruit. An earthiness adds interest and noticeable oak offers secondary accents. Still flaunting flamboyant tannins. Very good.*

**2007 Greg Linn Wines Rancho Ontiveras Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** 150 cases. 100% whole cluster. *A fruit-driven attention-getter with a luscious core of perfectly ripe cherry and berry fruit. Plenty of hi-class booty here. The moderately husky tannins are fine-grained and the finish is lengthy and generous. Very good (+).*

**2006 Ambullneo Vineyards Howling Rim Rock Vineyard Syrah** \$69. Aged three years in barrel. 25% whole cluster. *Pleasing aromas of dark berries, plum sauce, white pepper and smoky oak. The purple fruits*

*are discreetly concentrated and wrapped in soft, dry tannins. More restrained than many California Syrahs and one that will appeal to Pinot drinkers. Very good.*

**2008 Zito Family Tres Ninos Vineyard Zinfandel** 13.2% alc., \$49. *A shy nose leads to a delicious fruity core of purple fruits with hints of peppery spices. Uncommonly light on its feet for a California Zinfandel, and easy to drink. Good.*

All the 2007 wines and the 2008 Zinfandel were in release by March 5, 2010. Prices are between \$69 and \$95 for the Pinot Noirs and \$49 to \$75 for the Chardonnays. As mentioned above, Greg offers tastings in his home by appointment (805-474-5678). Greg is a no-nonsense, frank, but colorful winemaker and you will feel very comfortable and even entertained while tasting with him. I often say that a winery's wines reflect the personality of the winemaker, and in the case of Greg and his wines, this is very true. The website is [www.ambullneovineyards.com](http://www.ambullneovineyards.com).

# Newsworthy Headlines & Trends About Pinot Noir in 2009

## Wineries in the News

- **Kosta Browne Winery** was sold for a reported \$40 million to Vincraft, an investment group headed by former Beringer executives Wal Klenz and Pete Scott and Bill Price, the owner of Durell Vineyard in Sonoma. Dan Kosta, Chris Costello and Michael Browne continue as minority partners and will remain at the winery in their respective sales and marketing, management and winemaker roles. Total annual production is expected to remain at 10,500 cases, which is currently comfortable and quite manageable for them.
- **Calera** was in the news on several fronts. (1) Josh Jensen reported that because of all the paperwork and license fees required to sell wines to other states, it was much easier and cheaper to sell wine to foreign countries than to sell it within the United States. For example, it is simpler for Calera to sell wine to Japan which requires no permits, licenses or fees, than to any number of states here. In 2009, Calera exported wine to twenty different countries which represented 45% of total sales. (2) Calera is the biggest United States customer for Vino-Seal glass closures which are used on the Calera Central Coast Pinot Noirs and Mt. Harlan Cuvee Pinot Noir. The closure is more expensive than cork, but there is zero chance of cork taint in any bottle closed with it. (3) For reasons that are unclear, many people have started ordering only one Calera wine - the Jensen Vineyard Pinot Noir which represents only 5% of Calera's production. Calera has taken the step to refuse to fill such orders.

## People in the News

- Willamette Valley wine industry pioneers **Richard Sommer**, **Cal Knudsen** and **Gary Andrus** passed away in 2009. Sommer was one of the founders of Oregon's vinifera industry. He planted the first post Prohibition vinifera vines including Pinot Noir and Riesling on a former turkey farm in Roseburg, Oregon in 1961. Sommer later founded HillCrest Vineyard Winery which is Oregon's oldest continuously operating vinifera winery. Calvert "Cal" Knudsen was a former CEO of MacMillan Bloedel, a large forest products company, who bought a 200-acre walnut orchard in the Dundee Hills region of the Willamette Valley in 1971 and planted a vineyard which eventually grew to 120 acres at a time when there were only few others such as David Lett, Dick Erath and Dick Ponzi in the region growing wine grapes. Knudsen had become a wine buff after touring Europe with his wife in 1954. In 1975, he partnered with Dick Erath to form Knudsen-Erath Winery which lasted until the late 1980s when Erath bought out Knudsen. Knudsen then became an investor in Argyle Winery in Dundee which used grapes from Knudsen's vineyards. Knudsen died in 2009 at the age of 85. Gary Andrus had a successful 30-year career in the wine industry in California, New Zealand and Oregon. He founded Pine Ridge Winery in the Napa Valley in 1978 and several years later acquired land in the Dundee Hills and founded Archery Summit. At Archery Summit, he introduced Oregon to a modern approach and style and offered his wines at the then unheard of price of \$60 and more per bottle. His message was that Oregon was producing Pinot Noir that could rival any made in the world and many wineries followed suit with their pricing. In 2001, a divorce forced the sell of both Pine Ridge and Archery Summit. He and his second spouse, Christine, then founded Gypsy Dancer in the Chehalem Mountains after purchasing Lion Valley Vineyard. Andrus had a brief interest in New Zealand's Central Otago (Gypsy Dancer Christine Lorraine Cellars), but this venture never was successful. His legacy is carried on by a daughter, Danielle Andrus Montalieu, who with her husband, Laurent Montalieu, owns Soléna Cellars, and co-owns NW Wine Company, Hyland Vineyards and Grand Cru Estates.

## Vintage Reports

- Many of the **2007 vintage** California Pinot Noirs were released with much fanfare in 2009. Wine writers hailed the California 2007 Pinot Noir vintage as "the best ever" and "an important step forward in California Pinot Noir." The growing season was unremarkable except for low rainfall early in the season and winemakers found their task simplified as the wines made themselves without the necessity of additions and/or manipulations. Phenolic ripeness was achieved at moderate sugar levels and many of the resulting wines showed alcohols in the 13.6% to 14.4% range, generous but ripe tannins, and up front drinkability with a moderately long aging potential of 5 to 10 years. I believe it is safe to say that no other vintage in this decade

surpasses 2007 for breadth of quality Pinot Noir throughout California. Oregon's 2007 vintage was unfairly panned by many wine writers. Wedged between the fruity and flashy California type 2006 vintage, and the model 2008 vintage, 2007 was fraught with challenges. The "roller coaster" weather in the spring was followed by rain at harvest. Some wines ended up showing green characters and dilute flavors due to unripeness. The Pinot Noirs that were successful, and there were many adroit winemakers who crafted superb wines, tended to be more classic in style, with lower alcohols, higher acidities, and charming but delicate fruit flavors without being spectacularly endowed. I have found many Oregon Pinot Noirs from the 2007 vintage to like and prefer it over the 2006 vintage where many wines suffered from overripe flavors and high alcohol percentages.

- The **2009 vintage** for Pinot Noir was very successful in California for those wineries who picked before the heavy storms that arrived on October 13. Most regions reported picking at optimal ripening levels. The year was cool overall which allowed time for sugars to develop while acidity was retained. Gary Farrell, for example, called 2009 the most enjoyable harvest of his career. He said, "Cool, dry conditions prevailed throughout our entire harvest of Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. Yields were modest but quality was universally high with exceptionally clean fruit exhibiting optimum structure and flavor profiles." The Preliminary Crush Report from the California Department of Food and Agriculture noted that 3.7 million tons of grapes were harvested in 2009, an increase of 20% over 2008's small crop and close to the record harvest of 2005. Much of this production increase came from vineyards in the Central Valley and Lodi areas, although the harvest in Sonoma County was up 25% over 2008. Oregon had a relatively dry, cold winter and early spring followed by a mostly warmer and drier than normal May through September, with average to above average heat accumulations producing good ripening conditions. Unexpected rain in September brought threats of mold, but subsequent hot weather dried the grapes. Warm days in late September and October rewarded those who picked before overripeness ensued. Steve Lutz of Lenné Estate in the Yamhill-Carlton District of the Willamette Valley reported the following. "The great thing about an Oregon vintage is that no two are alike. We had a warm growing season with the most consecutive days above 90 degrees in July. The heat stress shut down the vines and many cooler, high altitude vineyards were ahead of warmer sites like ours. A potential issue with heat is shriveling that potentially contributes raisin-like flavors in the resulting wine. Fortunately, the heat was followed by a cooling period avoiding excess ripeness for the most part." At the Oregon Wine Symposium in February 2010, and reported by *Wines & Vines* online, Chris Welch, a grape broker and trader of bulk wine for Ciatti Co., estimated that Oregon's crush in 2009 amounted to 28,000 tons, a noticeably large increase over the 17,500 tons in 2008. That's the good news. The bad news is that the state now faces a large surplus of wine. The 2009 vintage was very good for Pinot Noir in New Zealand. The summer was warm and dry and conditions were moderate throughout harvest. Yields were generous, in line with 2008, despite extensive crop thinning.

## Popularity of Pinot Noir

- Pinot Noir is now the most popular variety in America's restaurants according to the 2008 *Wine & Spirits* Restaurant Poll reported in April 2009. The top five Pinot Noirs served at the restaurants polled were in order of popularity, **Merry Edwards**, Flowers, Adelsheim Vineyard, Hirsch Vineyards, and La Crema. Among the top fifty wines served at restaurants, Willakenzie, Adelsheim and Bethel Heights Pinot Noirs were new additions in 2008. 38% of restaurants said that wine sales had decreased.
- According to the Nielsen Co., United States table wine sales ending July 25, 2009, indicated that Pinot Noir showed the highest percentage change from a year earlier (10.1%) of any variety except Sauvignon Blanc (10.9%). Sales were \$452 million.
- The **cost of Pinot Noir** continues to rise. The average price among my top rated Pinot Noirs was \$ in 2008 and \$ in 2009. The annual *Wine & Spirits* Restaurant Poll for 2008 published in April 2009 indicated the average Pinot Noir price in restaurants rose from \$45 in 1995 to \$73 in 2008.
- Writer Jordan Mackay quipped, "There are certain phrases that you rarely, if ever, hear in wine circles. One is good, cheap Pinot Noir."
- Crushpad's success led to expansion in 2009 to serve larger numbers of commercial clients. Established in 2004 by Michael Brill, **Crushpad** was initially aimed at wine lovers who wanted to make small lots of quality wine from top vineyards for personal consumption. Many of these enthusiasts were Pinot Noir devotees. The company grew rapidly, reportedly producing 40,000 cases in 2009 and the number of commercial wineries making wine at Crushpad tripled. Crushpad moved to a large winemaking facility in southern San Francisco

and partnered with Napa's Bin to Bottle custom crush facility to serve clients who have outgrown the relatively small San Francisco location.

- Continued research supports the association between **moderate wine consumption** and decreased risk of heart disease and remains a key driver of wine's popularity among an increasingly health-conscious society.

## Roughing It During the Recession

- Wine consumption in the United States continued its upward growth in 2009 for the 16th consecutive year, but **sales of high-end Pinot Noir** dropped significantly in 2009, leaving many wineries scrambling to offer discounts on both multiple bottle purchases and shipping to stimulate sales. Vintners referred to sales of over \$50 Pinot Noir as the "dead zone," and vintners who were willing to admit it reported that sales were down 10% to 30%. Consumers were trading down to cheaper wines. Some wineries were either on the brink or went out of business already. B Vineyards and Habitat in Green Valley (Bpinot owned by Gerald Bybee) was founded on the premise of high-end premium organic Pinot Noir sales in the \$55 to \$70 range, but could not survive the economy's downturn, although the wines are among my favorites and in the top tier as far as quality in California. The vineyards are now for sale, which is unfortunate timing because values of wineries have fallen 20% to 50% compared to a few years ago. The *Santa Rosa Press Democrat* reported that Manchester Ridge Vineyards, a 30-acre source of high-end Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, which was getting \$4,000 per ton for Pinot Noir and \$3,900 per ton for Chardonnay, was facing expired winery contracts and was auctioning off the remaining 25-year lease on the property for \$1.4 million. More than \$6 million was invested to develop the property. Astonishingly, many still want to play the premium Pinot Noir game and small producers continue to enter the market, frequently offering their initial Pinot Noir releases in the \$40 range, undaunted by the competition and current economic doldrums. Many of these so-called "lifestyle" wineries will not survive this period of economic recession.
- Impact Databank reported that **inexpensive Pinot Noir brands** priced below the industry average are now outselling the higher-end of the spectrum at twice the rate for both domestic and imported brands. Many premium Pinot Noir wineries held prices the same as the year before, but very few lowered their prices. Some predict that prices will have to come down in 2010 as many wineries are pressured to reduce their unsold inventory to stay in business. Some wineries may sell their inventory on the bulk market, even at a loss and these wines will turn up in negociant bottlings like Castle Rock, though it will be difficult to identify exactly where the premium wine goes. Allocations are becoming a thing of the past for all but the most prestigious producers, and Pinot Noirs that in previous years were only sold to mailing list members are now available for sale to anyone for the asking. Growers have been sympathetic to the vintners' plight and have offered reduction in crop prices in 2009, even though contracts were in place. One example was Peter Cargasacci, a grower in the Sta. Rita Hills appellation, who cut his price by 10 percent.
- Many premium Pinot Noir producers are now offering two price points that include their top end line of Pinot Noir and a **second lower-priced brand** or bottling that offers both affordability and good quality. Some of these more affordable wines are regional appellation bottlings that sell for half the cost of the winery's single vineyard Pinot Noirs. Wine consumers rarely drink a \$60 Pinot Noir nightly with dinner, preferring to pop open a "daily drinker" in the under \$25 price range. Consumers have confidence in these second tier value-priced wines since they have had experience with the quality of the higher priced wines from the same winery. Wineries hope to make up in sales of the lower-priced wines for the sales they are losing in this economy with the premium wines. One example is Guy Davis at Davis Family Vineyards who recently launched the value-priced Two Sons label, named after his two sons, Cole and Cooper. Peay Vineyards has a second brand, Cep, Chasseur has Cazar, Radio-Coteau has County Line, and Belle Glos has the popular Meiomi brand. The second brands can often be successful as restaurant wines as well.
- The **prices of grapes** on the spot market dropped significantly in 2009 with the average selling price of Pinot Noir down about 43% from \$2,800 to \$4,500 a ton in 2008 to \$1,800 to \$2,800 a ton in 2009. Some growers were forced to harvest their own grapes, have wine made using a custom crush facility, and sell it on the bulk market to avoid taking a low offer on the grapes. Glenn Proctor quipped, "This isn't a year to cut a fat hog."
- The problem of **smoke taint** in 2008 in many vineyards in Mendocino and western Sonoma County added to Pinot Noir producers' woes. There were 2,000 wildfires in 17 counties across Northern California. Some producers, like Larry Londer, of Londer Vineyards in the Anderson Valley, is holding back most of his 2008 production, planning to bottle about 25% of the winery's usual yearly output. WesMar declassified all of its 2008 Hellenthal Vineyard wine, despite this vineyard being the winery's largest source of grapes. Some

notable Anderson Valley vineyards like Savoy Vineyard and Demuth Vineyard will have no vineyard designate Pinot Noirs from the 2008 vintage. Most North Coast wineries are being very cautious with the 2008 wines, avoiding the release of any questionable wines to preserve brand integrity. Smoke taint was a topic of much discussion among California winemakers. Australian researchers presented their experience and research on smoke taint at a University of California at Davis seminar in 2009. In 2007, Australians Kristen Kennison and Mark Gibberd published a research paper in the *Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry* that was the first to link smoke in the vineyard with tainted wine. Several facts are evident from this publication and seminar: (1) smoke taint in wine creates aromas and flavors that are described as gamy, spicy, smoky, charred, ash, cigar box, charcoal, bacon, truffle, coffee, barbecue, campfire, medicinal, woody and burnt rubber, (2) grapevines absorb volatile phenolic compounds such as guaiacol and 4-methyl guaiacol through the leaves, store it in the stems and leaves and transport the compounds to the skin of grapes (there are no smoke compounds contained within the pulp), (3) smoke taint presents no threat to health, (4) longer macerations increase smoke taint, (5) fermentation and aging of wine can increase concentrations of smoke taint compounds in wine, (6) small amounts of smoke taint are tolerable, similar to the effects created by oak aging, (7) the vulnerability of grapevines to smoke taint is highest in the period from seven days after veraison to harvest, (8) repeat exposure to smoke during the growing season has a cumulative effect, (9) growth and yields of vines decreases in the year following heavy exposure to smoke, (10) there appears to be no carry-over effect on the grapes from vines exposed to heavy smoke from the previous year, (11) fining and filtration may lead to some resolution of smoke taint, but do not eliminate smoke taint compounds completely and may strip the wine of desirable aromatic and flavor features, (12) Pinot Noir is more susceptible to smoke taint than Chardonnay or Syrah, and (13) possibly the biggest concern of winemakers is that high-end vineyard-designated wines may seem fine when bottled, but may develop smoke taint characters as aging goes on.

## Styling Pinot Noir

- Is the trend to pick Pinot Noir at **lower Brix levels** a reality or a perception? In truth, the trend is toward picking at balance, most feasible in very cool climates where ripe fruit flavors can be obtained at modest Brix levels when acidity is still relatively high. There are a number of producers who have been doing this for years such as Lane Tanner, Au Bon Climat and Littorai, and several newer wineries are following in step such as Rhys Vineyards, Ambullneo Vineyards, Copain and LIOCO.
- The term “**natural wine**” is being bantered about as a badge of quality. This term has no official definition, but is loosely defined as wine made from grapes that are sustainably, organically or biodynamically grown, and fermented with natural or indigenous yeasts. Some would also only include wines fermented in natural materials like oak, and exclude those fermented in stainless steel. The idea of natural wines dates back over twenty years when Frenchman Jules Chauvet, a negociant in Beaujolais, suggested the term. Another term that has been adopted by many wineries is “**green**,” which has many meanings from “organic” to “sustainably farmed,” to “carbon neutral,” leaving the consumer understandably confused. The California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance, has sponsored a self-assessment program for several years to assist wineries in following green farming practices. Jointly established by the California Wine Institute and the California Association of Winegrape Growers, the Alliance announced in early January 2010 that an extension of the original voluntary program has been initiated that sets minimum standards for third-party certification of vineyards and wineries, allowing those properly certified to advertise that they are “green.” Wineries can use the certification on their marketing materials and websites, but not yet on labels.
- Controversy about the ‘**sameness**’ of American Pinot Noirs has been in the news. Allen Meadows wrote an open letter to U.S. Pinot Noir producers that was published in his Burghound newsletter. “The problem as I see it is the lack of genetic diversity in the vineyards.....I’m referring to increasing and troubling emphasis of most new plantings to focus on just a few clones.....115, 667, 777 and 828 dominate.....these clones tend to taste more of themselves than reflect the site specific characteristics of where they’re planted.” Nick Peay of Peay Vineyards wrote an articulate rebuttal disagreeing with Meadow’s assertions as to the cause of homogeneity in domestic Pinot Noirs. Peay replied, “The ‘sameness’ is due to late-picking harvest decisions and the non traditional vinification protocols that many of the producers of same-tasting Pinot employ. When Pinot is picked overripe, the wines tend to taste the same regardless of clone or site.....the blame lies in a desire by a growing number of producers to impress critics and consumers with big, rich and juicy wines that have little to do with the charm, elegance and power of varietally-correct Pinot Noir.” Wine writer Jordan Mackay alluded to this as well when he commented, “The West Coast wines that tend not to look and taste like Pinot Noir are often the high-dollar wines, many from single vineyards, the ones ostensibly meant to show terroir.”



## Marketing

- The Millennial generation (ages 15 to 32 in 2009) is estimated at 70 million and wine consumption continues to grow among this group. Wineries are reaching out to this large potential customer base through social networking which appeals to the tech-savvy **Millennials**. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are powerful tools that essentially cost nothing and are becoming a preferred source of information over traditional sources of wine ratings such as *Wine Spectator* and *Wine Advocate* which the Millennials rarely use. Joe Dobbles, a prominent Oregon winemaker, said, “The idea of absolutely relying on some guy in a back room to taste our wines and write up a review are long gone.” Over 10 million people are using Twitter, and if a winery is looking to recruit the young and educated, they are finding that these people are interested in Tweets. The young crowd is also interested in the other related applications such as Twitpic.com where you can send a photo of the winery you are visiting, or Tastelive.com where they can share a glass of wine over Twitter with other “twine” lovers. The most current updates about all the wine news that is fit to tweet is available from winetwits.com and winetweets.com.

## Closures and Enclosures

- More wineries were using a variety of **closures** in 2009. According to *Wine Business Monthly*, screw caps were used by just 5% of wineries in 2004, but in 2009, 26% of wineries were using them. Some wineries, notably Buena Vista Carneros, converted completely to screw caps for all of their white and red wines. Natural cork still dominates among California and Oregon Pinot Noir priced over \$25. Technical corks, such as Diam (agglomerated natural cork granules) are gaining rapidly in popularity because there is no risk of cork taint. Diam offers the same level of oxygen transmission as good natural corks and produces different corks that can offer varying levels of oxygen transmission. Synthetic closures are almost exclusively reserved for inexpensive wines. Synthetics have several drawbacks including high oxygen-transmission, difficult extraction, and lack of biodegradability. Zork closures, an alternative to cork developed in Australia, are mainly used on novelty wines. Vino-Seal or Vino-Lok closure is made of plastic and glass. The closure uses a glass stopper with an inert o-ring to seal the wine. A bottle can be resealed easily with this closure and there is no risk of cork taint. The biggest drawback is the high cost and increased cost of bottling. Josh Jensen at Calera has taken an interest in this closure and uses it for all of his lower-priced bottlings. In my tastings, I still run across a corked wine in about one in fifty bottles (2%) of recent vintages, but I am not extremely sensitive to TCA, and there are probably another 1% of wines that have flat fruit and are probably tainted, but I cannot detect the smell of TCA. Despite the low percentage of cork taint, its occurrence is a huge disappointment, and in some cases a costly one.
- In 1652, an Englishman by the name of Sir Kenelm Digby produced the first wine bottles that were suited to storage and transport of wine, but the invention was patented nine years later by another Englishman, John Corlett. The English are credited with standardizing the size and volume of wine bottles. In 1979, the United States set a requirement that all bottles be of a set size of 750 milliliters as part of the national drive at the time to adopt the metric system. Winemakers in Europe adopted the same wine bottle size shortly thereafter. Wine bottles are very expensive to produce, they are heavy and fragile and their shape and size makes shipping inefficient. Producers of inexpensive mass-market wines are now turning to more environmentally friendly packaging such as airtight cardboard boxes and plastic containers. With high-end wines, there is a trend toward **lighter-weight bottles**. Benziger Family Winery in Glen Ellen, California, is buying bottles that are 10 percent to 20 percent lighter than previously used bottles, decreasing the winery’s footprint and supporting their goal of sustainability. Glass manufacturers such as Saint-Gobain Containers, Owens-Illinois Inc., and Saverglass are producing less weighty versions of wine bottles, despite the fact that developing new bottle molds can be very costly.
- **Recycling** wine bottles makes sense but has not been accomplished on a large scale in this country. Cyrill Penn, writing in *Wine Business Monthly*, estimates that more than 300 million cases of wine are sold each year and virtually none of the bottles are reused. An increasing number are being recycled, but it has been estimated that 70% end up in landfills in the United States. Practically every nation besides the United States has a large-scale functioning bottle collection and reuse system. In the European Union, a wine bottle is used eight times before it is discarded. There have been a handful of bottle recycling companies in the United States, but they all have failed due to the lack of proper mechanization to perform the task. Home winemaker Bruce Stephens, former bottle-washing plant owner Chris Ronson and Napa supervisor Bill Dodd have refurbished a former Del Monte fruit-canning plant in Stockton, California and named the enterprise, not surprisingly, Wine Bottle Recycling. According to an article by Alastair Bland in *The Bohemian* (January 6,

2010), this new company plans to collect and redistribute 3 million to 5 million case's worth of used wine bottles each year by sometime in 2010. The hope is that the company will be recirculating 2 percent of the wine industry's bottles. Modern machinery is now available such as a computerized optical sorting machine that can distinguish between the roughly 400 bottle molds in use today and a washing machine that can de-label and process over 70,000 wine bottles per hour. Until now, de-labeling has been a challenge due to the strong label adhesives introduced in the late 1990s. The owners of Wine Bottle Recycling plan to establish "bottle shacks" around Northern California where wine bottle donors will receive a cash refund (currently California Redemption Value does not apply to wine bottles). The recycled bottles will be sold to wineries at 20 to 50 percent less than new ones and will be cleaner. Several wineries, including Husch, Folio, Frey, Kendall-Jackson, and Sutter Home have shown a sincere interest in buying the recycled bottles.

## Controversy

- In early 2009, the European Union announced a proposal to allow European wineries to produce cheap **rosé** wine by blending red and white wines. This was immediately met with resistance from the French wine industry who claimed this was sacrilegious and threatened the current popularity of traditionally vinified French rosé. The European Union backed off by June 2009 and finally abandoned the proposal. Curiously, the blending of red and white wine is commonplace in Champagne. Mixing red and white wines to make rosé is permitted in the United States and Australia.
- Two papers published in 2009 in the *Journal of Wine Economics* by retired professor of statistics and current proprietor of Fieldbrook Winery, Thomas Hodgson, cast serious doubt on the validity of **wine competitions** and **wine-rating systems**. Hodgson found that when the same wine was presented blind three separate times from the same bottle to qualified wine judges, the judges' ratings varied by + or - 4 points on the standard 100 point rating scale. Only one in ten judges regularly rated the same wine within a range of + or - 2 points. In another study, Hodgson found that a wine which won a gold medal in one competition would have a high probability of winning none in others. The probability of a wine winning a gold medal in several competitions was what might be expected should a gold medal be awarded by chance alone. The conclusion some have drawn from these studies is that ratings of wines and the results of wine competitions are nearly worthless. Despite this, ratings are so ingrained in the expectations and beliefs of consumers, it is unlikely that ratings will lose any significance or credibility despite the widespread publicity generated by Hodgson's studies.

## Pinot and the City: Urban Wineries

- **Urban wineries** sprouted up in the San Francisco Bay area and began to appear in unlikely cities like New York, Cincinnati and San Diego. The San Francisco Wine Association (SFWA) consists of 20 vintners who produce small amounts of hand-crafted wine in the city of San Francisco. The boutique winery members of SFWA craft their wine at Crushpad and a majority produce some Pinot Noir including Bartz-Allen Winery, Connor Brennan Cellars, Due Cani Cellars, Joelle Wine Company, Kindred Wines, Mark Moretti Winery, Millarium Cellars, PerryMoore Wine, Pug Wine, Seawind Wines, Think Tank Wine Company, Townley Wines, and Wait Cellars. All the wines produced by members of SFWA may be purchased through the SFWA website at [www.sfwineassociation.com](http://www.sfwineassociation.com). Other wineries have found homes in industrial spaces in San Francisco where leases are reasonable and permits are easy to obtain. These vintners can spend their money on quality grape sources and equipment, rather than fancy tasting rooms or guest centers. Notable San Francisco urban Pinot Noir wineries include A.P. Vin, August West and Harrington Wines. The East Bay Vintner's Alliance (EBVA) consists of 19 urban wineries located in the cities of Emeryville, Oakland and Alameda. Prominent Pinot Noir producers who make their home in the East Bay include Aubin Cellars, Eno Wines and Tayerle Wines. The 3rd Annual Passport to the East Bay Trail will be held April 10, 2010. Visit [www.eastbayvintners.com](http://www.eastbayvintners.com) for information. Urban wineries in New York City may seem a bit out of place, but they have become quite successful. City Winery consists of 21,000 square feet of space and a wine bar located in the Tribeca section of Manhattan. Winemaker David Lecomte hails from California's Herzog Wine Cellars and makes wines with purchased grapes from California, New York, Argentina and Chile. Two Pinot Noirs are offered in 2008: City Winery Olsen Family Vineyards Willamette Valley Kosher Pinot Noir and City Winery Spring St. Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. Check out [www.citywine.com](http://www.citywine.com). Red Hook Winery opened with much fanfare in 2009. Located in the hip Brooklyn neighborhood of Red Hook, this winery has several high-profile owners that include Abe Schoener of Scholium Project in Napa, Robert Foley of Robert Foley Vineyards in Napa, Mark Snyder of Angel's Share Wines, and Christopher Nicolson, formerly of Littorai and the on site winemaker. The team sources grapes from Long Island's North Fork, but alias no Pinot Noir.

Expected production is about 500 cases from the 2008 vintage. Red Hook has no tasting room but tasting can be arranged by appointment (347-689-2432). Other New York urban wineries include Brooklyn Oenology which sources grapes from Long Island's North Fork ([www.brooklynenology.com](http://www.brooklynenology.com)), and Queens Farm, which is actually an urban vineyard that grows its own wine grapes in a 1.5-acre vineyard amidst a 47-acre farm in Floral Park, Queens and makes the wines at Premium Wine Group in Mattituck on the North Fork of Long Island ([www.queensfarm.org](http://www.queensfarm.org)).

## By the Numbers

- *Wine Business Monthly* reported in February 2009 that there were 2,219 bonded and 786 virtual wineries for a total of 3,005 wineries in California at the end of 2008. Washington was second with 539 wineries and Oregon third with 398. The largest California producers of Pinot Noir: E.&J. Gallo, 67,000,000 annual cases, Rodney Strong, 800,000 annual cases, Purple Wine Co., 515,000 annual cases, Castle Rock Winery, 450,000 annual cases, and Hahn Family Wines, 400,000 annual cases.
- More than 110 varieties of wine grapes are grown in California and 48 out of 58 counties grow wine grapes. Wine creates 820,000 jobs and 20.7 million people visit California wine regions each year.

# Small Sips of Pinot



## **2007 Anaba J McK Vineyard Carneros Pinot Noir** 14.5% alc., \$28.

A new winery owned by John Sweazey located in the town of Sonoma. From the sustainably farmed J McK Vineyard located in the heart of Sonoma Carneros. *Pleasing red cherry and berry scents with underlying smoke and herbal oak. A medium-weighted wine replete with red cherry, cranberry, red hard candy and brown spice flavors with a bright riff of cherries haunting the lingering finish. The flavor profile reminds me of a Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. Good.*



## **2007 Anaba Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** 14.5% alc., \$28. De-

stemmed, fermented in one-ton. Aged in French oak barrels for 17 months. *Very attractive scent of wild berries, oak vanillin and rose petals. Tasty mixed blue and black berry core accented by notes of cola, smoothly textured with supple tannins, and offering a refreshingly bright finish. Highly drinkable now and a charming wine with some flair. Very good.*



**2007 Capioux Chimera Sonoma County Pinot Noir** 14.6% alc., \$30. *An offbeat nose displaying scents of smoky oak, green brush, and exotic spices. More enjoyable in the mouth with a light core of darker cherry and berry fruits accented by notes of cola, root beer, oak and string bean. Lacks flair and interest. Decent.*

**2006 Charlie Clay Duelist Russian River Valley Pinot Noir** 14.7% alc., pH 3.57, 47 cases, \$65. A partnership between restaurateur Charlie Palmer and winemaker Clay Mauritson of Mauritson Winery in Dry Creek Valley. 2006 was the inaugural vintage of Charlie Clay wines with the Duelist being a reserve bottling. 85% Dutton Campbell Vineyard and 15% Bacigalupi Vineyard Wente clone. On the wine list at Charlie Palmer's restaurants. *A riper styled Pinot Noir which approaches but never reaches overripeness. Aromas of macerated strawberries, sandalwood and sweet oak. Juicy essence of berry compote trending to the red and blue berry spectrum with substantial oak in the background. A well-crafted wine that aims to please with vigorous fruit, soft tannins, bright acidity and some persistence on the finish. Good.*



**2005 Mahoney Vineyards Las Brisas Vineyard Carneros Pinot Noir** 14.5 alc., \$27. *Perfume of overripe strawberries, raisins, marzipan and oak toast. The slightly roasted and brown-sugared fruits are buttressed by soft tannins creating a very smooth mouth feel. Decent.*

**2007 Row Eleven Viñas 3 Three Vineyards California Pinot Noir** 13.9% alc., \$15.69. *A simple and straightforward moderately light wine with aromas of black cherries and black raspberries, sugar cone and oak. Nondescript in the mouth with simple cherry flavors. Soft tannins make for easy drinkability. Decent.*

**2007 Russian River Vineyards Mendocino County Pinot Noir** 14.4% alc., \$28. Small lot fermented, aged 1 year in 30% new French oak barrels. *Complex aromatic profile featuring black cherries, herbs, forest floor, oak and a little barnyard. Dark stone fruits are lavishly oaked, the tannins are supple, and a firm grip of citrus-driven acidity brings up the finish. Needs food. Decent.*



**2007 Russian River Vineyards Limited Left Edge Selection Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** 14.1% alc., \$60. Anthony Austin is the winemaker. Aged in 50% new French oak barrels. *Dark reddish-purple color in the glass. A touch of reduction initially resolves with time in the glass revealing smoky and woody dark cherry and berry fruits. The black raspberry and black cherry fruit displays an impressive fullness and roundness in the mouth, but the wine offers little nuance or flavor impact. The tannins are beautifully integrated and the refreshing finish is bright with citrus peel acidity. A linear, fruit-driven wine that may offer more interest given more time in the cellar. Good.*



**2007 Soliste Sonatera Vineyard T Block Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** 13.6% alc., 323 cases, \$68. A collaboration between long time friends Elisabeth and Claude Koeberle and Beth and Donald Plumley. The name, Soliste, is derived from the special barrel or soliste that Burgundian winemakers reserve for their family and friends. Sonatera Vineyard is located on a ridge near the cooler part of Sebastopol. Clones 115 and 777 planted in Goldridge sandy loam. *Darkly colored. The nose is dominated by savory spices including cardamon. The thick plum and blackberry fruit is set off by notes of anise, vanillin and cream. Very silky in the mouth with subtle fine tannins. Good.*



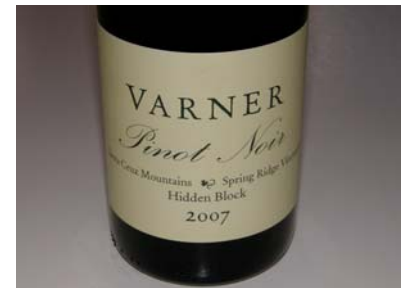
**2007 Westrey Oracle Vineyard Dundee Hills Salud Cuvee Willamette Valley Pinot Noir** 13.5% alc., 4 cases, auction item, not for sale. *I love this nose! Beautifully composed scents of fresh cherries, strawberries and Asian spice. Tasty berry core highlighting cranberry with the slightest spice accent. Delicate and bordering on dilute, but packing a wallop of flavor. Supple tannins, zippy acidity, and perfectly adapted for the dinner table. Very good.*



**2005 Whitcraft Winery Morning Dew Ranch Anderson Valley Pinot Noir** 12.4% alc., \$50. Unfined and unfiltered. *One look at the very dark reddish-purple color in the glass and you know what's coming. Intense and powerful aromas of blackberries, plums and cardamon spice. A muscular wine with a full on load of dense, deep, thick and almost jammy well-spiced dark fruits. A quirky wine with a big booty that packs in plenty of flavor without the heat. Over the top for me. Decent.*

**2004 Whitcraft Winery Aubaine Vineyard San Luis Obispo County Pinot Noir** 15.1% alc.. *Deeply colored. Bright dark roasted fruits with noticeable oak char on the nose. In the mouth the wine is packed with dense dark stone fruits with some sweetness evident from the alcohol. Thick and chewy with bold tannins and a grainy texture. An off-putting chemical note brings up the aftertaste. Unsatisfactory.*

**2007 Varner Spring Ridge Vineyard Hidden Block Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir** 14.6% alc., \$35. Eight-year-old vines. *The nose is more savory than fruity while the wine is intensely fruity in the mouth. Very tasty core of raspberry fruit with an underpinning of baking spices and oak. Very satisfying and persistent on the palate offering a silky smooth mouth feel and showing perfect integration of alcohol, acid and tannin indicating age ability. Light on its feet and packed with flavor. Even more impressive the next day from a previously opened and re-corked bottle.*





## VinAssure™ Wine Preservation System

VinAssure™ is a hand-held, lightweight, high pressure cylinder with custom engineered pressure regulator and delivery trigger that uses 100% Air Liquide Aligal™ Argon Gas, the same high-quality gas used in wine making. Each filled cylinder preserves up to 700 bottles translating to low per use cost (less than \$0.04 per use). It is the only hand-held device on the United States market using a pressurized cylinder and high quality argon gas.

Left over wine that is not stored properly after opening begins to oxidize and degrade quickly. The more sensitive your palate, the more you will notice the loss of attractive aroma and flavor components of a wine. The best method of sealing in the aroma and flavor is with a layer of argon gas which displaces air and forms a protective blanket over the wine. Practically every high-priced commercial wine preservation system uses argon because it is inert and is the heaviest of the colorless, odorless gases that will preserve wine. The inexpensive systems available on the market provide a very small number of uses and per use cost is as much as \$0.25 each time you use them. These systems keep the gas at a low pressure or use very small gas cartridges which don't hold much gas.

VinAssure™ grew out of a simple system that the developers used daily for over three years in their wine shop and tasting bar. It was so simple and economical they decided to develop a system for both home and commercial use. The system is easy to use with no parts to clean or maintain and replacement cylinders are available. Simply open the valve, inject argon gas into the bottle until the wine's aroma is noticeable (about 3 seconds), replace the original cork and return the wine to your cellar or refrigerator.

I used the VinAssure™ system at home and found it perfectly preserved bottles of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay for three days after the bottle was initially opened. Since my wife and I rarely polish off a whole bottle at dinner, the system has been invaluable to us.

Visit the website, [www.vinassure.com](http://www.vinassure.com) for more information and to view a video of the use of this system. Retail cost is \$249 plus \$22.50 hazardous material charge plus regular ground shipping charges. (per use cost still about \$0.10). Replacement cylinders are sold for \$39 (exchange) or \$69 (filled cylinder). Discounts are offered to wineries, wine bar owners, restaurateurs and other members of the trade.

Disclaimer: I have no financial interest in this product and receive no percentage of sales. I just think it is a great product!