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The FIRST Wine Newsletter Devoted Exclusively to Pinot Noir

Kistler Pinot Noir Overhyped?

There are two California Pinot Noirs that have attracted a “cult” following that supersedes all other producers— Kistler and Marcassin. Like great Burgundy, Pinot Noirs from these two wineries are very limited in quantity and tightly allocated. Their wines bring the highest bids at auction (often \$200-400 per bottle) and seem to attract the most bidder attention at auctions sites such as WineCommune.com. The wines are rarely reviewed by any notable sources other than the *Wine Advocate*. It would seem that many buyers lucky enough to acquire an allocation find them too valuable to drink and sell them on the secondary market for significant profit. Two recent tastings have called into question whether all the hype is really warranted.

An Executive Wine Seminars, Inc (EWS Tastings) tasting of Marcassin was reported in April on eRobertParker.com titled “The Magic of Marcassin”. At this tasting, Helen Turley and John Wetlaufer were in attendance and although the organizers claim they weren’t patronizing them, the co-organizer of the event went to graduate school with John Wetlaufer. Most tasters in attendance preferred the Chardonnays to the Pinots, and one lone taster (a known Burgundy devotee), disliked the sweet, ripe, and alcoholic style of the Pinot Noirs. This California buxom style of Pinot Noir is loved by most drinkers, and scores ranging from 92-95 confirmed this.

Allen Meadows has become the most respected authority on Burgundy in the world. Aka the “Burghound”, he spends more time tasting more Burgundy than anyone else in the world. He surprisingly switched gears recently and in his newsletter (at www.burghound.com) reported on a tasting of 102 high-end domestic Pinot Noirs from 1987-2001. This was a blind tasting of wines from the cellar of wine collector Kevin Harvey, with none, one, or two Burgundies in each flight. He reported considerable variability in quality, with many wines lacking elegance, grace and balance so typical of fine Burgundy. In general the Dehlinger and Williams Selyem wines showed well, but the Kistler Pinot Noirs scored consistently very poorly. Kistler’s wines were “high in alcohol, jamy, heavy-handed, and dense with oak.” Scores for wines like Cuvee Catherine and Cuvee Elizabeth (both tightly allocated and selling for \$80-\$90 on release), ranged from 79-88 with most at 86. Robert Parker Jr. has called these same wines “some of the world’s finest Pinots”, awarding scores of 96-99 for the same two special Cuvees in most years. Who you gonna trust? My personal experience supports the Burghound’s impressions: overhyped.

**If You Drink
No Noir, You
Pinot Noir**

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Robert Parker Jr. on the 2000 Kistler Occidental Vineyard Cuvee Elizabeth: “one of the most remarkable New World Pinots I have ever tasted. It can easily compete with the most profound French Burgundies. Bravo!” 150 cases, \$90.

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Controversy Over “Big is Better” Ongoing

Well-known and well-respected California wine writer, Dan Berger, was more than a little upset at a recent Southern California international wine competition. As a member of the tasting panel, a Pinot Noir that he scored a gold medal, was rejected by others on the panel who deemed it too light. The wine, Gehringer Brothers Estate Winery in Oliver, British Columbia, retails for \$13, and according to Berger, had a nice strawberry juice character.

In the same judging, Berger liked another Pinot Noir from British Columbia, a Mission Hills Reserve, and although similar in type, was able to convince the panel to award it a bronze medal (again, Berger voted it a gold medal).

Berger was disappointed that there was no support for elegant, food-friendly wines that are inexpensive. “Winemakers should be encouraged to continue making wines that are elegant, approachable and food-friendly, instead of just going for high-alcohol, low-acid crowd pleasers that are built for scores rather than consumers who might actually want to drink them with a meal.” Now there is a novel idea: a California Pinot Noir with a place at the table.

Sideways: Book and Movie About a Wine Odyssey

Southern California author Rex Pickett has released “Sideways”, a book that weaves the story of a wine-centered road trip through bars and tasting rooms of the Santa Ynez Valley. The story is based on the adventures of Pickett and his two real-life wine-drinking pals, Brit Julian Davies and musician Roy Gittens. In the acknowledgements, Pickett thanks Davies “for educating me on wine free of charge,” and Gittens “for unwittingly providing the inspiration for one of the characters.” The novel chronicles a week in the life of Jack and Miles, friends who are facing marriage and/or dealing with divorce. Armed with “*The Oxford Companion of Wine*” in their luggage, they embark on a booze odyssey that is full of humorous surprises.

Sideways, the movie, will be released by writer-director Alexander Payne by Searchlight in November, 2004.

Thumbprint Cellars

Thumbprint Cellars is the work of winemaker, Scott Lindstrom-Dake who began making wine in 1995 as a hobby. When he sold or gave away a bottle of his first vintage, he started writing personal messages on the bottles using a gold pen. One time, he accidentally grabbed a bottle where the gold ink was still wet—leaving a gold thumbprint. The look was appealing and original and Thumbprint Cellars was born. Now he “puts his thumbprint on each bottle to represent the handcrafted quality you expect from an artisan winery.”

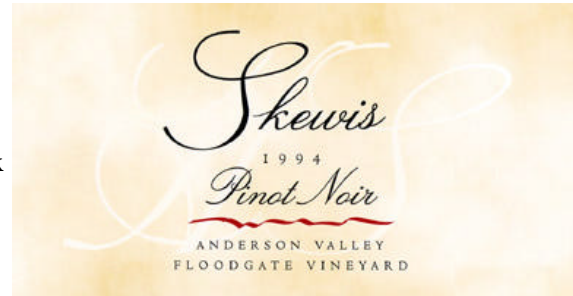
In 2000 he began producing his wine at F. Tedeschi Winery in Healdsburg and released his first Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (66 cases). The current release, **2001 Russian River Pinot Noir** (\$32) is up to 225 cases. This wine was recently voted “Best in Sonoma County” by the *North Bay Bohemian*, a local Sonoma paper. The award was voted by consumers, not by wine judges.

The wine is available at the F. Tedeschi Winery Tasting Room or on the internet at thumbprintcellars.com.



Skewis Burgundian Vineyard Designates

The *PinotFile* first ran a feature on Skewis Wines in November, 2003 (Vol 3, Issue 13). Recently I have tasted through the five vineyard designated 2001 Pinot Noirs and interviewed winemaker Hank Skewis. Hank has sweated through 25 vintages including several years at Lambert Bridge Winery in Dry Creek where there was no Pinot Noir. It was a trip to Burgundy to work the harvest that gave Hank the bug to make Pinot Noir. In 1994, grower Fred Peterson of Floodgate Vineyard in the Anderson Valley offered Hank 3 barrels worth of grapes. He is now up to 1,000 cases of high quality, complex Pinot Noirs from vineyards in Sonoma and Mendocino Counties. He sources grapes from five distinct vineyards and even manages one vineyard himself (Montgomery). Recently Hank left his job to concentrate completely on Skewis Wines. He is a dedicated vinologist who feels that great Pinot Noir is largely made in the vineyard. Winemaking is traditional Burgundian with 18 months of barrel aging and an additional 4 to 6 months of bottle aging prior to release.



Skewis Montgomery Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 2001 (\$45). This 12-year old vineyard is in the Olivet Road area west of Santa Rosa— clone unknown. This release has the highest acid and takes the longest to come around (released 6 months later than other wines). 198 cases.

Skewis Floodgate Vineyard Anderson Valley Pinot Noir 2001 (\$45). The fruit is a 50-50 blend of Pommard and Martini clones sourced from the same vine rows each year. Vines are 15 years old. This wine is the most barnyard in style with a good dose of underbrush in the flavors. 110 cases.

Skewis Bush Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 2001 (\$42). Young vines (planted in 1998), Dijon 115 clone. Harvest was 1.8 tons per acre in 2001. The most California style of the lineup. Look for an unusual bay-eucalyptus flavor. 220 cases.

Skewis Salzgaber Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 2001 (\$40). Also young vines here. Some earthy, mushroom notes in this Pinot Noir. Same clone as Bush but a completely different wine.

Skewis Demuth Vineyard Anderson Valley Pinot Noir 2001 (\$35). From a small vineyard of 8 acres located high above Anderson Valley at 1500 feet. The clones are 75% Wadenswil and 25% Pommard. A lighter, elegant style which develops earthiness over time. 220 cases.

The common thread that runs through all of these Pinot Noirs is a rustic earthiness and a good dose of oak. These wines need time to open up after uncorking. With air they take on complex herbal and brushy spice notes. They are wines of interest that need some contemplation. They are very sound for aging and Floodgate Vineyard releases from 1994 and 1995 are drinking very well at present.

Hank's wife, Maggie, handles all the promotion and wine sales. Call her at 1-707-431-2160. The website is at skewiswines.com.

Sheeps Make Great Pets and Vineyard Weeders

In Sonoma County, where so many vineyards are turning to organic practices, Deborah Walton of Canvas Ranch has been leasing out her Olde English Babydoll Miniature Southdown sheep as weeders. Hand-mowing of weeds in vineyards is an option, but it very time consuming and noisy. Miniature sheep are small enough to traffic easily through the vines and minimally compact the soil. Besides being voracious grazers, they are very cuddly and quickly win over visitors. Besides an occasionally butt, visitors and vineyard workers love having the cute, timid animals around.

Owner Arnaud Palatan of Pastis Restaurant in Los Angeles seeks out little-known French country wines for his list. On Wednesdays, if you buy one bottle with your meal, he will send you home with a second bottle for free. What a novel gesture!



The expression, “good wine needs no bush” is an ancient proverb going back, at least, to Roman days, that means that good wine needs no advertising. The most ancient tavern signs were a bush or garland of ivy (wine) or a checkerboard (food). A tavern sign is mentioned in Aristophanes, and tavern signs have been found in the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Just why the bush evolved as the symbol of good wine is not entirely clear, but it probably derived from the wreath of ivy with which Bacchus was crowned and which is often shown twined around his staff. In the epilogue of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Rosalind says, “If it be true that good wine needs no bush, ’tis true that a good play needs no epilogue. Yet to good wine they do use good bushes, and good plays prove the better by the help of a good epilogue.”

From *Wine into Words* by James Gabler

Prince’s Top 10 Pinot Noirs

At a recent wine tasting dinner, I found it interesting when we went around the room and asked the fourteen people (all male) in attendance what the best wine was that they had ever drunk. There were two votes for 1967 Yquem, two votes for 1947 Petrus, one for 1982 Cheval Blanc, a few votes for German dessert wines; none for California Cabernet. This got me to thinking about the best Pinot Noirs that I have experienced over the last 20 years. For what its worth, here is the list in order starting with the best.

- 1 1990 DRC Romanee Conti
- 2 1943 DRC La Tache (my birthday wine)
- 3 1992 Williams Selyem Rochioli Vineyard
- 4 1999 DRC La Tache
- 5 1985 Calera Jensen
- 6 1995 Williams Selyem Allen Vineyard
- 7 2000 Littorai Theirot Vineyard
- 8 1995 Denis Mortet 1er Cru Les Champeaux
- 9 1992 Ponzi Reserve
- 10 1985 Lafon Volnay Santenots du Milieu

