

PinotFile[©]

The FIRST Wine Newsletter Devoted Exclusively to Pinot Noir

Rene Chazottes, Maître Sommelier

This issue of the PinotFile features an extended interview with Rene Chazottes, Director of Wine, at the exclusive Pacific Club of Newport Beach. Born in French Madagascar, Rene came to the United States in 1967. He was the chef/owner of a French restaurant in Sherman Oaks, California for several years. Subsequently he passed the difficult exam to become a Master Sommelier of The French Sommelier Society. In 1988 he held the title of Best Sommelier in America and in 1990 represented the United States in the International Sommelier Competition held in Paris. At this competition, he won first place in the prestigious Harmony of Food and Wine contest competing with sommeliers from sixteen other countries. He is in constant demand as a wine judge and most recently was the Chief of the Tasting Panel for *The Underground Wine Journal*. He is the only respected and notable wine judge in the United States with a background as a chef and master sommelier (MS). Rene tastes at least 5,000 wines a year. In addition, he leads trips for the Pacific Club to wine regions throughout the world— Portugal and an Art and Wine Tour in Europe are scheduled this year. He has extensively toured every significant wine growing region in the world. Over the years I have organized over twenty wine dinners with Rene. Planning with him is often more rewarding than the dinner itself. These dinners have included several Superbowls of Pinot Noir, a Williams Selyem vertical, several Burgundy tastings, a Spanish wine tasting featuring old vintages of Vega Sicilia and Marques De Murrieta, a Beaucastle vertical, and a Zind Humbrecht wine dinner. I sat down with him recently to get his perspective on several wine-related issues.

The wine press has been saying that the “sommelier is dead” due to the trend of restaurants toward simpler menus, small plates, and small wine lists (<100 listings, even <50). The trend has been to reduce staff and as a result restaurants don't have knowledgeable staff that can match food and wine. Wines are more drinkable upon release now and restaurants do not cellar older vintages. With a trendy wine list, older vintages are not required. In addition, people do not take the time to dine— they want to eat quickly and not dine with several courses accompanied by several wines. Wines by the glass have become popular because diners do not have to commit to one or two bottles and restaurants encourage this program because they are making a killing (buying wine for \$8 a bottle and selling it for \$8 a glass).

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

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It is said that a sommelier is an individual with the knowledge of a wine-maker, the palate of a four star chef, the insight of a diplomat, the authority of a general, the wit of a comedian, and the patience of a saint.

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What is the most frustrating part of being a sommelier? People want to lecture you. They have a little bit of knowledge about wine and want to pontificate. If you go to see your doctor, you don't tell him what to do. You listen to what he tells you. Make it clear you want his (the sommelier's) help. Give him an honest price range and describe a wine you have enjoyed previously, and leave it at that.

What is a major factor for you in choosing a wine? I always pay attention to the season of the year in choosing a style of wine that is an appropriate match for the seasonal cuisine. Hardier red wines in winter, lighter wines in summer, etc. You match the wine selection with the fresh ingredients that are in season and the spirit of the year.

What is your favorite food wine? Pinot Noir.

Salmon is on every restaurant menu now and is very popular because of its health benefits. How would you prepare salmon to match the following wines? Pinot Noir: béarnaise sauce. Merlot: reduction sauce of shallots and merlot. Zinfandel: braise the salmon to death and prepare a sauce with orange zest. Rose: poached salmon. Cabernet: don't even think about it. Chardonnay: beurre blanc sauce. Sauvignon Blanc: serve warm with vegetable juice-based sauce. Chenin Blanc: cream sauce, asparagus.

Can you think of one of the greatest wine-food matches you have experienced? Fresh sautéed goose liver pate with rhubarb compote, served with an Alsatian Tokay Pinot Gris.

What is the biggest wine-food failure that makes you cringe? Serving ice water with dinner. Ice in water kills the taste of wine. I only serve plain water without ice at the Pacific Club.

What is the biggest flaw in California and Oregon Pinot Noirs? The wines have too much extraction and too much alcohol. *Where do you see California and Oregon Pinot Noirs ten years from now?* I think they will make a comeback by being more elegant, delicate, and less extracted. *What do winemakers do with Pinot Noir that no one talks about?* Pinot Noir is not dark purple— that is due to technology. Purple Pinot Noir is like a blond African girl— unnatural. *How accurate is the alcohol level stated on labels?* The level can vary by 2-3%. In general, winemakers tend to understate the alcohol level since taxation is based on the alcohol level.

What California Pinot Noirs do you find food friendly? The problem for most California Pinot Noirs is that they are overpriced. I like Calera and Etude among others.

Why is red Burgundy such a good food wine? Burgundies have less alcohol and impeccable balance. The result is that after dinner you do not feel drunk or tired. The Burgundians know how to eat— they take time to eat and they match their wines with the appropriate food.

What exactly makes Pinot Noir such a great food wine? High acid and red fruits. Wines high in acid cleanse the palate and increase the desire for more food. Cabernet type wines have black fruits and more sugar. Pinot Noir has red cherry, currant, strawberry— the taste is sensual and exotic.

Are there any Pinot Noirs from outside California, Oregon, and Burgundy that are potentially great? New Zealand Pinot Noirs are a bit vegetative for me. Australian Pinot Noirs are like old Burgundy and some are too extracted. British Columbia is promising but getting the grapes to ripen is a problem. The Pinot Noirs from Switzerland, Germany, and Austria are lighter and not great (Austria however has fabulous white wines, particularly Rieslings). There are pockets of potential success in Chile (see feature on Veramonte on page 3).

In 1997 you gave a series of seminars titled "Art of Wine & Food" at the Sutton Place Hotel in Newport Beach in three parts: Search for Perfect Couple, Wine & Food: Affinities & Atrocities, and Hedonistic Pleasure in 5 Courses. Any plans to repeat these seminars? Probably not. You have to have a kitchen that you completely trust. In general, sommeliers know a lot more about food than chefs know about wine. Unless the chef follows the food preparation guidelines specifically laid out by the sommelier, food-wine seminars can be a disaster. The event planning is very time consuming and as a result the event would have to be expensive.

Do you have any plans for a book on wine and food? Maybe in a few years. I would like to write a book about the "Life of a Sommelier". My experience has been unique in that I do not work "on the floor" in a restaurant like a traditional sommelier. My perspective would be quite different.

The Gospel According To Rene

“Wine was made for drinking with food and when you have the perfect match– the very best style of wine with perfectly prepared food– that is it– the experience will bring you to your knees.”

“The best wine is the wine you have in your glass if it gives you pleasure. It doesn’t matter where it came from or what it cost.”

“French is most of the time overrated... ..but, when its good, its damn good.”

“Do not be intimidated by wine and all the hype surrounding it– it is only fermented grape juice. Do not be overwhelmed by names and prices. The wine press should not be able to tell you what to drink.”



Veramonte Pinot Noir

The Casablanca Valley AVA in Chile has shown potential for Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The area is cool with pockets of plantings in canyons cooled by the ocean and blessed with plenty of natural water. Veramonte is owned by Constellation Brands (Franciscan Estates, Ravenswood, and Simi). The winery’s inaugural Pinot Noir is the **2002 Winemaker Selection**. Although not currently exported to the United States, it will eventually be marketed here in the \$10-12 range.

I recently sampled a bottle. The style is more European with higher acid and tannins. A bit rustic, it is mildly lacking in depth and a little pruney on the finish, but its not bad for the money. The potential is evident. The Burgundians, including Jacques Prieur, have been recently sighted in the Casablanca Valley region of Chile. Their interest in the area speaks volumes about the future possibilities of quality Chilean Pinot Noir. Stay tuned.

Half Bottles

The poor neglected, much maligned 375ml bottle of wine. It just doesn’t get any respect. For Pinot Noirs that don’t demand any significant aging, the half bottle concept makes a lot of sense. A half bottle is half the price of a full bottle, but contains the same wine. 2+ glasses contained therein make it ideal for a solo drinker at mealtime. Half bottles can allow the budget-constrained buyer to try many top Pinot Noirs for half price. I recently saw the following excellent wines for sale in half bottle format at the Wine Exchange in Orange, CA: **Archery Summit Pinot Noir Premier 2001** (\$18), **Chehalem Pinot Noir Rion Reserve 2000** (\$22), **Domaine Serene Pinot Noir Evanstad Reserve 2000** (\$20), **Hamacher Pinot Noir 2001** (\$16), **Patz & Hall Pinot Noir Hyde Vineyard Carneros 2001** (\$21), **Sapphire Hill Pinot Noir 2001** (\$17), **Scherrer Pinot Noir Fort Ross Sonoma Coast 2001** (\$17), and **Sidruí Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands 2002** (\$17). That’s eight fine bottles of Pinot Noir for \$150. Be sure and keep a few half bottles to store your left-over wine from full bottles for drinking the next day.



Wine art has become a multimillion dollar business in the United States. Well-healed oenophiles think nothing of spending \$6,000 for an original painting or \$1,200 for a signed and numbered print of their favorite bottle of wine. Still-life wine art is a big seller in California where home wine cellars are common and prominently displayed wine art is a big status symbol.

Two of the most successful painters are Thomas Stiltz and Thomas Arvid. Arvid currently has a sepia limited edition serigraph of 2 works— one a bottle of Opus One titled “Life of Party” and the second a bottle of Williams Selyem Pinot Noir titled “So Deserving” - priced at \$1250 for the two piece suite (www.gallery-319.com). Stiltz’s work has earned between \$1 million and \$2 million in annual retail sales for the company that reproduces and sells it (Soho Editions, New York).



Fire Station Red

The Gold Ridge Fire District in Sonoma’s wine country is staffed by volunteers and short on revenue. To raise money for the firefighters, John Drady, a Gold Ridge firefighter and vintner, started Fire Station Red. A portion of the profit from sales of this winery is donated to Gold Ridge Fire District and other fire departments across the nation. Drady teamed with local winegrower Fred Nunes, a retired firefighting helicopter pilot for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, and winemaker Anthony Austin. Austin was the founding winemaker at Firestone Vineyards which he left in 1982 to start Austin Cellars, and has been making Pinot Noir for 30 years.

The **2002 Fire Station Red Russian River Valley Pinot Noir** will be released in the Fall of 2004. The grapes are from Fred Nunes’s Nunes Vineyard, planted in 1997 on land that had been in his family since 1950. Bottles of the wine sport a fire engine red foil capsule. Good wine and a good cause. The winery’s web site is way cool— www.firestationred.com.

