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Table Wines vs “Trophy Wines”

At the American Society of Enology and Viticulture Meeting in San Diego the subject of a symposium was the trend toward picking sweeter grapes and the resultant higher alcohol wines. Various terms athletic, profiled, powerful, blockbuster, ultracalifornian or trophy wines, these big wines shine at wine tastings where they receive high scores, but perform poorly at the table where the high alcohol and low acid tires the palate quickly and competes with the flavors of food. The proliferation of this style of wine is a combination of many factors, such as untimely heat driving sugar levels ahead of flavors, and the pressure in the marketplace to produce powerful wines that please the wine critics and press.

The California Grape Crush Report reveals that the average alcohol of all varieties of California wine rose from 12.5% to 14.8% over the 30 years between 1971 and 2001. The average brix of grapes at harvest in Napa in 1971 was 20.5 compared to 24.2 in 2001.

Wine consultant George Vierra, writing in *Wine Business Monthly* (July, 2004) has proposed that these wines be called “social wines” as a separate category from “table wines”. He argues that few wines with more than 14% alcohol are complimentary to food. Food wines have good balance between acid, body, and alcohol. Acid balanced wines work best at the table because the acid clears the palate. The problem is, it is difficult to get flavors and the mouth feel desired at less than 14% alcohol. Higher alcohol in a wine is judged by people as having more body and fruit flavor. As a result, in California, body and alcohol tend to receive more favor in balance goals than acid. The result is rich and full wines. The European style of wine emphasizes more acid in the balance, resulting in an elegant style of wine which is not as showy on the first taste. These wines are more subtle and reveal their charms more slowly.

The challenge to winemakers is to make wines with flavors they are looking for at lower sugar levels. This can definitely be accomplished. The Domaine Romanee-Conti 2001 Montrachet has 13% alcohol. Those who have tasted this wine recently would unanimously agree that the current price of over \$1,100 a bottle is too low.

F.W. Beech, a wine scholar, spoke to this subject: “A table wine is suitable for accompanying and enhancing the flavour of a meal. Generally it is not too strong in flavor or aroma with an alcohol content of 10-12%. It is usually dry, or slightly sweet, and lighter in body than a social wine.”

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

Volume 4, Issue 2

August 22, 2004

“Table wine is grape wine having an alcohol content not in excess of 14% by volume.

From the Code Fed Regs Title 27, 4.21, 1994

Inside this issue:

Belle Glos Pinot Noir	2
IPNC	3
Hearty Burgundy	3
Williams Selyem New Releases	4
Top 100+ Wines Weekend	4

Belle Glos by Caymus

The Belle Glos label is owned by the Wagner family of Caymus Vineyards fame. Caymus Special Select Cabernet Sauvignon, Caymus Chardonnay (Mer Soleil) and Caymus Conundrum are well known, but the winery actually has a long history with Pinot Noir, producing some excellent wines from relatively warm locations of the Napa Valley (Rutherford) in the late 1970's and early 1980's (the 1981 Special Select was very good). They even produced a Pinot Noir Blanc wine labeled "Eye of Partridge". The Pinot Noir program was revived in 2001 with the release of Belle Glos Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir. The name comes from Chuck Wagner's mother, Loma Belle Glos-Wagner who stills lives on the Caymus property. There are three areas where Caymus is farming Pinot Noir grapes— the Sonoma Coast, Santa Maria Valley, and the Santa Lucia Highlands (for a future bottling). These are all coastal areas, but the styles will be quite different due to differences in the amount of fog, wind and sunlight at a specific site, and something they have found very important, the diurnal temperature variation (differences in temperature from day to night during the growing season).



Caymus acquired a portion of the historic Santa Maria Hills Vineyard in the 1990's. The land, on a west-facing slope of the Santa Maria Valley foothills, had been planted to Pinot Noir in 1972-1974— so the vines are almost ancient by California Pinot Noir standards. The vines are "own root," meaning they are not the typical root-stock with budwood from another vine grafted on. The identity of the clone is unsure, probably Pommard. The **2001 Belle Glos Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** from this vineyard was well-received by the wine press (see my review in the July 7, 2003 issue of the *PinotFile*). Bob Hosmon of the *Miami Sun Sentinel* said: "To say that this is one of the best U.S.-produced Pinot Noirs I've ever tasted is not an overstatement... if you're looking for something truly special, you won't be disappointed. Unfortunately no website, mail, e-mail, or phone orders.

The **2002 Belle Glos Clark & Telephone Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** has just been released. With the 2002 vintage, winemakers Joseph Wagner and Jon Bolta (Conundrum) took what was already a low-yielding vineyard and reduced the crop even more radically, by regular thinning, to increase the flavor concentration of the berries. When the grapes were hand-harvested, they ended up with just over one ton per acre. The quality was so high and the flavors so distinctive that they felt the wine deserved to be named for the vineyard that produced it— located at the intersection of Clark & Telephone Roads. Three different yeast strains were used to highlight different characters in the grapes. Some wine lots were left to soak on their skins for several days while others were pressed off early— according to what they thought would help each best express its unique character. Barrels were from five different coopers, with age ranging from new (60%) to three-times used. Winemaker tasting notes include aromas of cranberry with spicy notes of peppercorn, cumin and ginger. In the mouth, pepper-spice notes give way to strawberry flavors and firm acidity. The tannins are silky but firm and the texture is mouthcoating. The long, lingering finish combines notes of spicy tobacco and strawberry with sweet, toasty oak and hints of black licorice.

The **2002 Belle Glos Taylor Lane Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** has also been released. This small vineyard was planted near the town of Occidental on the Sonoma Coast in 1995 and this bottling is the inaugural release. Joseph Wagner, while in middle school, helped develop this vineyard, clearing trees and rocks from this previously unplanted land, and laying out and planting the vine rows. In order to get the grapes to ripen in this cool seaside climate, they converted their trellis system to "Trentina" (after the region in Italy where it originated) which maximizes sun exposure on the leaves. There is a very consistent diurnal temperature variation here which ensures a good balance between ripeness and acidity. The wine was aged for just nine months in French oak barrels (60% new). Tasting notes from the winemaker describe a nose filled with scents of cherry and cola with underlying notes of new oak and caramel. In the mouth, the entry is dominated by strawberry and cherry flavors. Sweet strawberry and caramel qualities carry the wine through to a fruity/sweet finish with full, ripe tannins. The wine is lush, but underlined with balancing acidity and toasty oak. The finish is long— seemingly endless— and mouthwatering.

18th Annual International Pinot Noir Celebration Cooks

629 pinotphiles attended the 18th IPNC on July 23-25, 2004 at Linfield College in McMinnville. Two consecutive days recorded temperatures of 104 degrees! The one negative about the IPNC, if any can be found, is that alfresco tastings of Pinot Noir in hot August weather just doesn't work. That aside, 65 Pinot Noir producers from Oregon, California, Canada, France, Italy, Switzerland, Israel, New Zealand, and Chile and 39 guest chefs came to the celebration. The buzz was the high quality of the 2002 vintage Pinot Noirs. Adam Campbell, winemaker at Elk Cove Vineyards said that the harvest in 2002 was simply superb and "ranked up there with the best vintages we've had in Oregon as far as growing grapes is concerned." In California 2002 was much like 2001 as far as style, but Zach Rasmussen, winemaker at Goldeneye Winery, said that in 2002 the grapes "had more extraction, power, and complex flavors."

One featured seminar was held at the Domaine Drouhin Estate to discuss farming techniques including the effective use of small tractors, high density planting, irrigation, soil types, microclimates, sun exposure and clonal selection. The proper selection of Pinot Noir clones for individual sites is critical. If they have an off-year in France, it is still Burgundy, but if it's an off year here, it's considered an overpriced Pinot Noir!

Special tastings at the Celebration included "California Gems", an opportunity to taste new special Pinot Noirs with winemakers from Arcadian, Domaine Alfred, Etude, Flowers, Foley Estate, Goldeneye, Robert Mondavi, Scherrer, Siduri, Skewis, and Vision Cellars.

This year's special guest chef was Master Chef Odashima of Kappo Odashima, Tokyo, Japan. Odashima has been enamored of Pinot Noir since the 1960's, when he was chef at Takara, a noted Japanese restaurant in Paris. Pinot Noir represents over 70 percent of the wines that he serves currently with his meals at Kappo Odashima. He cooked a seven-course Grand Dinner featuring exotic dishes of eel, prawns, duck and pork.

The highlight of the IPNC is the Saturday night traditional Northwest Salmon Bake where fresh Chinook Salmon is fire roasted on long wooden planks and served with a drizzle of marjoram butter. The Sparkling Finale on Sunday morning is affectionately referred to as the "Breakfast of Pinot Noir Champions".

Some 2002 Pinot Noirs from the IPNC highly recommended by *California Wine and Food Magazine* include: Amity Sunnyside Vineyard, Brick House "Les Dijonais", Brooks Janus, Chehalem Reserve, Cristom Eileen vineyard, Domaine Drouhin Estate, Elk Cove Roosevelt, Francis Tannahill "The Hermit", Panther Creek Bednarik Vineyard, R. Stuart, Chalone Estate, Domaine Alfred Califa, Etude, Flowers Sonoma Coast, Siduri Rosella's Vineyard, and Vision Cellars Sonoma County.

To be included on the mailing list for next year's Celebration July 29-31, 2005, go to www.ipnc.org.

Hearty Burgundy

At the beginning of the 20th century, Burgundy wines were adulterated with wine from Algeria, Southern France, and Spain to produce a big, bold style of Pinot Noir that appealed to the English public who drank most of the exported Burgundy. This is probably the source of the tag "hearty" Burgundy and the wines remained that way for several years after phylloxera.

In California, Gallo winery executives were allowed to order wine for personal use at no cost. It was noted by Ernest Gallo that they usually ordered more robust reds like Barbarone and Burgundy Pastosos. Ernest wanted to produce a more full-bodied red wine and came up with Hearty Burgundy. The base grapes for this wine were Zinfandel and Petite Sirah from the Central Valley, Napa, and Sonoma. Interestingly, Rochioli's first crops of Pinot Noir in 1971 and 1972 were sold to Martini & Pratti who then sent on to Gallo for their Hearty Burgundy! The wine received modest praise by wine critics and continues to be a good seller today.

The 2002 single-vineyard Pinot Noirs from Williams Selyem have been released and have received high scores from Robert Parker and Stephen Tanzer. In their reviews, they use words like “deep, rich, dense, big, backward, impressive structured, beefy, powerful, outstanding power, concentrated, superripe, strong, port-like, and muscle-bound.” At \$50-\$80 a bottle, these “social wines” are expensive, but 1,000 people are clamoring on the outside, waiting to get on the mailing list to buy some. The bottlings include Flax Vineyard (RRV), Weir Vineyard (Yorkville Highlands), Vista Verde Vineyard (Central Coast), Coastlands (Sonoma Coast), Ferrington Vineyard (Anderson Valley), Allen Vineyard (RRV), Rochioli Riverblock Vineyard (RRV), and Precious Mountain Vineyard (Sonoma Coast).

The Drake Estate Vineyard is a new Estate vineyard for the Williams Selyem Winery in the Russian River Valley. The vineyard is located to the east of the town of Guerneville. Climate is very much influenced by the Pacific Ocean. 7 blocks of Pinot Noir were planted in 1999 using clones UCD 4 Pommard, Dijon 115, 667, 777, a selection from David Bruce vineyards, and a selection from Cornell University via Canada via University of Dijon. The fruit currently goes into the Russian River Valley and Sonoma County bottlings, but a vineyard-designate release is planned for the future.



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Tasting the Top 100+ Wines of the 20th Century

Legendary wine tasting dinners are offered by the New York Wine Workshop affiliated with Acker Merrill Wine Auction House and hosted by owner John Kapon. The events are usually held at notable restaurants in New York (and occasionally California). On October 6 there will be a tasting of 1991 Burgundies to include Leflaive Chavalier Montrachet, Leroy Clos du Vougeot, Ponsot Clos de la Roche, Vogue Musigny VV, and DRC La Tache (\$345). On October 14 there is a Domaine Dujac dinner at Le Cirque 2000 Restaurant. Wines include 1990, 1993, 1996 Echezeaux, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1993, 1996, and 1999 Clos de la Roche, and 1971, 1976, 1978 Clos St Denis (\$735).

The superbowl of all tastings will be held the weekend of October 29-31: The Top 100+ Wines of the 20th Century. This is a bacchanal lasting three days involving 144 wines served at lunches and dinners at Daniel, Cru, Per Se, and Veritas restaurants. 40 guests (2 spots still open at this writing), \$25,000 pp inclusive. At the Saturday lunch the following Burgundies will be poured: 1937 Leroy Richebourg, 1937 and 1947 Clos de Lambrays, 1949 Rousseau Chambertin, 1955 Leroy Chambertin, 1945, 1949, and 1962 Vogue Musigny VV, 1978 Dujac Clos de la Roche, 1978 Jayer Richebourg, Echezeaux, and Cros Parantoux, 1942, 1945, 1949, 1959, 1962, and 1971 DRC La Tache, 1959, 1962, and 1971 DRC Romanee-Conti and more!

For more information, go to the website at ackerwines.com or e-mail to wineworkshops@aol.com.