

# PinotFile<sup>®</sup>

The **FIRST** Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinot Noir

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## PinotFile Dinner Series: A Williams Selyem Retrospective

The Crew assembled recently at Mr Stox Restaurant in Anaheim, California for a dinner and tasting of older vintages of Williams Selyem Pinot Noir. Subtitled “Prom Night for Pinot Lovers”, the wines included 1991, 1992, 1994, and 1995 Allen Vineyard, 1991, 1992, 1994, and 1995 Olivet Lane Vineyard, and 1995 Rochioli Vineyard.

The now-legendary Williams Selyem Winery was the original garage winery. Started at a time when most of California Pinot Noir was ordinary, many doubted California could ever produce the kind of gentle, supple Pinot Noir that typified Burgundy. Burt Williams was a home winemaker and Ed Selyem a beer and fruit winemaker. They began making wine from Sonoma grapes for their own use in 1979. The winery was started in 1981 in a garage in Fulton, California. The first wine was a Zinfandel. Burt and Ed continued to raise their families and pay for their houses using income from Burt’s job in San Francisco as a printer for the San Francisco News Agency, and Ed’s as a wine buyer and accountant at Speer’s Market in Forestville. Burt’s desire was to make world-class wine and Ed’s to create a successful business from local viticulture. They started with no capital, never borrowed, and grew 25% every year by starting small and putting all of their income back into the business. Their first truly commercial wine was a 1982 Pinot Noir that was sold under the name Hacienda del Rio— it was a hit and Burgundy lovers began to talk about the little upstart winery.

Williams was a burly vintner who had an intuitive sense of how Pinot Noir should be vinified. He never set foot in Burgundy but he had drunk a lot of wine from the region. Production methods were old-fashioned out of necessity due to lack of capital. Ed Selyem was the business mind behind the operation. While Burt preferred colorful sportshirts and suspenders, Ed wore T-shirts. Both lived simply and shunned publicity. There never was a sign at the winery announcing its location. Selyem developed the concept of a mailing list to distribute wine long before mailing lists became the accepted way of allocating scarce wine. Early on the wine was sold mostly to other winemakers and retailers with good palates. The more they made and the more press that followed caused a snowball effect in demand. The wine became so popular that a waiting list was developed for those begging to get on the mailing list. Eventually 85% of their wine was sold directly to individuals on the carefully guarded mailing list who they enjoyed being in contact with, visiting with, and learning from.

**Drink Pinot:  
Let Your  
Bladder  
Experience  
Nirvana**

**Volume 4, Issue 7  
September 26, 2004**

Burt and Ed never forgot why they started making wine in the first place: “It’s not just like I/m making the wine for the public,” Williams said. “It’s nice for us that the public likes it too, but we basically make the wine to please ourselves.”

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They were fortunate to successfully contact the very best growers in the Russian River Valley who not only were growing the best fruit in America, they were great folks to work with. All contracts were on a handshake basis. Williams Selyem never did own any vineyards. Howard Allen (owner of Allen Vineyard) built them a winery building on his ranch and they moved out of their fixed garage in 1989.

Their method of Pinot Noir production is now currently practiced at least in some form by most California vintners of the grape today. Burt and Ed spent serious time in the vineyard checking on grapes in the fall until they were ready. The grapes were picked ripe, hand-sorted and destemmed at the winery, and fermented in small, double-walled, stainless steel, recycled open-top dairy tanks. Ideally, fermentation was long and cool. They got into the tanks and did some footwork during fermentation, but there was no crushing. The skins were lightly pressed, the wine was gravity racked, and the last gallons of juice were lifted out of the tanks in buckets. The wine never saw fining, filtration, or a pump. Aging was done in new French oak (mostly Tronçais) 225-liter barrels made by the same cooper that produced casks for Domaine Romanee-Conti. The barrels were never used more than twice. The wine was hand-bottled, labeled, and foiled.

Williams Selyem produced credible Zinfandels and Chardonnays, but it was the Pinot Noirs that drew the most attention. The Pinot Noirs were amazingly fruity and complex when young, and seemed to age better than most Pinot Noirs from California. The wines peaked at 6-7 years after release, but it was difficult to avoid drinking them young. The unlikely owners and the scarcity of their wine created a mystique, but it was the wine's quality and consistency that was the real attraction. Wine writers spoke in superlatives previously reserved for Burgundy like: "well-balanced, ripe and juicy flavors, rich and supple texture, voluptuous and intensely flavored, delicacy and finesse with profound flavor." Dan Berger raved, "Best Pinot Noir in America and a rival to the best in the World." Matt Kramer anointed Williams Selyem "The Best Pinot Noir in California." Anthony Dias Blue chimed that "Williams Selyem Pinot Noir shines above the rest." Some of the winery's fans even waxed poetically:

There once were two men with a dream,  
That, using their skills as a team,  
They could turn out a wine,  
So exceedingly fine,  
Of the crop t' would be hailed as the cream.

Who are these two men of the west?  
Who draw with the Wine Country's best.  
Whose rich pinot noirs,  
While sparkling like stars,  
Yield heavenly flavor and zest.

... ..Arthur J Tobias



The Allen Vineyard is on Westside Road and is owned by retired San Francisco realtor, Howard Allen, but leased and farmed by neighbor Tom Rochioli. Joe Rochioli planted the Allen Vineyard in the 1970's using cuttings from his adjacent vineyard. The Allen Vineyard and a portion of the Rochioli Vineyard constitute some of the oldest Pommard clone plantings in California. Burt has said that the 1995 vintage from Allen Vineyard was his favorite. Prices below are release prices— multiply by about three for current prices. Comments about the wines are the general consensus of the group at the tasting. The wines were cellared properly since release.

**1991 Williams Selyem Allen Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$33):** Intoxicating nose of fruit and cherry cola,. Fruit not as rich as it used to be, but the favorite Allen of the group. A classic now a little subdued but still titillates.

**1992 Williams Selyem Allen Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$30):** Same nose as the 1991 but turned down a notch. Acid has taken the forefront over the fruit but still silky and comforting.

**1994 Williams Selyem Allen Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$42):** Aromas and taste of vanilla, cherry and raspberry. Very light, lacking depth, but soft and elegant.

**1995 Williams Selyem Allen Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$45):** Not what it once was (one of my favorite Williams Selyem wines), but still an attractive nose with a yummy berry and cola aftertaste. The wine is struggling to seduce, but lacks the charm it once had.

The Olivet Lane Vineyard is a 65 acre parcel located in the Russian River Valley, 15 miles from the Pacific Ocean, in an area of rolling hills called Vine Hill (a newly proposed name is Laguna Ridge). Owned and farmed by the Pelligrini family, the vines were planted in 1975. This vineyard produced a larger crop— 4-5 tons/acre— than the Allen Vineyard during the 1991-1995 vintages.

**1991 Williams Selyem Olivet Lane Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$28):** Weak nose of sweet fruit and herbs. Still a surprising amount of structure for its age.

**1992 Williams Selyem Olivet Lane Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$28):** Close to the 1991. Nose and tastes of black cherry, vanilla, and spice. Well-balanced and clean, lacking some richness.

**1994 Williams Selyem Olivet Lane Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$34):** The only wine not from my cellar but has been properly stored. Possibly corked. Must withhold judgment on this wine.

**1995 Williams Selyem Olivet Lane Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$36):** Great nose and flavors of sweet berries, rhubarb, vanilla, and cola. Amazingly well preserved with persistent richness and depth.

The Williams Selyem Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noirs until 1997 were from the West Block of Rochioli Vineyard planted in 1969 and 1970. Joe Rochioli gave Williams the grapes from this hollowed part of his vineyard even after son Tom joined him and started making wine and even when Tom ran short. The Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noirs were the most coveted of all of Williams Selyem wines.

**1995 Williams Selyem Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$60):** Brightest fruit of all wines sampled this evening. Darkest in color, it still is complex and richly flavored with enjoyable berry, cherry and floral notes. A few tasters thought they tasted an “off-taste”.

Considering the age (9-13 years old), these wines were amazingly well-balanced, elegant, spicy, and clean. They lacked some freshness, richness, and *cajones* they once had. All of them were still excellent food wines. In general, the Olivet Lane bottlings retained more structure than the Allen wines and the 1995 Olivet Lane was still stellar. The nose on the Allen bottlings was a thing of beauty, but the wines did not deliver on the promise of the nose. If you have any Williams Selyem Pinot Noirs prior to the 1995 vintage, drink up.

These Pinot Noirs were at one time the benchmark for California. They were serious wines with all of the pleasure that the Russian River Valley terroir could produce. Over the years they gave me more pleasure than I can describe in words, and these last precious bottles of Williams Selyem are sadly, the end of an era for me. Like my high school prom, the wonderful memories linger, but there is no going back.

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**Like chefs, winemakers change jobs frequently. Here are the latest results of switches:**

**Hugh Chapelle is the new winemaker at Lynmar Winery. He was previously head winemaker at Flowers Vineyard and Winery. The associate winemaker at Flowers Ross Cobb, has been promoted to winemaker.**

**Jerome Chery, a native of France, has left Sonoma's Littorai to become winemaker at Saintsbury in Carneros.**

**Greg La Follette has been hired as the new winemaker at DeLoach Winery. He will continue to make Pinot Noir under his own label, Tandem, and consult with other wineries.**



  
**PrinceofPinot.com**

## **The Ten Commandments of Pinot Noir**

1. Never buy a Pinot Noir based on score.
2. Never drink a purchased Pinot Noir until it has rested comfortably in your cellar for 6-8 weeks.
3. Never believe what retailers tell you unless you know them very, very, very well.
4. Never buy labels.
5. Never buy a North American Pinot Noir for less than \$20 unless you just want a cheap drunk. Good cheap Pinot Noir is an oxymoron.
6. Never give in to a hostage wine no matter how much you want it.
7. Never keep North American Pinot Noir longer than 8 years. Almost certainly it will never be any better than it was after 6-7 years.
8. Always try to buy Pinot Noir in multiples of three so you can follow the wine's evolution over time. This will avoid the "I wish I would have bought more" problem after cracking open your first bottle one year after purchase.
9. Always do a little research and get to know the winegrower/winemaker. The internet makes access to this information instantly available. Also, don't be afraid to call and talk directly to them.
10. Always trust your own palate.