

PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinot Noir

Thanksgiving: Its About the Food

Thanksgiving dinner is not the time to trot out your aged high-end Pinot Noirs and Burgundies. The power and excellence of these wines work great with just turkey, but will often be lost in the complex panoply of flavors that this holiday dinner table provides. I reviewed the current wine press releases on choosing a wine for the Thanksgiving feast and found practically every varietal on earth either suggested or recommended. Pinot Gris, Gewurtztraminer, lighter Chardonnays, Chenin Blanc, Gruner Veltliner, Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc, Zinfandel, Rhone-style blends, Syrah, Cru Beaujolais, Barbera, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and of course Pinot Noir. The best solution: open several different bottles and let your guests decide.

In choosing a Pinot Noir, look for newer vintages with soft tannins and high acid. Many of your dinner guests will not have an appreciation for fine wine so selecting a good, but inexpensive, bottling is often the preferred choice. These wines can be appealing if soft and fruity and have some Pinot Noir character. Although I am not a big fan of under \$20 Pinot Noirs, I think that any of the following selections would be appropriate (all 2002 vintage): California— Echelon (Central Coast) \$10, Estancia (Monterey) \$10, Screw Kappa Napa (Napa) \$12, Crosspoint (Monterey) \$12, Beringer Founder's Estate \$12, Concannon Select Vineyards (Central Coast) \$12, Sebastiani Sonoma Coast \$10 and Oregon— Duck Pond \$9. Sometimes the light way is the right way.

Birds— a Problem & the Solution

Birds are a pest to vigneron and viticulturists. Flying in flocks of thousands, starlings can eat a lot of grapes. The 2004 vintage in Oregon had significant yield loss to birds. Several tactics have been employed to deter birds from foraging grapes. Noisy gas guns, high-frequency devices, over-the-row netting, side-netting (does not impede sunlight and decreases disease risk), and diversionary food such as watermelons have been employed. At Cloudy Bay Winery, they use a 4-wheel bike with a powerful stereo system which is played at top decibels as a deterrent. But probably the best solution is raptors such as falcons. Falcons can be brought into vineyards by trainers and when the birds see the falcon flying around, they fly higher and keep on going.

Pinot Noir is a good belly button wine.

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As mentioned in the May 16, 2004 issue, Sebastiani has reinvented itself, downsized, and now produces several premium quality Sonoma County bottlings. The Sebastiani 2003 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir has been released (\$9 at Costco) and like the 2002 is a lot of bang for the buck.

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Costco Pinot Noir

Costco has rolled out a new collection of wines under the Kirkland Signature label. The 2003 Kirkland Signature Pinot Noir has just been released for the holidays. 3,000 cases were produced from Oregon grapes (vinted and bottled by Wine Exchange in Newburg, Oregon), priced at \$14. Nancy Griese, who oversees Costco's Kirkland Signature wine program, says "We've taken the guesswork out of buying the perfect Pinot Noir." Now I wouldn't go that far, but the wine is very respectable. Simple and light, this Pinot Noir has appealing strawberry and spice notes, no noticeable tannins, and a good acid backbone. It is rather typical for an Oregon Pinot Noir. Left opened awhile, it improves in the glass. A great "starter" Pinot Noir or daily drinker.

Besides its own exclusive line of wines, Costco is introducing Kirkland Signature wine stems. The \$30-million-a-year in sales that Riedel Crystal U.S.A. racks up has not gone unnoticed. The Costco wineglasses are extra-large, 26.4-ounce bowls, made in Austria with 24 percent lead crystal. These stems are comparable to ones made by Riedel, but are priced at \$27 for an eight-piece set, nearly 70 percent less. The Kirkland Signature logo is etched on the base of every stem. Can you say knockoff?

The Humble Beginnings of California Pinot Noir

Paul Root, owner of Root's Cellar in Healdsburg, a boutique wine source, recently reminisced as he told the following story which underlines the humble origin of today's booming Pinot Noir industry in California. One foggy, rainy morning in December 1981, Paul was squatting on a barrel rack in a garage on Fulton Road in Santa Rosa sipping just-thieved samples of several lots of Pinot Noir just handed him by Ed Selyem as he hopped and crawled across the various barrels lining the perimeter of the building. One of the wines that really rocked Paul was a Pinot Noir made from a vineyard owned by some guy named Joe Rochioli, a friend of Burt Williams who had been selling his fruit to a few small producers over the years. (The first commercial release from these two was a 1982 Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir, a watershed event). Burt Williams stood in the doorway making sly comments regarding the two of us looking like tipsy sailors on a listing ship. At that time, Burt was still setting the type for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and Ed had a home business as an accountant as well as being the beverage-buyer for a tiny grocery store in Forestville. The name the two had given their fledgling wine operation was "Hacienda Del Rio", and they were starting to get recognition from several respected wine-scribes. At roughly the same time, a talented woman with a flair for Mexican cuisine had opened a little restaurant west of Guerneville called "Hacienda Del Rio", and threatened ill-will toward the two if they should persist. Paul remembers Ed saying something like "We really didn't like the name that much anyway," hence they changed the name to Williams Selyem (the restaurant closed a few years later). Meanwhile Tom Rochioli (Joe's son) had the production of commercial wines on his mind at the time, and was discussing just that with a young wine enthusiast named Gary Farrell. Gary had spent time in the cellars of Dehlinger, Bynum, and Stemmler, and was more than happy to lend a hand producing the first wines at Rochioli as well. Interestingly, Gary's first commercial release was also a 1982 Rochioli-Allen Pinot Noir. Paul sold this wine at his first commercial enterprise, Tip Top Liquor Warehouse, also in Healdsburg. Obviously the Rochioli-Williams Selyem-Gary Farrell connection was the beginning of California Pinot Noir as we know it today and the somewhat incestuous yet symbiotic relationship continues between these three outstanding producers. Tom Rochioli still produces Pinot Noirs that are the standard-bearers for the Russian River Valley and sells grapes to both Williams Selyem and Gary Farrell.



New Zealand Pinot Noir Update

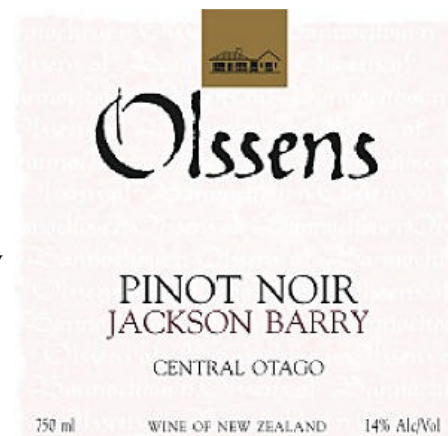
Periodically I taste a few Kiwi Pinots to see how things are progressing from down under. I have never been thrilled by these wines as they often seem unripe with vegetal overtones. When they are on, they do have plenty of ripe cherry fruit with a delicate overlay of baking spices, sweet herbs, and mineral. The two regions in New Zealand that are producing the best quality Pinot Noirs are Marlborough in the northern region of South Island and Central Otago, the most southerly wine-producing area on the South Island. Otago is favored for its cool temperatures, and although Marlborough has more Pinot Noir acreage than anywhere else in New Zealand, Otago acreage has increased rapidly, from 46 hectares in 1995 to 810 in production in 2004. The climate here is as “continental” as one can get in New Zealand and the diurnal temperature range is great. The 2002 vintage was the best vintage since 1998 and probably the best vintage that Central Otago has ever had.

In the latest *Cuisine Magazine* Top 10 New Zealand Pinot Noirs, seven wines were awarded five stars, and six of these came from Otago. The winner was **Bannock Brae Barrel Select Pinot Noir 2002**. Rounding out the top five were **Bannock Brae Goldfields Pinot Noir 2002**, **Valli Gibbston Pinot Noir 2003**, **Peregrine Pinot Noir 2003**, and **Alexandria Wine Co Davishon Pinot Noir 2002**.

Other New Zealand Pinot Noir standouts have included **Amisfield Central Otago Pinot Noir 2002** (2004 Best Pinot Noir of Show at San Francisco International Wine Competition), **Felton Road Block 5 Pinot Noir 2002** (2nd at 2004 Tri-Nations judging between Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand), **Two Paddocks 1st Paddock Pinot Noir 2003**, (owned by actor Sam Neil), **Dog Point Marlborough Pinot Noir 2002** (a WS 90, made by James Healy and Ivan Sutherland who used to be head winemaker and head viticulturalist at Cloudy Bay), **Mt Difficulty Pinot Noir 2002** (highly rewarded wine), **Spy Valley Marlborough Pinot Noir 2002**, **Akarua Pinot Noir 2002**, and **Kaituna Valley, Awatere Vineyard Marlborough Pinot Noir 2002** (a *Decanter* 5 star award winner). An excellent newsletter on New Zealand wines and a source for many limited-production Pinot Noirs is online at www.otagowine.com. Other good sources include www.southernwines.com and in California www.viapacifica.com.

Olssens in the hills of Bannockburn, Central Otago, is owned and operated by the husband and wife team of John Olssen and Heather McPherson. The couple were brought up in the Central Otago region, known for its gold prospecting, superb trout fishing, and viticultural potential. They represent the first of the second-wave of vintners to farm this region (the pioneering first-wave Central Otago wineries were Gibbston Valley, Chard Farm, Rippon, and Blackridge). The property was purchased in 1989 and the 10 hectare Olssen's Garden Vineyard planted to primarily Pinot Noir. Karen Olssen joined the team as viticulturist in 1996, Peter Bartle became the winemaker in 2001 (his previous experience included Joseph Phelps Wines, Villa Maria, and John Forrest Estate in Marlborough), and a winery was built for the 2001 vintage. The winery even has a Williams Selyem connection, as assistant winemaker Tony Hunt spent time at this landmark winery. The **Olssens Slapjack Creek Pinot Noir 2002** won first place at the 2004 Tri-Nations Wine Judging featuring wines from Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand. Another vineyard selection, **Olssens Jackson Barry Pinot Noir 2002** (\$20) is currently available in California (Wine Exchange). This is a decent Pinot Noir that is light-bodied and smooth. The strawberry and cherry fruit is restrained, but offers some pleasure with airing. My notes say simple and comfortable, not a terrific wine by itself, but the high acid makes it a nice partner with food.

Matt Douglas, general manager at Mt Difficulty, feels that “Central Otago produces power, not sweetness. It's the intensity of the fruit which makes the difference. The wines have high tannins, but are very smooth.”






PrinceofPinot.com

Affairs of the Vine will be conducting The 2004 Pinot Noir Shootout final judging on December 28, 2004. The top performers as selected by the judging panel will be showcased at a Passionate About Pinot Noir Summit in the Bay Area in February, 2005. The judging panel is diverse and includes retail, restaurant and wine trade professionals, winemakers, wine writers, and consumers. The winning wines are judged on a three-tier system: 4 Hearts-Love at first sip, 3 Hearts-An affair to remember, and 2 Hearts-Will provide fond memories. Vintners must submit four bottles of each entry by December 7, 2004. The wines must be currently available or available soon. Register online for \$50. Call 707-874-1975 or online at affairsofthevine.com.

Bolinas: Weird or Just Wired?

In a recent PinotFile, I ran a short piece on the eccentric winemaker, Sean Thackrey, who makes wine out of his house in Bolinas, California. There are many stories about Bolinas, the most well-known being the townspeople's habit of dynamiting road signs put up by the highway department directing travelers to the town. I personally stopped in a couple years back and would not go back. It is kind of a spooky place mired in the drug-culture of the hippie era. One of my readers, Dick Sands, wrote to me and related a funny story about Bolinas I wanted to share with you.

Dick has a friend who lives in Bolinas. About 20 years ago he went to visit his friend and the instructions on getting there went something like this: from the Golden Gate Bridge go thru Sausalito, then proceed for 6.7 miles, then turn left on the black top road, then 1.8 miles later turn right on the black top road, at 1.2 miles turn onto a dirt road which turns into downtown Bolinas, after you go by Smokies (a bar), go to the fourth building on the left, pull in and pull up to the pay phone, call me, then get back in your car, roll up the windows, do not talk to anybody, and if it seems like trouble drive away, and return to call a little later. Under no condition are you and your lady to walk around, and do not go to Smokies. He arrived a little later and we went to his home. He then explained a little. He was working in San Francisco and after he had lived in Bolinas for two years, he stayed at work late, drove into Bolinas, took off his tie, and stopped at Smokies for a beer. As soon as he entered, he got jumped, and several people started beating the heck out of him. After a few minutes of beating him, somebody recognized him and yelled, "hey quit that, it is Hawks (his name)" and they stopped. He didn't bother getting his beer, went home, got his suit ready for the cleaners, and had his ribs taped. Lesson learned, you never go into Smokies unless you are dressed Bolinas casual.