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The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinot Noir

2005: Year of
the Pinot

Following Your Pinot Dream

Awhile back I received a curious e-mail from a reader in New York who said he spent the better part of a week staying up until 3:00 AM reading past issues of the *PinotFile*. He went on to say he had learned an enormous amount about Pinot Noir and wouldn't stop until he read them all! Finally, he remarked that he was following his dream to make Pinot Noir in the Russian River Valley in 2005.

Jamie Kutch has lived his entire life in New York City. Several years ago he developed an interest in wine and for the last three years has made wine in his small apartment with grapes shipped out from the West Coast. The more he read and tasted, the more his passion grew. His Pinot Noir epiphany came when a friend gave him a glass of 1999 La Tache; "It simply blew my mind."

Two years ago, while out of work from his Wall Street job, and home surfing the Board, he fortuitously stumbled upon Andrew Vingiello. He also worked on Wall Street, but on the West Coast. At night he was mentoring under Brian Loring and making his first batch of Pinot Noir (under his new label, A.P.VIN) They communicated by e-mail and eventually Andrew sent him a barrel sample of his wine which showed well in a New York wine tasting with other California Pinot Noirs. Jamie was now hooked and realized that Andrew was living HIS dream. Both Brian and Andrew urged Jamie to come out west at harvest and "get his hands dirty". He just could not imagine leaving his family, friends, and girlfriend of eight years. It just did not seem possible until he met Michael Browne.

Some months after receiving the barrel sample of A.P.Vin Pinot, he landed a job with a large investment bank. The work was boring and the other employees cutthroat. Meanwhile his passion for wine was growing. One day he was online trying to acquire some Kosta Browne Kanzler Vineyard Pinot Noir from a fellow member of the RobertParker.com Bulletin Board. After acquiring a few bottles and opening one, he was smitten. He felt it was the "best California Pinot Noir I ever tasted." Subsequently he sent an e-mail to Michael Browne of Kosta Browne Winery detailing his dream to make Pinot Noir and requesting an allocation of a Pinot Noir blend called "4 Barrels". Michael was sold out but sent him a bottle from his own stash along with a note which read in part, "My advice is to go for your dreams if it is at all possible, otherwise you might regret it for the rest of your life. A man once told me 'the biggest regrets in life are not things that you did,

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"There is no greater reward for the wine-maker than to put a great Pinot Noir in the bottle"

... ..Gary Farrell

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but the things that you did not do.’ I think he was a wise man. As for living the dream, it is pretty cool to work with something that you are passionate about. Lots of hard work involved, but it is well worth it. My advice if you think this is your calling is to drop everything you are doing and sacrifice a few years to get where you want to be. That is what I did and it is going in a very good direction. Another good example is Andrew at A.P., Vin. He went for it and now it is taking him for a ride.” Michael also offered to help make Jamie’s dream a reality if he wanted it. He offered to mentor him in making 125 cases of Pinot Noir under his own label.

Flushed with excitement, Jamie quit his job in New York City, talked his girlfriend into joining him, and moved to San Francisco. Under Michael Browne’s tutelage, his first vintage will be a Russian River Valley Pinot Noir from Amber Ridge Vineyard. Look for the 2005 Kutch Pinot Noir in two years. You can join the mailing list for this first vintage at jamiekutch.com or e-mail Jamie at jamiekutch@hotmail.com.

Kosta Browne is a rising star among California “gargiste” Pinot Noir producers. The focus of this small-production winery is the Russian River Valley, but appellation and single vineyard releases from Santa Lucia Highlands and the Sonoma Coast are also offered. Michael Browne is the winemaker here, and like Jamie, changed careers fueled by an infatuation for Pinot Noir. He moved to Sonoma County from Washington State with the goal of becoming an architect. While working at a local restaurant, he developed a love for Pinot Noir and eventually co-founded Kosta Browne in 1997. Partner Dan Kosta is a native of Sonoma County who spent years at John Ash & Co in Santa Rosa as Head Sommelier. Although he is officially the Sales and Marketing Director for Kosta Browne, he shares in most of the hands-on work of making the winery’s Pinot Noirs.

The style of Kosta Browne Pinot Noirs is in the latest “ultracalifornian” mode featuring plentiful, rich, concentrated fruit, hefty wood-smoke, and high alcohol (the 2003 Appellation Series Pinot Noirs are right around 16% alcohol). The wines are marked by an appealing sweetness secondary to the alcohol and the oak. Although balance can be an issue at these high levels of alcohol, these winemakers seem to pull it off as shown by the many eager buyers

The winery’s current releases are the Appellation Series: **2003 Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir** (250 cases, \$38), **2003 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** (\$28) and the **2003 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir** (\$38). The official release date was May 1, but all of these wines are sold out at the winery. The Vineyard Designate Series of wines will be released October 1 and include a Cohn Vineyard Pinot Noir from the Russian River Valley and a Kanzler Vineyard Pinot Noir from the Sonoma Coast. A special release, 4 Barrels Reserve Pinot Noir, is offered to mailing list customers only in the Fall. To join the mailing list: kostabrowne.com.



First Pinot Noir With Labeled Antioxidant Content

Willamette Valley Vineyards of Turner, Oregon, has received approval by the TTB (Alcohol, Tax and Trade Bureau of the U.S. Department of Treasury) for listing resveratrol content on its label. The 2002 Vintage Selection Pinot Noir label listed the antioxidant resveratrol and its content. The 2003 Whole Cluster Fermented Pinot Noir went even further: “Resveratrol 25.9 Micromolar” and “Pinot noir develops a natural defense against botrytis (mold) in our most, cool climate: the antioxidant resveratrol. The same language contained on the Willamette Valley Vineyards 2004 Whole Cluster Pinot Noir label, however, was rejected by the TTB. The TTB requested that the word resveratrol be deleted.

The winery feels that listing resveratrol content and explaining its source is of value to the consumer and the wording used does not make any health claims. The TBB, however, has reconsidered the approval of the 2002 and 2003 labels claiming the word resveratrol possibly creates an association between drinking alcohol and good health. Even though the scientific evidence is overwhelming in support of the health benefits of resveratrol, it will be an uphill battle convincing the entrenched prohibitionists in Washington to allow this sensitive wording. Willamette Valley Vineyards plans to appeal.

Bay Area Wine Project

Steven and Lisa Rigisich are New York transplants who are passionate about their wine hobby. They have created the Bay Area Wine Project to promote wine appreciation in the Bay Area. The central activity of the Project is to organize wine tastings centered on a particular theme and featuring hard-to-find premium wines. Steven's true love is Pinot Noir and on his website at bawineproject.com, he has a "Pinot Corner" that includes new Pinot Noir releases, events, and his interesting commentary. His latest "rambling" on the site features his dislike for "excessively expensive trophy Pinots that taste like Cab." He centers his criticism on Robert Parker's recent *Wine Advocate* which awarded high scores to many California Pinot Noirs made in this style. The website also features a nice, although incomplete, listing of California Pinot Noir Producers.

The weekend of June 24-26, the Bay Area Wine Project is sponsoring the First Annual Pinot Days— A Festival Celebration of Pinot Noir From Around the World. On Friday, June 24, there is a tasting of 2001-2003 Pinot Noirs from Pisoni, Garys', and Rosella's Vineyards along with the vineyard owners and winemakers (at Fort Mason Center). Saturday, June 25, features a walk-around tasting of over 70 Pinot Noir producers world-wide also at Fort Mason Center. A Pinot Days Pinot Competition will be held in conjunction with the tasting as five San Francisco sommeliers discuss and judge the wines. Finally, on Sunday, June 26, there is a Winemaker's Brunch at the Marin Country Club in Novato. For tickets and information: bawineproject.com.

Peninsula Wine Tasting Group

Mark Sutherland (pictured at right at this year's WOPN Paulee) and Bob Carlson have recently organized a sophisticated wine tasting group in the San Francisco Bay Area. Mark recently sent me the results of some recent tastings of Pinot Noir that I wanted to share with my readers.

A tasting of recent releases by seventeen tasters ranked in order of the group's consensus preference: (1) 2002 Patz and Hall Burnside Sonoma Coast \$50, (2) 2000 Porter Creek Hillside Vineyard Russian River Valley \$22, (3) 2002 White Rose Estate Willamette Valley Pinot Noir \$60, (4) 1999 Marcassin Marcassin Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir \$102, and (5) 2003 George Hirsch Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir \$71. Another tasting flight consisted of Williams Selyem Allen Vineyard Pinot Noirs and was judged by the same tasters (in order of preference): (1) 1996 Williams Selyem Allen Vineyard Pinot Noir \$50, (2) 1998 Williams Selyem Allen Vineyard Pinot Noir \$65, (3) 1997 Williams Selyem Allen Vineyard Pinot Noir \$50, (4) 1999 Williams Selyem Allen Vineyard Pinot Noir \$73, and (5) 2000 Williams Selyem Allen Vineyard Pinot Noir \$50. Note the significant increase in price and the drop-off in quality when the winery was sold to the new owners in 1997.

Finally, a vertical tasting of the famed Calera Jensen Vineyard Pinot Noirs was held and the group preferences for sixteen tasters are listed from first to last: (1) 1996 Calera Jensen Pinot Noir \$40, (2) 1984 Calera Jensen Pinot Noir \$38, (3) 1990 Calera Jensen Pinot Noir \$40, (4) 2000 Calera Jensen Pinot Noir \$43, (5) 1988 Calera Jensen Pinot Noir \$20, and (6) 1986 Calera Jensen Pinot Noir \$35. In 2003, Robert Parker Jr. did a large vertical tasting of Calera Pinot Noirs and posted the results on his website. He pronounced Calera as "One of the most compelling Pinot specialists of not only the New World, but of Planet Earth." I guess it is only fitting that owner Josh Jensen have the license plate, "Mr Pinot".



Domaine Frederic Esmonin

Frederic Esmonin joined his father Andre in 1988 after learning the winemaking trade in Beaune. Since founding the Domaine in 1970 and up until 1988, Andre sold off his wine to negociants. After 1988 a line of excellent wines has emerged which are now estate bottled. The Domaine, which prior to 1988 was known as Domaine des Estournelles, owns or farms three Grands Crus in Gevrey Chambertain (Mazis, Ruchottes, and Griottes) and two Premiers Crus (Lavaux and Estournelles Saint-Jacques) and two Village wines (including Clos Prieur). Esmonin owns a large portion of Estournelles and probably produces the best example of this vineyard in Burgundy.

There are two very unique features of wines from this producer. First, the Domaine's wines are often the first to be released for any vintage. The 2003 vintage has been on retailer's shelves for a couple of months already. Second, the prices are unusually fair. If you want to talk about "value" Burgundy, you can start with this Domaine. For example, the Grands Crus in 2003 have been released at \$50-\$55, priced about the same as most Premiers Crus. The Premiers Crus are priced laughably low for their quality, in the \$30-\$35 range. The Clos de Beze from purchased grapes is only \$90. The wines are full-bodied cherry bombs that may speak more of Pinot Noir than terroir because of this ultra-ripe vintage but there is no denying the class of these offerings.

Recently I had the opportunity to taste three of the Esmonin Burgundies. I have a number of 1999s in my cellar and the Premiers Crus wines are ready baby.

1999 Domaine Frederic Esmonin Estournelles Saint-Jacques (\$30) 13.0% alc. Estournelles is right next to Clos Saint-Jacques at the top of the hill. Many consider Clos Saint-Jacques Grands Crus quality. This beauty has broad flavors, brandied cherries, minerals, Burgundy *je ne sais quoi*, and an exotic sweetness of fruit that makes you want to yell out— "Ooo wee, Ooo wee, Baby". It is an outright steal for \$30.

2003 Domaine Frederic Esmonin Lavaux Saint-Jacques (\$35) 13.5% alc. An in-your-face fruit bomb that is big, plush, and strewn with wonderful floral highlights of violets and roses. Not elegant now and more California than French, but give this beauty six years.

2003 Domaine Frederic Esmonin Mazy-Chambertin (\$55) 13.5% alc. This wine has oodles of ultra-ripe cherry fruit, luscious spice, and a platform of low acid. Saturated and sweet. The heat of the vintage has given this wine a tremendous amount of concentration, but the perfect balance will bring it along to a soft landing in the years to come. One of Burgundy's classic Grands Crus wines for less than many premium California Pinot Noirs. Get real!

Chick Wine

A low-alcohol (9.8%) wine aimed at the female market and developed by an all-female team at Beringer Blass Wine Estates will start selling this month for less than \$10 a bottle. Labeled "White Lie Early Season Chardonnay", it is the first of probably many "girlie" wines to follow. The corks carry white lies familiar to women like "I got it on sale" and "It's my natural color."

The concept behind White Lie is that it is made from grapes picked earlier, when sugar levels are lower. Then cone technology is used to reduce the alcohol content even further. The idea makes sense since alcohol affects women more than men because women metabolize alcohol more slowly than men. Men eliminate much more alcohol in the stomach than women so their blood levels are lower after imbibing the same quantity of wine. Women can drink White Lies without getting easily sloshed. Can "Baby Boom Pinot Gris" be far behind?



How often have you cursed and sweated trying to remove a beautiful and classy wax capsule from a bottle of Pinot Noir? Desperate times call for the right tool. Metrokane, makers of the Rabbit lever corkscrew, has developed the Wax Wacker. Retailing for about \$6, this tool allows you to remove the wax seals on wine bottles by flipping the wax tablet off of a wine cork. Removing a wax seat on a bottle prevents corkscrew damage and keeps the lever gears in a corkscrew from clogging. Now if they just made a holster for the Wacker.



Arista Pinot Noir

Arista is a new project from John Copeland, a retired military pilot who also worked in the eye care field and for Kendall Jackson before joining forces with his brother-in-law, Al McWilliams, a prominent Texas orthodontist. They have recently acquired vineyards in northern Sonoma County near Cloverdale and in the Russian River Valley. The winemaker is Daniel Moore, a former gewürztraminer producer under the Z-Moore label and then Pinot Noir and Chardonnay winemaker at Lynmar. Currently he is also partnering with Jeff Morgan to make Solo Rosa rose wine. Moore made some terrific Russian River Pinot Noirs in the 1990s at Lynmar (as a sidelight, Lynmar is currently offering for sale a few of their library Pinot Noirs from the 1990s on their website). Copeland and McWilliams are constructing an estate winery building and tasting room just above Westside Road on the property they purchased. Tasting is currently by appointment only.

The wines are quite limited. Visit the website at aristawine.com to purchase or try winex.com, or weimax.com.

2002 Arista Longbow Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$35) Longbow is a winemaker's selection of barrels named in honor of Sir John Copeland who was knighted by King Edward III of England in 1346. The idea is that Copeland was an excellent archer and this Copeland wine "hits the bull's eye." This is a typical medium-bodied Russian River Pinot Noir with notes of cherries, spice, cola, and sweet oak. The **2003 Longbow Russian River Valley Pinot Noir** has just been released and is in the same style, but is still a little closed.

2002 Arista Harper's Rost Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$35) This wine is sourced from the Arista estate vineyard on Westside Road named after Reuben Harper, a farmer here in the 1800s who is buried near the vineyard. This offering is very similar to the Longbow with maybe a little more spice and vanilla.

A Russian River Valley appellation bottling is also offered at \$26.

