

PinotFile[®]

The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinot Noir

**Pinot Is The
Word. It's Got
Groove, It's
Got Meaning**

PinotFile Dinner Series: J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir

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The Crew gathered on June 30, 2005 at Mr Stox Restaurant in Anaheim, California for a remarkable dinner and vertical tasting of every J. Rochioli Vineyards and Winery West Block Pinot Noir, 1992-2002. There were a number of luminaries in attendance including John "Dookey" Maggiano, Ed "Big Boy" Buckley, Art "Deep" Fries, Steve "Slide Rule" Dember, Chuck "Cereal" Keller, Mike "Cash & Carry" Cohen, Rene "Master Somm" Chazottes, and the Prince. It was a spirited evening marked by celestial Pinot and bonhomie.

Some of the West Block grapes were sold on a hand-shake basis to Williams Selyem beginning in the 1980s and they made the Rochioli Vineyard famous. My favorite all-time California Pinot Noir is the 1992 Williams Selyem Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir. With the sale of Williams Selyem in 1997, West Block grapes were no longer made available to that winery.

The concept of vineyard-designated blocks bottled as separate wines was the idea of J. Rochioli winemaker Tom Rochioli. He had noted differences in barrels from different plots of the estate vineyard. It was a trip to France in 1990 where Tom had his wine epiphany. After visiting Domaine Romanee-Conti, he remarked, "Here are these blocks of vines together in a pretty small area on a slope that looks fairly uniform, yet the wine from each plot is unique and different." He decided to model his own separate expressions of the Rochioli Vineyard after the French and create a miniature Cote d'Or in the Russian River Valley.

An Estate Pinot Noir under the Rochioli label has been produced every year since 1982. It was apparent early on that West Block was very special and a Reserve Pinot Noir consisting of a selection of barrels from the West Block was produced under the J. Rochioli label in 1986, 1989, 1990, and 1991. In 1988, it was labeled as Special Select.

In 1992, the first of the block-designates debuted with the West Block Pinot Noir and Three Corner Block Pinot Noir. These wines have been produced every year up to the current 2002 release. East Block was released separately in 1993, 1994, and 1997-2002. Little Hill Block and River Block debuted in 1999. Since 1999, there have been five vineyard block-designated Pinot Noirs bottled under the J. Rochioli label.

Each of the block-designated wines come from similar plant material and are farmed in the same fashion. Each wine is vinified alike, with subtle differences depending on the vintage. Yet, each wine is distinct, thereby validating the French concept of terroir.

The 4 acre West Block is Rochioli's most reputed plot and is referred to as Rochioli's "mother clone" since cuttings from this vineyard have supplied several of the younger blocks on the estate. The clone is Pommard, UCD4,



planted on its own rootstock. The original vines, which were planted in 1970, are disease-ridden and produce less than 1 ton-per-acre so that a planned program of replacement of the original vines is regrettably underway. A photo of the 160 acre Rochioli vineyard is below.



The J. Rochioli block-designated Pinot Noirs are made in very small quantities. The most recent vintages of West Block Pinot Noir produced only 16 barrels. The wine is only sold to a mailing list that currently has a waiting list. The 2002 vintage was released at \$70 per bottle.

Some quotes taken from the wine press indicate how Rochioli Pinot Noirs are revered.

“Rochioli seems to be one of those rare American Pinots that both old-school and new school Pinot lovers like. They have a deft touch never being too big, too oaky, or too concentrated, but always havng lots of flavor.”

“Rich and concentrated, but remarkably pure and fresh.”

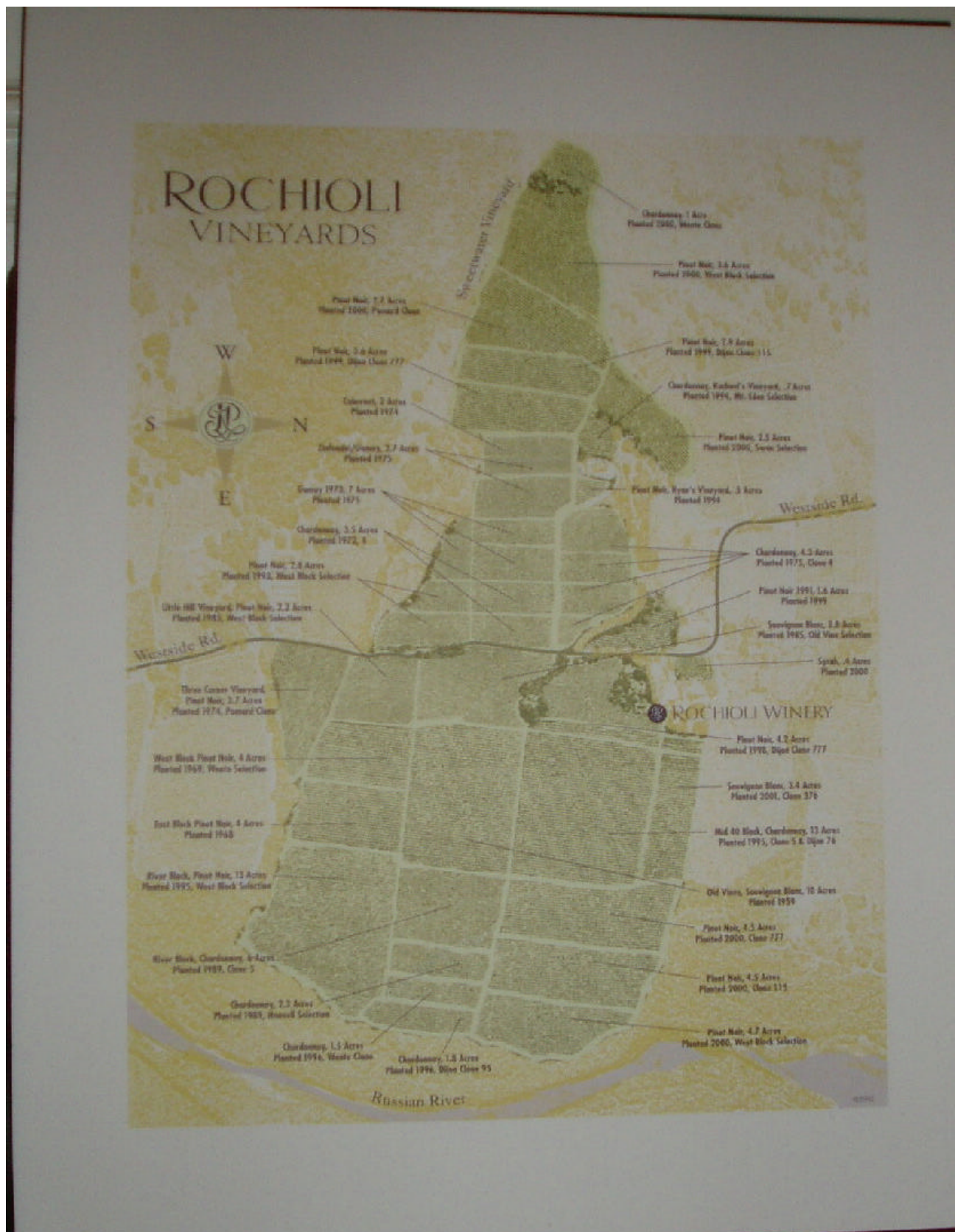
“The West Block Pinot Noir has a reputation for stylistic consistency, deep color, medium body, strong fruit and spice profile. A liquid portrait of the Russian River Valley.”

From Lawrence Osborne’s book, *The Accidental Connoisseur*, a French tasting note for Rochioli Pinot Noir translated as follows: “Dark purple robe, bordered with orange. A direct and seductive nose overflowing with floral notes, gingerbread, cocoa, candied cherries. A mouth which is spherical, sexy, fleshy with refined wood. Velvety tannins flowing around aromas of fruits and moist earth, astonishing length.”

Quarterly Review of Wines (7/2005): One of the top ten Sonoma County Pinot Noirs (West Block).



Joe Rochioli, Jr. (left) and Tom Rochioli



West Block is in the lower left between Little Hill Vineyard and East Block.



The evening began with an aperitif of 2003 Rochioli Sauvignon Blanc. This is always one of the top wines of its genre in California. Even people who say they don't like Sauvignon Blanc will ask, "What is this?" after sampling this terrific wine. The aperitif wine was served with grilled scallops on skewers, lump crab canapés, and white and green asparagus tempura. Then it was on to the main event. The Pinot Noirs were served in two flights of six wines each. All of the wines were pre-poured an hour before tasting into appropriate Burgundian stemware. The wines had been properly stored since release. The first flight: **1991 Williams Selyem Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir**, and **1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, and 1996 J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir**. The food course was grilled Sonoma quail with duck confit on a roasted butternut squash puree and garlic reduction. The second flight: **1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002 J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir**. The accompanying food was rack of venison with peppered Yukon Gold potato and black trumpet mushrooms.

A number of general observations about the wines were agreed upon by all of those present. The experience was eye-opening as all of the wines had aged beautifully and no defects or sign of oxidation could be detected. Tom Rochioli has said that the wines need a minimum of six years to reach their peak, but many vintages can far exceed the six-year mark. Some wines were distinctly better, but there were no bad wines in the lineup. The nose on all of the wines was fresh and fabulous and the initial attack was heavenly - laden with luscious Pinot fruit. The style is one of softness and elegance with harmonious balance. The more recent vintages are bigger with fresher fruit and a little more oak. Not surprisingly, some vintages were better with food, while others were worse. If any criticism can be leveled at this beautiful lineup of Pinot Noirs, it is the short finish of the wines. After the great nose, copious fruit, and silky mouthfeel, the finish leaves you wanting more. It is this one shortcoming that keeps these benchmark California Pinot Noirs from being equal to great Grand Cru Burgundy. Still, a vinous treasure that leaves you singing: Well, bless my soul, What I chill I get, I'm in love, I'm all shook up.

1991 Williams Selyem Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir Beautiful fresh aromas of strawberries. Great elegance. Astonishingly good for a 14-year-old. Could not meet the challenge of the food, however, being much too delicate.

1992 J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir Attractive nose that exploded over time. A bigger style than the Williams Selyem. Fantastic with venison. Several tasters put this wine in their top 2.

1993 J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir Lovely wine, soft and supple. Shines with food. Some had this wine in their top 2.

1994 J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir Not particularly distinctive. Fruit is shy and the finish is thin.

1995 J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir A clean and mellow Pinot Noir that is a very good food wine.

1996 J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir The group favorite with and without food. A welcoming earthy nose leads to complex berry flavors highlighted by cinnamon. This cosmic wine has something deep inside that cannot be denied.

1997 J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir A funky and fruity nose with abundant flavors of spice and ripe fruit.

1998 J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir Plenty of earth and tobacco makes this Pinot a bit different. Lovely finish. Controversial.

1999 J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir A trace of TCA. Enjoyable, but a bit flat and flatter yet with food.

2000 J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir The ripest and oakiest wine in the lineup. A huge nose, a Hummer full of fruit. Some tasters had this wine in their top 2.

2001 J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir Funky nose and taste highlighted by sumptuous fruit and vanilla. One of the top 2 for a few.

2002 J. Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir A young big boy with plenty of oak showing at present. Absolutely a knock-out with the food. A prodigy that will be greased lightning in a few years. Many tasters had this wine in their top 2.



Joe Rochioli, Jr. preaching the gospel of Rochioli West Block to his devoted flock



A photograph of a cluster of Rochioli West Block Pinot Noir photographed by Bobbi Chamberlain in 2003
(Copies are available from the photographer for purchase - contact me for details)