

**Etude Pinot
Noir
Issue**

PinotFile

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Pinot Noir: The Soul of Etude Wines

The Crew gathered at The Pacific Club of Newport Beach on October 18, 2005 to dine and taste through 12 vintages of Etude Carneros Pinot Noir. The commodious table was set in a grand fashion with each setting featuring twelve glasses of ruby-red Pinot Noir sparkling in the candlelight. The event was presided over by Master Sommelier, Rene Chazottes, who masterfully orchestrated the wine service and directed the talented chef in harmonizing the food and wines. There was spirited discussion throughout the meal about the merits of individual wines, but the quality of the Pinot Noirs were so consistently high, the evening was exceptionally memorable.

" Pinot Noir is the soul of Etude Wines. To consistently make great Pinot Noir is considered the ultimate wine-growing challenge. What better teacher than Pinot Noir, both transparent and unforgiving, to magnify every decision of the wine-grower on the path to understanding and mastering the process. Our goal is to produce a distinctly styled Pinot Noir of the highest quality, a wine that can satisfy your Burgundian urge and yet be proud of its California roots."

... ..Tony Soter



The degustation began with an Amuse Bouche and 2004 Etude Pinot Gris. Two entrees followed: Duck Biscaya with Seared Foie Gras and Seared Black Angus Beef (Australian), Smoked Eggplant, Potato Puree, and Sauteed Exotic Mushrooms. The wines included Etude Carneros Pinot Noir 1992-2003 and Etude Heirloom Pinot Noir 2001. The evening concluded with an Autumn Pear and Brown Sugar Tart.



It was an encounter in Tony Soter's cellar with Madam Lalou Bize-Leroy in 1980 that led to Soter's decision to name his new wine company Etude. Lalou was, as always, direct and honest in her assessment of Tony's first Pinot Noir. Etude, which is derived from the French word, *étude*, refers to a musical composition designed to improve the technique of the player. Tony says, "Pinot Noir is the best and most transparent wine vehicle with which to 'study' the craft and this has been a life-long and humbling pursuit... I like to say I was in pursuit of the wisdom of ancestors I never had."

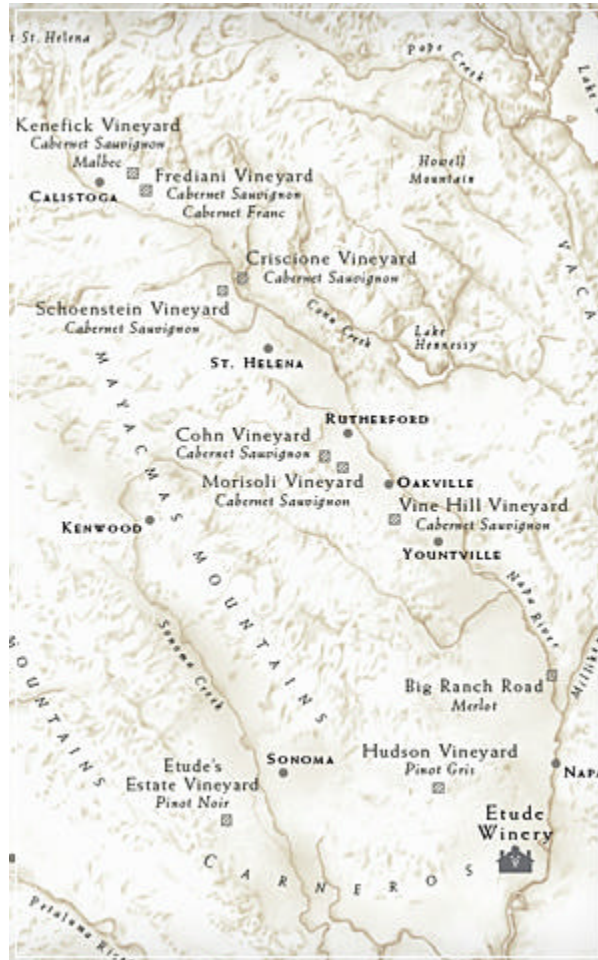
Tony Soter is one of California's most distinguished wine pioneers. He was one of the first winery consultants to work to express terroir from individual vineyard sites owned by Araujo Estate, Dalla Valle, Maraga, Niebaum-Coppola, Shafer, Spttswoode and Viader. He was also one of the first consultants in Napa to purchase grapes by the acre and not by the ton which had been the tradition up to that time. This pushed growers to lower yields resulting in better quality fruit. He ended his consulting career in 1999 to concentrate full-time on Etude.

Soter started Etude Wines in 1980 with a Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon but quickly moved into Carneros Pinot Noir, Napa Pinot Blanc, Napa Merlot, Carneros Pinot Gris, a Brut Rosé sparkling wine and a Vin Gris of Pinot Noir. Initially it was a bootstrapping entrepreneurial venture while he worked his day job as a consulting enologist to other wineries. Soter owned no vineyards, but developed contracts with growers which allowed him to farm his blocks according to strict standards of scrupulous cultural practices.

Soter and his wife are both Oregon natives and a few years ago he purchased a property called Beacon Hill Vineyard near McMinnville in the Willamette Valley. He is increasing the output at Etude, now owned by Beringer Blass (Etude was sold in 2001) and developing Etude's estate vineyard and new state-of-the-art winery. A benefit of the association with Beringer Blass has been a seven-acre parcel planted to ten different selections of heirloom Pinot Noir. The Heirloom wine will have its own home in a vineyard that will be a kind of little library for these heirloom selections. He is also elevating the quality of new grape sources in Carneros, including Beringer



Blass's new Benoist Vineyard. The map below shows the location of the new Etude Winery and Etude's Estate Vineyard in Carneros.



Doug Parsons of Raleigh, North Carolina provided many of the wines for this tasting. He is a long-time personal friend of Tony Soter and told me that Tony trained many successful protégés through the years without expecting anything in return. Additionally, Tony was always helpful and kind to all he met in the wine business. From all I have read and gathered, Tony Soter is, himself, a Pinot Noir heirloom.

The following pages include individual vintage notes from Tony Soter and some general consensus from the attendees regarding the wines as they showed at this tasting. Some wines were preferred over others, but they were very consistent in style regardless of the vintage, and every wine offered some interest and charm. The 2001 Heirloom was corked (slight mustiness and dirty socks perfume), but a second bottle was opened which showed the wine's true character and was highly enjoyable.



The wines are sourced from selected Carneros sites farmed specifically to Etude's strict standards of scrupulous cultural practices. More than 20% of the wines produced each year are identified as unworthy of the Etude label and are sold off in bulk anonymously. All of the wine is aged approximately 14 months in the finest French oak barrels (at least 50% new). In exceptional cellars Etude Pinot Noirs have been known to mature harmoniously for up to 10 years (but see notes below on wines beyond 10 years old).

1992 Etude Carneros Pinot Noir In Carneros 1992 was a year that offered excellent concentration of color and the best acidity seen in years. However, due to late Spring rains and early harvest, the stems were not mature. The adjustment was to let the fruit hang longer than the numbers might have indicated and use fewer stems. The result was a wine on release that emphasized more berry fruits as opposed to spice offered by stems and more vivid color. This wine now offers a funky, barnyard nose. The color remains bright ruby and the wine retains plenty of dark fruit. There are a number of secondary flavors here like leather and vitamins. Some tasters really liked this wine and one voted it best wine of the night with a comment, "Couldn't be beat!"

1993 Etude Carneros Pinot Noir A successful vintage. In its youth this wine offered generously layered red fruits and a full-textured feel, right through to the warm, cinnamon-laden finish. Now this wine is the lightest in color of the lineup. The nose had an appealing perfume of strawberries and cinnamon. The flavors didn't match the aromas and the wine faded over the evening. A tired soldier that was probably excellent several years back.

1994 Etude Carneros Pinot Noir This wine was consistent in style with previous vintages upon release. It offered a perfumed aroma of red fruits, flavors of ripe Bing cherries and cinnamon-spiced oak. The texture was supple, the "grip" subtle and the finish seductively lingering. This night the wine displayed a bit of barnyard and saltine crackers in the nose which became more fruity and harmonious over time. The mouth feel was velvety. Red fruits were notable but a slight bit dry.

1995 Etude Carneros Pinot Noir The 1995 growing season began slowly due to a cool spring which continued into the summer months. The pendulum swung towards a strong high pressure and good warmth lasting through harvest. On release this wine exhibited the extra measure of flavor and structure which a vintage like this provides. Consistent in style with previous years, it offered perfumed aromas of red fruits, flavors of ripe Bing cherries and cinnamon spiced oak. The texture was supple and the finish lingering on release. This wine tied with the 2003 vintage as wine of the night by the group. The nose of red fruits and spice was outrageous. The flavors of sandalwood, crushed raspberries, candied cherries, and slight gaminess wowed everyone. A complete wine still hitting all the high notes.

1996 Etude Carneros Pinot Noir The 1996 vintage was hardly a paragon of moderation. The weather was consistently erratic and unseasonably hot or cold all season long. The crop was very small, the harvest very early and the concentration very good. This was offered as a grand scale Carneros Pinot Noir that was ripe, chewy and complex. It was remarkably ready to drink on release. Tonight the wine drinks fine. A lovely nose leads to a satiny mouth full of red fruits, earth, and a touch of funkiness. Still bright and fresh.

1997 Etude Carneros Pinot Noir In a departure from the norm there were two bottlings of 1997 Pinot Noir: the Carneros and the Carneros LX. The LX was created to ease the impact of the price increase of the primary Carneros bottling. Both wines were similar and side by side the differences were hard to discern. Only the Carneros bottling was sampled here. The vintage was a great example of mother nature being generous. The crop was huge and required no less than three thinnings to get down to the desired crop levels. The weather was benign right through harvest. Maturity of fruit was

exceptional. Upon release, the 1997 Carneros Pinot Noir had a vibrant dark ruby color and a penetrating black cherry aroma. There were youthful tannins to resolve. The finish was nuanced with cinnamon and sandalwood notes. This is a wine that was expected to reward cellaring but it is slightly tired out now. The balance is impaired by high acid and the fruit is dilute and dry.

1998 Etude Carneros Pinot Noir 1998 was a challenging year early in the season because the spring weather was erratic, cold and wet. The consequence was a very small crop that required additional thinning to balance the uneven set. The balance of the 1998 year was uneventful in Carneros and the small crop had plenty of time to ripen without complication. Although harvest was just half what was produced in 1997, the outcome was rewarding. It was felt that this was one of the best wines in years. It had classic qualities of bright red fruit aromatics woven together with notes of cinnamon, sandalwood and a hint of mystery. The palate was supple and graceful and not overly tannic. The flavors were penetrating and lengthy. Tonight this wine lived up to its expectations at release. A lovely perfumed nose of cherries and cinnamon leads to an explosion of rapturously spicy and exotic cherry fruit. Full-bodied and soft in texture. A gorgeous wine at this stage. One taster put it #1 in the lineup.

1999 Etude Carneros Pinot Noir The 1999 vintage was affected by a blast of heat at the end of the season that spiked sugar levels and concentrated the fruit to an extraordinary degree. The result was a lushly textured wine with extraordinary fruit in the uniquely California style. 6,000 cases, \$40. A favorite of several in the group and the most perfectly balanced wine of the lineup according to Rene. This is a perfect example of a crossover wine combining the best of California and Burgundy in one bottle. This wine just hums with chocolate, jammy cherries, cherry liqueur and spice. Immensely fruity, but elegant at the same time with a lengthy finish and refreshing acidity on the backend. I wrote: "[This is Pinot Noir!](#)"

2000 Etude Carneros Pinot Noir The 2000 growing season was cooler than 1999 and the crops were much larger. This required severe thinning to reduce the crop. While the warm years are impressively powerful, it is the cooler seasons that offer both richness and finesse. 6,700 cases, \$40. A hard act to follow after the powerful 1999. A few tasters really liked this wine which displays uncommon brightness and freshness. Like most of these wines, it was balanced and generous in the mouth.

2001 Etude Carneros Pinot Noir A dry spring, April frost and a cool, long growing season gave the Carneros Pinot Noir long hang time. Yields were just right, neither high nor low, and grapes were picked at peak without high sugars or acids. The resulting wine on release offered both richness and finesse. 7,600 cases, \$40. A very dark ruby-red wine displaying phenomenally copious red fruits in the mouth. Fat and spicy with undertones of sandalwood, black currants and licorice. A sweet finish leaves a smile on your face. My notes say "[Wonderful.](#)"

2002 Etude Carneros Pinot Noir 2002 was an exemplary vintage for Pinot Noir in Carneros. Rains in late May and June set a smaller than usual crop in Carneros leading to highly concentrated fruit in the vineyard. 8,000 cases, \$40 This wine marches to the same beat as the 2001. Plenty of earth, herbs, and cinnamon enhance the red fruits in the nose. The flavors duplicate the nose with sensations of silk and noble complexity. A complete wine that marries California fruit with Burgundian sensitivities.

"Our wines draw their character from the clay-heavy soils of the region, where Pinot Noir can be high in extract and structure."

2003 Etude Carneros Pinot Noir A cool spring in 2003 led to naturally adjusted crop levels. There were little crop adjustments required to control the quantity for lower yields, but strict thinning passes were performed throughout the season to ensure evenly ripe fruit. The weather as harvest approached was very cooperative in that there were no heat spikes that are common late in the growing season. The result was excellent fruit condition with beautiful flavors. The 2003 vintage was the first crush at the new Etude Carneros Winery (see photo right). Taking the lovely grapes to the newly renovated winery complete with all the state-of-the-art toys and luxurious amounts of space was a dream come true. All the systems worked harmoniously, resulting in a marvel of simplicity and efficiency that has made it possible to achieve superb results. \$40. This wine made a big impression on many of the tasters. The nose was a knockout -strawberries and a hint of barnyard. Still a Lolita, but utterly seductive. A fantastic fruit bomb that exploded immediately with flavor and saturated the palate with a basket of red, black and purple fruits with spice and game. My notes say "Wow!" How can grapes make something this good?



2001 Etude Heirloom Pinot Noir A rich heritage of plant variation exists in vines, particularly among the many variants of the ancient variety Pinot Noir. Some of the most interesting selections are on the brink of oblivion because disease-free, high-yielding vines are the basic tenets of academic and commercial plant selection. The Heirloom Pinot Noir is made from several heirloom selections of Carneros Pinot Noir. All of the fruit used in Heirloom comes from shy-bearing clones with a marked tendency to produce small, irregularly-shaped bunches and very small berries. Heirloom is made in small lots using the most traditional techniques. New French barrels are used for aging each vintage. Only 300-400 cases can be produced annually from these very limited sources. The 2001 vintage produced 34 barrels total. Upon release this wine had subtle aromas of tea rose, sandalwood and cassis harmonizing with hints of smoky oak and freshly grated ginger notes. Silky tannins introduce the palate to deep black cherry, plum and bacon flavors that are wrapped in an opulent though still tightly-woven structure. \$80. The favorite wine of one taster. The second or non-corked bottle was clean and fresh. All sorts of things are going on in this complex wine - leather, meatiness, grilled nuts, and cinnamon toast. Plenty of heartiness, and surely feral but a wine with finesse too. There is no other Pinot Noir like it made in California.

The Etude Carneros Pinot Noirs are wines of brightness and freshness and consistency of style. Most of all, they are balanced. The aromas and flavors are never overbearing like so many California "hip-hop" Pinots that give you a kick but are not complex. The tannins are well-integrated and the acid is evident but polished. I always spend a lot of time with my nose in the glass and these wines rewarded me. The aromas were interesting in that they displayed more than a blast of fruit. Herbs, cinnamon, earth, and exotic flavors impossible to identify were abundant. Many wines tasted very similar underscoring the talents of the winemaker despite the vagaries of each vintage. In summary, Rene would say, "It is what it is." I say "It is California Pinot Noir at its best."

Etude wines are distributed nationally but may be purchased directly from the winery. Etude Wines, PO Box 3382, Napa, California 94558. Phone: (707) 257-5300. Website: www.etudewines.com. Tony Soter's other Pinot Noir, Beacon Hill Willamette Valley Oregon Pinot Noir, is available at retail and from the website: www.soterwines.com.


PrinceofPinot.com

Vertical tastings allow you to examine a winemakers large body of work. With this experience comes a true appreciation of the talent and devotion that winemakers of skill offer to the wine enthusiast.

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Winemaker Greg Saunders at the 2005 WOPN

World of Pinot Noir: Be There or Be Square

If you love Pinot, make your plans to attend the next World of Pinot Noir in Shell Beach, California, March 3-4, 2006. The 6th Annual event kicks off on Friday, March 3 with seminars covering biodynamic farming, Bien Nacido Vineyard tribute, and revisiting clones (Dijon vs field selection). Another option is a Riedel Crystal tasting led by Maximilian Riedel, featuring the Sommelier, Burgundy, and Grand Cru glass. Friday afternoon there is a walk-around tasting of more than 60 Pinot Noirs, international in scope, but mainly from California. Friday evening will be the gala dinner at The Cliffs Resort with guest chef Frank Ostini. On Saturday, March 4, there are additional seminars including Pinot Noir Pairings with Sommelier panelists and The Wines of Louis Jadot (this Saturday morning Burgundy session is always a sellout and the highlight of the event). Saturday afternoon is another walk-around tasting (many different Pinot Noir producers from Friday's walk-around) and Silent Auction of magnums of Pinot Noir. The event concludes with a Santa Barbara-style Paulee at Au Bon Climat Winery with 36 participating wineries pouring Pinot Noir out of large-format bottles.

Tickets may be purchased for individual events. The WOPN is a sell-out every year so purchase your tickets **NOW**. The host hotel, The Cliffs Resort, is probably sold out by now, but there are many other choices of lodging within a short walk or drive of The Cliffs Resort. This is a unique opportunity to taste over 120 producers of Pinot Noir, rub shoulders with winery owners, winemakers, sommeliers, the Prince and just average Pinot geeks. You can't really call yourself a pinotophile if you haven't attended this event.

For information and to purchase tickets, go to wopn.com.