

**If You Drink
No Noir, You
Pinot Noir**

PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinot Noir

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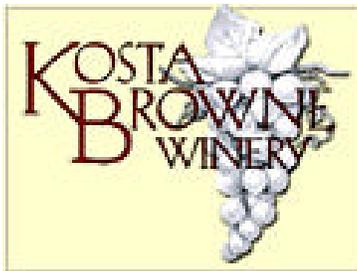
Kosta Browne: Performance Grade Pinot

Kosta Browne is currently one of the hottest cult gargiste Pinot Noir producers in California. A partnership between Dan Kosta and Michael Browne, this winery has burst on the scene in the last two vintages. Both Dan and Michael left other careers to pursue their passion for Pinot Noir. Dan, a native of Sonoma County, is the Sales and Marketing Director, using the experience gained in more than 15 years in the restaurant business, primarily at John Ash & Co in Santa Rosa, California. Michael moved to Sonoma over 20 years ago with the goal of becoming an architect. He quickly fell in love with local wines and gained winemaking experience at Deerfield Ranch Winery while also working at John Ash & Co. The two of them would set aside a few bucks at the end of each evening's work in a piggy bank. After raising \$2,600, they bought a half ton of Pinot Noir grapes, a single barrel and a used, hand-cranked crusher to produce the first vintage. This was 1997 and they have never looked back.

I had a blast visiting the gang at Kosta Browne Winery at the end of harvest. The initials KB are appropriate, because these guys are definitely "kicked-back." There is an unbridled enthusiasm and passion here which is evident after spending a short time sampling Pinots with them. Michael was frantically running from barrel to barrel offering 2004 barrel samples in machine gun fashion, each one seemingly tasting better than the last. Along with Dan and Michael, two other aspiring winemakers left previous careers to work here: Jamie Kutch (ex Wall Street New Yorker - see *PinotFile*, Vol 5, Issue 9)) and Tony Velebile (ex accountant from Fullerton, California). Stop in at harvest time, they will happily put you to work and who knows, you may be leaving your career behind. On my visit I was looking for some "crush groupies" but no luck. See photos on the next page of the KB gang.

The style at Kosta Browne is "New World" featuring plentiful, rich, concentrated fruit, hefty wood-smoke, ripe fine-grained tannins and high alcohol all in beautiful balance. The wines are marked by an appealing sweetness and creaminess secondary to the alcohol and the oak. I like to call their wines "Performance Grade" meaning they can compete with any other Pinots made in this style: big and bold flavors with plenty of muscle to reach the finish line smoothly.

Making great Pinot begins with great grapes. Through their contacts in Sonoma, Dan and Michael have been able to acquire world-class sources of Pinot Noir for their wines. Although they do produce a Santa Lucia Highlands appellation Pinot



Noir, their focus is on Russian River Valley wines. All of the wines are hand-wrought - hand-picked, hand-sorted, and gravity-fed. Michael is known as a master of blending. Although KB may strike you as “kicked back”, they are very serious about their commitment to quality.



From left to right in the caves at Kosta Browne - Prince (a rare photo without a glass of Pinot), Tony, Michael, Mark Wells (a local Pinot geek who lends a hand here), Dan, and Jamie.



Michael digs into the must of a barrel of Rosella's Vineyard Pinot Noir fermenting in the barrel. Wine-making is very “hands on” at Kosta Browne.

The latest releases from Kosta Browne. You have been forewarned before your tongue hangs out that all of these wines are sold out. Production is very limited at present but future plans call for a 8,000 cases annually. Some of the wines are available at finer restaurants, retail stores and on the secondary market. A bottle of 2003 Kanzler Vineyard Pinot Noir was recently offered on winecommune.com for \$149! Most of the wine is sold through a mailing list: sign up at www.kostabrowne.com.

2003 Kosta Browne Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 15.25% alc., \$38. Vineyard sources include Amber Ridge (25%), Koplen (25%), Cohn (20%), Dutton-Manzana (20%) and Tykanera (10%). 20% old clones, 40% 667, 30% 115, 10% Pommard. I tasted at the winery. Classic RRV nose of cola and ripe cherry with vanilla and spice. Sweet, unctuous fruits mimic the aromas. The mouth feel is silky and the wine finishes remarkably clean and soft considering the octane.

2003 Kosta Browne Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir 14.2% alc., 250 cases, \$38. This wine comes from the Claudinger Vineyard. Clones are 40% 667 and 50% 115. 80% French and 20% Polish oak!

2003 Kosta Browne Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 14.95% alc., \$38. 75% from the Carinalli Vineyard, 19% from Kanzler Vineyard and 6% from Amber Ridge Vineyard. 94% of the blend is from the area of the Sonoma Coast known as the Petaluma Gap. Clones are 85% Pommard, 9% 667, and 6% 115.

2003 Kosta Browne Koplen Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 15.6% alc., \$48. Dennis Koplen calls his vines his "girls" and takes care of them as if they were his children. The vineyard is located on Olivet Road in the Russian River Valley's middle reach and is planted exclusively to clone 667. This wine shows deep structure and a dark fruit profile. Yield is below two tons per acre.

2003 Kosta Browne Cohn Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 15.5% alc., 260 cases, \$48. From nearly 40 year old vines. Classic Russian River Valley characteristics. All old clones.

2003 Kosta Browne Kanzler Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 14.7% alc., 270 cases, \$48. A very distinct terroir that produces a very exotic Pinot Noir. The wine is deep, complex and bursting with intense flavors and aromatics. My favorite among the 2004 barrel samples tasted. Clones are 68% 667, 25% 115, and 7% Pommard.

2003 Kosta Browne Four Barrels Pinot Noir. The best of the best. Word is that the 2003 Four Barrels is the best yet. Only available to mailing list customers. You might have to beg for this one.



Spam No Joke to the Far East

Michael Browne is a great cook and his web site offers some recipes of note but no mention of Pinot Noir and Spam

In South Korea Spam is a luxury item and often comes wrapped in boxed sets. A set of 12 cans costs \$44. Chusok is the Korean equivalent of Thanksgiving and nearly 8 million cans of Spam will be offered as gifts. South Koreans take Spam very seriously and seem perplexed as to why Americans make a parody of it. Last year "Spamalot" opened on Broadway to lampoon the meat product. Spam is also popular in Hawaii, the Philippines, Okinawa, Guam, and Saipan. All of these places have a history of U.S. military presence. Spam was a staple of the GI diet during World War II and the Korean War.

Turns out Spam goes very nicely with red wine, particularly Pinot Noir. Although Pinot Noir is the most food friendly red wine, I don't foresee a run on Spam among pinotphiles in this country. It is just too quirky and retro and, well, a joke.



Scherrer Winery: Unassuming Great Pinot

For those of you who are regular readers of the *PinotFile* you know that I have touted recent vintages of Scherrer Winery Pinot Noir. You have to really be in the know to seek out Fred Scherrer's Pinots. He operates out of a nondescript insulated warehouse which was once an apple-packing shed. The door is unmarked and I don't recall seeing any sign anywhere on my recent visit. Finding the place along a potholed road near Sebastopol is a challenge. He has been accused by his followers of trying too hard to not sell his wine. His newsletter is two pages of mimeographed material that is well-written and informative, but will never win any marketing awards. His wine label is as plain as it gets.

Fred Scherrer is the son of an Alexander Valley grape grower whose ranch has been in the family since 1899. Like most teenagers, Fred developed an interest in alcohol in high school and began making wine at home with his parent's approval. His uncle Mario used to tease him about his winemaking, calling his wine "Zinfandoodle" rather than Zinfandel. He went on to enroll at UC Davis and went to work for Fieldstone, Greenwood Ridge and Dehlinger wineries. He worked his way up to winemaker for Dehlinger and stayed ten years. With the encouragement of his family and Tom Dehlinger, he began making Zinfandel from his father, Ed Scherrer's vineyard in 1991. His first vintage was 600 cases. He gradually expanded his label to include Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay and by 1998 he left Dehlinger to make the Scherrer Winery his full time occupation.



Fred Scherrer

Fred has a unique ability to express the best in each vintage. His wines are never heavy-handed or manipulated, just nurtured to reach their full potential. Daniel Dawson, writing at backroomwines.com said it best when after meeting Fred and tasting his wines said, "If there is a message in a bottle of Scherrer, it's this: well made wines are alive and they have a gentleness and complexity about them that can't be forced and doing so makes them no nearly as good. Wines should be good if drunk without the company of food and should be even better when enjoyed with really good food. He didn't say it, but my short time with Fred Scherrer gave me the feeling that he approaches winemaking with the 'caretaker of the land' mindset. The work is done in the vineyard and his job is to allow the grapes and the land to express themselves correctly...and deliciously."

Fred's Pinot Noirs are blends from various vineyard sources in Sonoma County, Russian River Valley and Sonoma Coast. As he has explored the various vineyard sites for Pinot Noir, he has employed an increasingly brutal blending selection for the various bottlings. The wines are typically destemmed, not crushed and fermented in simple open top fermenters and manually punched down. They are barreled very shortly after pressing and allowed to rest on their lees for many months before first being racked and blended. Fred never releases a wine before it's time and it is not unusual for him to have two or three vintages 'on the floor' at once. The Pinot Noirs are never filtered.



While in Sonoma recently, I had the opportunity to taste three different older vintages of Scherrer Winery Pinot Noir. Where before I might have been a fan, I am now a convert.

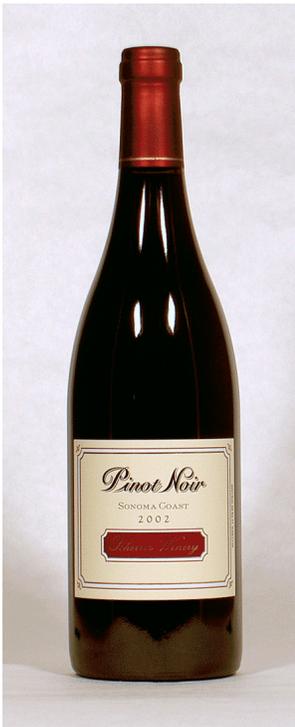
1999 Scherrer Winery Hirsch Vineyard “Diaphenous” Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 140 cases, \$40. While most wines from the Hirsch Vineyard are intense, masculine wines, Fred had access this year to a hillside of feminine personality. The wine was named “diaphanous” for it’s ethereal character in the bottle. This is a debutante of a wine - floral, beautiful and fresh. Elegant in style with plenty of charm. A few Pinot geeks sat around on a Saturday afternoon drinking Pinot in Forestville. We also opened 2003 Sonnet Amber Ridge Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, 2000 Lynmar Laguna Ridge Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, 2003 Skewis Floodgate Vineyard Anderson Valley Pinot Noir, 2004 Dain American Beauty Amber Ridge Pinot Noir and 2001 J. Rochioli East Block Pinot Noir. Now this was a Pinot bacchanal, not a beauty contest, but the Scherrer Pinot was the best of the lot. Sorry Fred but we nicknamed your wine “Horny Dog Pinot” since one of the dogs present kept humping another male dog throughout our afternoon festivities.

2001 Scherrer Winery Ft Ross Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 300 cases, \$38. The Ft Ross Vineyard was planted in the late 1990s with mainly Dijon clones. The floral and spicy nose pulls you in and the sweet red fruits on the palate leave you grinning. A perfectly composed and balanced graceful Pinot Noir.

2001 Scherrer Winery Ft Ross Vineyard Reserve Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 110 cases, \$42. This wild and crazy Pinot has more muscle to offer than the previous two wines. It’s unrefined side demanded more time in the barrel and bottle. The nose is the star now - wonderful spice, cinnamon and cola. The flavors of dark fruits, damp earth and cedar pack plenty of punch. Still a model of finesse. Although the saying is a bit hackneyed now, I can’t resist saying this wine is like a velvet hammer in an iron fist.

Fortunately, Fred holds back some of his wine for library and retrospective tastings. Beginning October 20, a library order form was posted on the website, www.scherrerwinery.com/library.htm. Goodies include magnums. Quantity discounts apply.

Each November the winery holds an Open House for mailing list customers. The event includes tastings of new releases and a selection of older library wines, To get on the mailing list, phone 707-823-8980 or visit the website, www.scherrerwinery.com. Great Pinot is where you find it.



Three Thieves Pinot Noir is Snob Repellant

The Three Thieves, Joel Gott (of Joel Gott Wines in Napa), Charles Bieler (his family owns Chateau Routas in France) and Roger Scommegma (a businessman who owns a small hotel in Boonville, Ca) have released a vineyard-designated Pinot Noir jug wine. The grapes for the wine come from a 99-acre vineyard, Circle K Ranch, located in the Clarksburg district near Lodi, rumored by old-timers to produce great Pinot Noir. They set out to produce a decent wine at a reasonable cost and all indications are they have succeeded. The Three Thieves label (which also includes other varietals and 1-liter boxed wines) sold 100,000 cases in 2004 and earlier this year 50% of the upstart company was sold to Trinchero Estates. The three partners put up only \$15,000 each to start the company and so for an initial investment of \$45,000, they built a multimillion-dollar wine brand within a couple of years.





The joke is on folks who said no one would buy premium wine bottled in a jug. The mission of Three Thieves is to “Bring the joy of wine to the masses.” and their tagline is “Liberators of World Class Wine.” Joel Gott is the winemaker who infused the wine with French and American oak. Alcohol is 13.35%. To keep snobs away, the wine is bottled in a retro, 1 liter clear glass jug. Suggested price is \$10.99. Production amounts to 40,000 9L cases. The Pinot Noir composition is 75% Circle K Ranch Pinot Noir, 13% Circle K Ranch Syrah, 5% Monterey Pinot Noir and 7% California Syrah.

My impression: a decent easy drinking on the back porch Pinot Noir.

The website, www.threethieves.com, is a scream. Here you can read about the wines and purchase snob repellent T-shirts. The phone is 866-JUGBOYS.

Remember that if you are decanting wine from one of the Three Thieves 1 liter boxes, make sure you tilt the paper cup and pour slowly so as not to “bruise” the fruit in the wine. Also, if drinking directly from a Three Thieves jug, always hold it with both hands.



The Three Thieves:




PrinceofPinot.com

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From the Three Thieves website:



Low-Octane Wine

At a time when the consumer palate is being guided towards bigger, richer and fattier wines, the French have devised a technique called “Lirization.” The exact process is a secret, but in essence the technology can convert any wine from 14% alcohol to 6% alcohol. According to French law, a wine cannot be called a wine if the alcohol is below 8,5% so the Bordeaux-based firm that developed this technique, Linares, calls the reduced alcohol product “Lir”.

The process takes existing wines and removes the alcohol without adversely affecting the wine’s taste and mouth feel. Consumer testing reveals that most people can’t tell the difference.

The French hope this technique will revive the declining interest in wine drinking in their nation. The lower alcohol would allow for consumption at meals and retain the ability to drive an automobile safely. France has suffered declining wine consumption and restaurant wine sales have been going down.

Whether the technology takes hold remains to be seen as the market is always in evolution. There is already some hint of a trend toward lower alcohols shown by interest in low-alcohol, tank-fermented Chardonnay. Certainly women wine drinkers will welcome this trend as their general intolerance of alcohol prevents them from freely imbibing. Imagine a group of ladies at lunch, looking up at the server and asking, “Do you have any lirized Chardonnay?”