

**Expensive
Pinot: “Deep-
Pocket Pinot”**

PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinot Noir

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Pinot With A View

I was recently driving along River Road in the Russian River Valley and found myself dreaming about this beautiful countryside. I was wishing I had some big bucks like Bryce Jones, former owner of Sonoma Cutrer, who recently purchased 200+ acres (at \$50,000 per acre) along this bucolic stretch of highway. I turned off of River Road onto Slusser Road, passed Saralee’s Vineyard, and headed up the driveway at Russian Hill Winery.

I was awakened from my dreaming by the scene in front of me. A big white estate sat at the top of the hill and with its grand white columns looked like something out of a Southern travelogue (the locals call it Tara). A new tasting room on the property (a former dog kennel and site of the original Russian Hill winery) opens onto a patio with a grand 180 degree vista of the Russian River Valley. (see below)



Russian Hill's location permits views of world-class vineyards, old hop kilns, prize-winning dairy farms and the panorama from coastal mountains in the west to Mount St. Helena in the east.

The Russian Hill Estate encompasses a 21 acre property surrounded by the estate vines of Tara Vineyard. Russian Hill Winery is owned by not one, but two, former academic physicians, Edward Gomez and Ellen Mack. I was able to spend some time with Ed (pictured to the right) and he showed the Princess and myself around the beautiful property. The new winery (to the right of the main house in the photo on the previous page) is state-of-the-art and much of the design was done by Ed, who utilized his interest in engineering, electronics and science to build the structure. Ed is truly a "hands-on" owner and loves to tinker at the winery. He claims to actually love bottling lines! Ed's wife found the property in 1997 after a two year search. She oversees vineyard operations and watches the money. She is very active in wine-related organizations including The Society of Medical Friends of Wine and Women for Wine-sense.



The first vintage was 1999 so the wines are a work in progress. Winemaker Patrick Melley is largely a self-taught winemaker who is part of the Gomez extended family. He says he works hardest to attain that magical mouth feel that only Pinot Noir can offer. An honorable goal. The wines, which include Syrah and Chardonnay, have won a number of accolades. Most of the wines are estate grown and estate bottled.

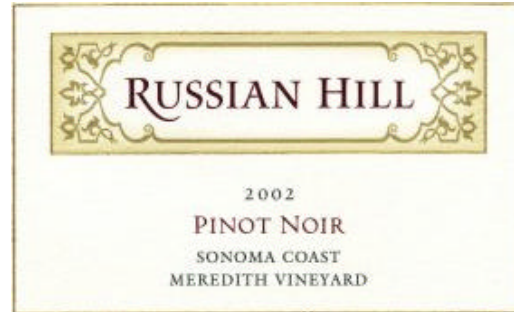
2002 Russian Hill Russian River Valley Pinot Noir \$24. A lighter-style Pinot Noir that combines spice and earthy fruit with bracing acidity. A blend of several vineyards including Sunny View (six miles to the south of Russian Hill planted to Dijon clones 667, 777 and Pommard and Leras Vineyard farmed by Nick Leras).

2002 Russian Hill Estate Vineyards Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.5% alc., \$30. A blend of estate vineyards. Light to medium body. An attractive nose of smoke and cherries. Initially it is a little rough and angular, but with an hour of air time it unfolds beautifully and smooths out just fine. A good Pinot that could use a little more mid-palate richness.

2002 Russian Hill Tara Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir \$50 Tara Vineyard was planted by Dutton Ranch in 1998. There are three distinct parcels of blocks. The lowest lying and easterly facing of these is planted to Dijon clone 115 and clone 37 of Pinot Noir and is used to make the Tara Vineyard Pinot Noir. The soil here is distinctly darker and richer and afternoon sun exposure is less intense. This appealing Pinot is like a thoroughbred at the starting gate - raring to go from the start. "I don't need no stinking air time." The most feminine wine of the lineup with gossamer tannins. Aromas of rose hip, cinnamon, cedar and red fruits are absolutely intoxicating. Very light on its feet - kinda like Berry Saunders in his prime. It's Monday Night - "Are You Ready for Some Pinot?"

*"Medicine and winemaking
are of the same philosophy:
each is both a science and an
art form."*

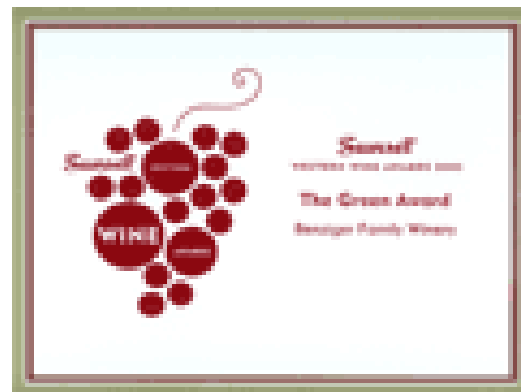
2002 Russian Hill Meredith Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 14.5% alc., \$42. Meredith Vineyard is well known to fans of Merry Edward's Pinot Noirs. It is located in a bowl in the fog-enshrouded Sebastopol Hills. This wine is a keeper. Great nose of spice and cola. Fresh cherry pie flavors. Smooth and silky as a baby's bottom. Like all great young wines it gains momentum over time and with 45 minutes of air this Pinot shines brightly. Got Duck?



Russian Hill Winery is located at 4525 Slusser Road, Windsor. The phone is 707-575-9428 and the website is www.russianhillwinery.com. Limited quantities of the 2002 Meredith Vineyard and 2002 Tara Vineyard Pinot Noirs are available from the winery's library. Current releases include the 2002 Russian River Valley, 2002 Estate Vineyards, 2002 Leras Vineyard (\$38), 2003 Meredith Vineyard (\$40), and 2003 Tara Vineyard (\$42) Pinot Noirs.

Benziger Makes Big Commitment to Pinot

Bodega Bay is probably most famous for the movie, "The Birds" which was filmed here by Alfred Hitchcock. But the vineyards popping up between the small towns of Bodega Bay and Occidental are fast acquiring a reputation for startlingly good Pinot Noir. Now Benziger is not the first winery that comes to mind when you mention Pinot Noir. Benziger Family Winery is a well-respected producer of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Petite Sirah and other varietals under the Benziger Family and Imagery labels. This Sonoma Mountain Winery has 25 years of winegrowing know how and recently was awarded the Sunset Magazine Green Award recognizing the winery for its sustainable winemaking and winegrowing methods.



Benziger Family Winery has embarked on a major commitment to Pinot Noir with its "Partial to Pinot" program. Mike Benziger, led by his vineyard team of Dave Komar and Mark Burningham, have developed a biodynamic vineyard planted to six different clones and two rootstocks of Pinot Noir. The new Bodega Bay Vineyard is on 22 acres of virgin property in the true Sonoma Coast. Biodynamics have been practiced from day one and the vineyard will be Demeter-certified by the 2005 harvest. Pre-plant amendments to the soil consisted of just compost and gypsum. The vines were planted in a vertical high-density system making for extremely low yields per vine. The grapes are dry-farmed and the overall yield of the vineyard is very low. Maximum production will only be around two tons per acre. Complimenting this new vineyard will be augmented winemaking facilities at the Benziger winery to handle Pinot Noir in the royal fashion to which it is accustomed.

The first vintage from the Bodega Bay Vineyard will be 2004. 100 cases will be released in the Fall of 2006. The 2005 vintage, the first Demeter-certified vintage, will be somewhat larger but crop size in 2005 was reduced due to bad weather at critical stages of grape development. Grape supply was off around 60% but what was left looks very good. Eventually several different Pinot Noirs will be produced from this one vineyard. The winery will also continue to produce a Russian River Valley Pinot Noir blend.

Go With the (Gravity) Flow

Drive along Westside Road in the Russian River Valley and you won't recognize the old neighborhood. It used to be Pinot Lovers could stop off at Rochioli, Porter Creek and Davis Bynum and that was about it. Oh sure, if you knew where Williams Selyem was you could peek in there and a few years ago Gary Farrell built a new winery and tasting room on the Road. But times change and Westside Road is becoming a sort of Pinot Rodeo Drive. Arista has built a beautiful new tasting room near Rochioli, word is Williams Selyem will be following suite, and Moshin Vineyards has built a fancy new gravity-flow winery and tasting room that is very *haute couture*.



Moshin Vineyards Winery is one of the few gravity-flow wineries in Sonoma County. Rick Moshin is a mathematics professor at San Jose State University who has farmed Pinot Noir in the Russian River Valley for several years. He designed the winery to utilize a four-tiered gravity-flow system. The Pinot Noir grapes will never be pumped or pushed. The costs of building a true gravity-flow winery prevent many others from accomplishing this task. The difference in building costs is considerable - the retaining walls for the Moshin Winery cost \$500,000 alone.

Some true or partial gravity-flow wineries in Sonoma include Flowers Vineyard & Winery in Cazadero and Fritz Winery in the Dry Creek Valley. In Napa there are Rudd Winery, Trefethen Vineyards (one of the first gravity-flow wineries built in 1886 but largely unused today), Christian Brothers Winery (now the Culinary Institute at Greystone) and Far Niente.

The winery is built on a hill with the front facing formed from old barnwood to give it an aged look. The crush pad is on the highest or first level. The sorted and destemmed grapes then drop directly into one of the fermentors on the second level. A hose connected to the fermentors directs the juice to

“If you’re not making Pinot, then gravity flow isn’t that much of an advantage.”

the tanks in the cellar on the third level. Wine then flows by gravity directly into barrels and is stored in the cellar. There is a cold room for white wine fermentation and a warm room for finishing malolactic fermentation. The bottling room is on the fourth level where the wine flows from the cellar into the bottle filler and then the bottle.

The winery has all sorts of technological wizardry including custom-made, closed-top fermentation tanks, specially made settling tanks, an ozone machine for sterilization, Italian membrane presses and destemmers, a power washer and barrel cleaner, and a pneumatic punch down system. The current permit allows for 30,000 cases, although current production is far below this. Custom crush will be available for others and currently Merry Edwards, George Wine Company and Gary Davis (Davis Family Vineyards), among 8-10 others, are under contract for custom crush services.

Moshin himself has a total of 18 acres and will produce about 5,000 cases of Pinot Noir yearly. Six different bottlings make up Moshin Vineyard's offerings. Rick Moshin will soon be giving up his day job (he plans to retire in December, 2005) and pursue winemaking full time. He is a self-taught grape grower and winemaker. The Moshin label dates to 1989 when Rick traded grapes for crush services with Gary Farrell and Davis Bynum. He remembers way back to the early 1970s when he drove down Westside Road dreaming of some acreage to call his own. He now feels blessed to own several vineyards in the area.

The winery and tasting room will have Rick Moshin's hand print. He laid the groundwork himself, bulldozing tons of earth and building a series of small retaining walls, a water tank and a septic system. The tasting room will include a bar featuring hand-hewn black walnut lumber milled by Moshin. Rick knows every detail in the winery and as he says, "I have total control over what happens to my wines, which is a fantastic feeling."

Moshin Vineyards, 1-800-466-7446, www.moshinvineyards.com.



george at Moshin Winery

George is a former bond trader who has a passion for good food and Pinot Noir. His last name is immaterial as his reputation follows the name George - something like stars who only use a first name like Madonna. The George Wine Company has become a cult favorite of pinotphiles. I met up with the real George recently at Moshin Winery where he crafts his Pinot to see if this character really existed.

This guy is a one man show. He hand destems and sorts his grapes. This year he used 50% whole cluster, probably to save the skin on his fingers. Pumping is not in his vocabulary. He uses one gallon fermentors which guys like Gallo would scoff at. The wine is aged 10 months in 100% NEW Francois Ferres oak (\$800 a barrel, ouch!). When finished, the wine is hand bottled, hand labeled. His goal: a feminine, elegant style of Pinot Noir. Then when the wine is ready for sale, he delivers all of the wine personally to his customers!!

That's George on the left with the George cap. His barrels are in the background. Get some George and you too can be famous and happy.




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The PinotFile aims to enhance your wine experience but not dictate your wine experience.

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One of the custom fermenting tanks designed by Ed Gomez at Russian Hill Winery. There are actually cooling units (not visible) on the bottom of the tank to aid in precise control of temperature during fermentation.

John Tyler Wines

John Tyler Wines has a heritage that goes back over 50 years in the Russian River Valley. In 1956, Charles and Helen Bacigalupi purchased 121 acres on Westside Road, a few miles south of Healdsburg. The initial vineyards consisted of 16 acres of Zinfandel, Mission, Golden Chablis and Muscat. Paul Heck, a practicing dentist in Healdsburg and part owner of Korbel Champagne Cellars in Guerneville, encouraged Charles to plant Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. In 1964, Charles began his plantings with six acres of each varietal. The vineyards now consist of 125 acres of premium grapes, most of which are along Westside Road and managed for the past 30 years by John Bacigalupi and his family. Patrick, Paul Heck's second child and Tyler's father were raised among the vineyards of Korbel Champagne Cellars and Patrick's passion for winemaking and grape cultivation were passed onto his son, Tyler. After Tyler's graduation from Cal Poly and seven winemaking seasons, he was ready for his own winemaking career. John Bacigalupi joined with Tyler Heck in a joint venture in 2001. In 2002 the venture was commercialized by crushing 14 tons of Pinot Noir for John Tyler Wines.

Today six distinct Pinot Noir clones are grown along Westside Road on approximately 44 acres. Emphasis has been on environmental soundness, sustainability and quality. Cane pruning, which requires more skill and thought, is employed throughout the vineyards. Future plans call for a more diverse selection of Pinot Noir clones and several different Pinot Noir bottlings.

2002 John Tyler Bacigalupi Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., 826 cases, \$42. Pommard and Wente clones. This wine has an attractive nose of cherry cola, spice and toasted oak. The flavors of ripe red fruits and herbs are complimented by fine grained tannins. An elegant, lighter style with acid in good perspective. Not a wine to contemplate, but a reliable food wine that goes down easy.

John Tyler Wines is a winery with history that bears watching. Website is www.johntylervines.com.