

Few Things are Sweeter than a Pinot Noir Hangover

PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Devoted to Pinoaficionados

Volume 5, Issue 21

January 23, 2006

Inside this issue:

SF Chronicle 2006 Wine Competition Results	2
Lane Tanner and Labyrinth Pinot Noirs	3
Benovia Winery Debuts in 2006	5
Overheard at the Wine Shop, Pt II	6

Ambullneo Vineyards: Just Blend It

Greg Linn is no die-hard terroirist for he believes in blending fruit from different vineyards. The idea is that each vineyard contributes a different character to the blend and the blend can be adjusted each year independent of the vagaries of the vintage. Greg's philosophy is that "great vineyards can make great wines, but adeptly blending several great vineyards creates unique wines of exceptional character." He maintains that the results of blending, say La Tache, Musigny and Chambertain, would be spectacular. A sacrilege to the French but very American!

Greg is both a dog and wine fancier and the name of his wine reflects both interests. Ambullneo stands for AM-American, BULL-Bull Breeds and NEO-Neapolitan Mastiff. The Ambullneo breed of dog is a cross between bulldogs and the European mastiff. This canine breed is fearless and powerful and moves with grace and agility. Like the Ambullneo dog, Greg's Ambullneo wine has great strength and focus and is the perfect companion. (Pictured right is Rockne, Greg's prized Ambullneo),



To fully enjoy the magic of Pinot Noir, you need to physically see some of the vineyards and wineries and talk to the producers of the wines. The next best thing is to read the *PinotFile*.



Greg makes his wines along with talented winemaker Scott Ames (left in photo) in a shared facility with Tantara at Au Bon Climat. The approach here is merciless green cropping in 2004 because of robust fruit set and ruthless selection of only the best barrels that harmonize for the final wine. They are not interested in making "a fast, slapdash wine." The Ambullneo wines have found their way onto many top restaurant wine lists. They have also been well received by the wine press and achieved distinction in wine competitions. The prices for the three 2004 Pinot Noirs can be a shock, but the heavy bottle, the packaging, the embossed wood containers all exude confidence and class. Not to mention that the wine inside is pretty special.

2004 Ambullneo Vineyards Bulldog Reserve Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 14.2% alc., 600 cases, \$79. A blend of grapes from Solomon Hills, Laetitia and Rancho Ontiveros Vineyards in the Santa Maria Valley. This wine is no pussycat but has the most finesse of the trio. Well-made but still showing its youthfulness. Plenty of cherries and plums kissed by earth and oak in the nose and duplicated in the flavors. A little heat on the nose and finish now.



2004 Ambullneo Vineyards Mastiff Cuvee Carneros Pinot Noir 14.4% alc., 350 cases, \$79. A blend of blocks in the Hyde and Hudson Vineyards of Carneros. A balanced wine that is pretty and natural. A unique and distinctive Pinot Noir that is brimming with voluptuous cherry and tea notes. The alcohol is well-integrated in this wine. A pleasure to drink.

2004 Ambullneo Vineyards Canis Major California Pinot Noir 14.3% alc., 150 cases, \$95. A north-south blend of Carneros and Santa Maria Valley fruit named after Canis Major or Dogstar. A dark ruby wine that is well-endowed with sappy fruit. The mouth feel is like fine suede and the finish is smooth, lengthy and warm.

None of these wines are, excuse the pun, dogs. At this time the wines are all about fruit and they need time to develop complexity. None of them kisses on the first date. They are "big-babe" Pinots for sure, but put together nicely. As Greg has remarked, "They ain't your grandma's Pinot." The 2005 vintage wines are said to offer more elegance and finesse.

The wines are well-distributed to several California retailers (Hi-Time Cellars, Wally's, K&L Wines). There is also a mailing list. Contact Greg at 714-692-1098. The website is www.ambullneowines.com. Magnums (\$168-200) are available. Greg also makes a Burgundian-styled Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay and a Syrah is offered as a future now.

2006 San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition

Wine competitions are not to be taken too seriously for, like wine scores, they seek to quantify the quality of wines. They are, however, part of the American landscape and are an outlet for wineries to strut their medals and affirm their claims of excellence. One caution note is that many smaller excellent wineries do not enter their wines in competitions so the winners are not chosen from all-comers.

The well-respected 2006 San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition was held January 10-13. 3,318 wine entries were judged by 55 professional judges. The notable Pinot Noir winners are listed here (all the medal winners can be found at www.sfgate.com). A public tasting of the wines will be held on February 25, 2006 at Ft Mason Center in San Francisco.

Red Wine Sweepstakes: **2004 Patz & Hall Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** (\$28)

Best of Class: (1) less than \$13.99 - **2004 Martin Ray Angeline Russian River Valley Pinot Noir** (\$10). (2) \$14-19.99 - **2004 Gallo Family Vineyard Sonoma County Pinot Noir** (\$15). (3) \$20-29.99 - **2003 Silver Stone Wines 50% Bien Nacido Vineyard, 50% Latch Vineyard** (\$28). (4) more than \$30 - **2004 Patz & Hall Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** (\$28) and **2004 De La Montanya Winery Tinas Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir**: Double Gold (\$38).

Cudos to the winners but there are many gold, silver and bronze medal Pinot Noirs that are excellent and many have been featured in the PinotFile (Davis Family Vineyards, Harmonique, Lost Canyon Winery, Russian Hill Estate, Woodenhead, Domaine Alfred, Roessler Cellars, Row Eleven, Pellegrini (Olivet Lane Estate) and Truckee River.



Lane (Tanner) and Ariki Hill - Pinot Amour

You can find Lane Tanner and Ariki Hill in a small wine lab at Central Coast Wine Services in Santa Maria. Recently married, this unpretentious small lab is their home away from home and they have spent many nights during harvest holed up here. Ariki is a manager at Central Coast Wine Services, a large cooperative facility where small wineries can lease space and equipment. Currently there are 50 wineries producing 300,000 cases here. He also produces Pinot Noirs from Central Coast vineyards and the Yarra Valley of Australia. I know a number of American winemakers who consult for Pinot Noir wineries in New Zealand but no one who makes both a California and Australia Pinot Noir for sale here in California. Lane Tanner, of course, has been a pioneer and fixture, if not a maverick on the Santa Barbara wine scene for over 20 years. Both Lane and Ariki have a shared passion for Pinot Noir but their approach is refreshingly laid-back (see Lane's business card below). I had the opportunity to meet both of them recently and taste their wines. Ariki talks like a chatterbox on speed with a Kiwi accent but I think I got the just of what he was telling me.

Lane Tanner Winery

Lane Tanner is a native Californian who started out in the air pollution industry after graduating from San Jose State University in 1976 with a degree in chemistry. She discovered soon enough that this was not her calling after being sent to Montana to spend a winter. Returning to California, Konocti Winery in Lake County gave her a job on the bottling line but when they discovered her background in chemistry, they had her do some lab work. Lane says, "The first day I was in the lab, I was introduced to their consultant, Andre Tchelistcheff, as the new enologist. I had no clue what that was. Andre kept telling the winemaker, 'Have Lane test this, have Lane check that.'" Fortunately Andre like her and her future career was born.

She moved on to Firestone Winery in Santa Barbara County for a time and then started Lane Tanner Winery in 1984. Initially she made the house wine for the Hitching Post Restaurant made famous in *Sideways*. By 1989 she was making Pinot Noir under her own label. Currently she produces about 1,500 cases of mainly Pinot Noir and Syrah. Basically her winemaking techniques have not changed much over the years. She strives for elegance and avoids high and intrusive alcohol at all costs. Oak is not overdone either with only 20-30% new French oak used during a 12-18 month period in barrel. She remains a one-woman show by doing everything from start to finish herself. You won't find her wines prominently promoted, but people in the know buy everything she makes every year.

On a past website newsletter she talks of Elvis and what wine he might drink with peanut butter and banana sandwiches. She decided it would be a huge "to go" cup with 7-up, wine and ice. Now it would be a sacrilege for most winemakers to suggest adding ice to their wines. But Lane "wouldn't think twice about it." She says, "Say it's a hot summer day. Grab your favorite young Pinot Noir and pour it over ice. A good Pinot will taste like a well-made sangria this way and yes, I have done it. I say blast to anyone who tells me when, where and how to drink wine. The King died for our right to excess, obsession and having it our way!"

2003 Lane Tanner Bien Nacido Vineyard Pinot Noir 13.7% alc.. This Pinot is for lovers of subtle aromas and flavors. It is not a blousy (sic) or showy wine. The nose is "Burgundian" with appealing earth and barnyard notes. The plum and prune flavors are highlighted by a touch of oak. A reigned-in style. The label says "Last night I dreamed we partied with Elvis."

2003 Lane Tanner Melville Vineyard Santa Ynez Valley Pinot Noir 13.8% alc.. Last year for this bottling. Plenty of floral and smoked meat aromas. A basket of dark fruits, spice and mocha. Label says, "Life should make you tingly inside."



The current 2004 releases are available on the website, www.lanetanner.com and Los Olivos retail stores. The three wines available are: **2004 Lane Tanner Julia's Vineyard Pinot Noir** 13.2% alc., 355 cases, \$33, **2004 Lane Tanner Bien Nacido Vineyard Pinot Noir** 12.8% alc., 412 cases, \$30, and **2004 Lane Tanner Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir** 12.7% alc., 425 cases, \$24.50.

Labyrinth

Ariki (Rick) Hill is a native of New Zealand who has experience in vinifying Pinot Noir both in Australia and California. Like his wife Lane, he makes Pinot Noirs that are not in the mainstream "ultraformian" style so popular today. He picks his grapes early when the sugars are lower and the acidity higher. He feels when grapes are fully or over ripe (ie the stems green), the treasured Pinot flavors are gone. He speaks of unique watermelon characteristics in his wines. Rick's wines need time and are made to reach their pinnacle for drinking at about 7 years. Current production is 1,200 cases.

Labyrinth 2002 Bien Nacido Pinot Noir 13.6 alc., \$28. A lovely Pinot nose. The wine is lean and racy and picks up bulk with exposure to air.

Labyrinth 2003 Bien Nacido Pinot Noir 13.6% alc., \$28. This vintage has more forward fruit and a little more spice. Finishes clean.

Labyrinth 2002 Yarra Valley Viggers Vineyard Australia 14.1% alc., \$39. Full bodied wine with a bracing acid touch. The dark fruit flavors are earthy and pruney. Prominent tannins need time to blend in.

Labyrinth 2003 Yarra Valley Valley Farm Vineyard Australia 12.5% alc., \$35. Subdued black cherry and prune flavors. Tasted from a just-opened bottle. Re-corked and tasted later that day with dinner, the wine was more appealing with more vibrant fruit and body. Burgundy style.



Rick's wines are available at Los Olivos retail stores (ie Wine Country) and by contacting him at ajhill@labyrinthwine.com.

Benovia Winery to Debut in 2006

Benovia Estates Wines is a new small producer of premium Pinot Noirs plus limited amounts of Chardonnay, Syrah and Zinfandel from vineyards primarily in the Russian River Valley and Sonoma Coast. The winery's ultimate goal is to produce 5,000 cases per year. The winery owns two estate properties. The Benovia Ranch, formerly the Cohn Ranch, was purchased by owner Joe Anderson in 2002. The vineyard is located just off of Westside Road, west of Healdsburg with 6.5 acres planted to Pinot Noir. In past vintages, the grapes from this well-known vineyard went to Williams Selyem and Kosta Browne. The other property is the scenic Martaella Vineyard, located on Hartman Road in the Russians River Valley AVA. The vineyard is 18 acres, 13.5 of which is planted to Pinot Noir. This property was previously owned and farmed by DeLoach Vineyards.

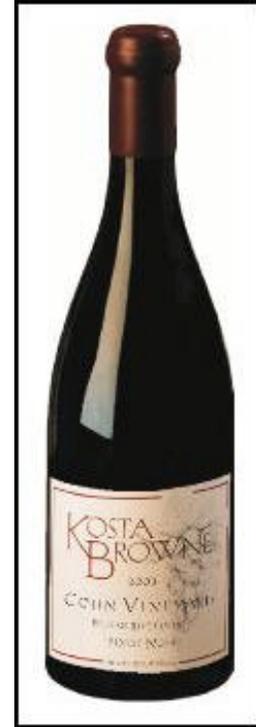
The new venture has an impressive team on board. Owner Joe Anderson resides in Phoenix, Arizona where his company, Schaller Anderson, Inc. is a third party administrator for health insurance. He has a passion for wine and is committed to making extraordinary wines. The winery will be managed by Bob Mosby, PhD, a noted psychologist and business consultant also from Phoenix., He is a long time wine lover who worked the crush at Williams Selyem for 10 years and after Williams Selyem was sold, helped out at Brogan Cellars. He now resides in Healdsburg to help run the winery.

Well-known viticulturist Daniel Roberts, PhD has been hired to oversee the management of the vineyards and direct all new planting projects. The most prominent member of the team is new winemaker Mike Sullivan. Mike is a graduate of Fresno State (BS in Enology) who has been in the wine industry for over 15 years, most recently as winemaker for eight years at Hartford Family Winery. Under his leadership, Hartford became one of California's best producers of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and old-vine Zinfandel. In recognition of his skills, Mike was named Wine Personality of the Year by Robert Parker, Jr. in 2002 was named Winemaker of the Year by Ronn Wiegand also in 2002. After his hiring Mike said, "I joined Benovia to make wines that transcend

varietal correctness. I want to create bottlings that meld the grape, climate and topography into something unique and special. We've got some of the world's finest cool-climate sites within spitting distance of our winery. The cold winds that blow off the Pacific Ocean and complex soils and geography of the California coastline provide us with some of the greatest natural resources on Earth. I'm looking forward to vinifying wines that are deep, concentrated and incredibly complex."

"We wanted a winemaker who had experience and touch to produce wines that were compelling, honest and dramatic" ...Joe Anderson

You can contact Benovia Winery by mail - 3339 Hartman Rd, Santa Rosa, CA 95401, by phone - 707-526-4441, or by email - BMosby9766@aol.com.





PrinceofPinot.com

There will be no PinottFile next week as I will be in the Russian River Valley working (or is that uncorking?)

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Steve Dutton's family first planted Pinot Noir at their 1,500 acre Dutton Ranch 30 years ago. He was recently quoted: "We only had 50 acres of Pinot in 1990 and sold the grapes for \$300 a ton, most of it to wineries making sparkling wines. Now, Pinot is the latest buzz grape. By 2005, we had 390 acres and our average price per ton was up to \$2,677. The cost of grapes from special vineyard blocks hit \$5,000!"

Overheard at the Wine Shop - Part II

Thanks to Gerald Weisl of Weimax Wines (an excellent source for Pinot Noir in the Bay Area of California - 1178 Broadway, Burlingame, www.weimax.com) I have some more humorous tales from the wine store trenches. Unlike some of my quotes in the last issue that were made up, Gerald swears these are true.

The other day a customer was specifically interested in Oregon Pinot Noir. That's because "they don't have the histamines of California wines and my wife is allergic. She can drink Oregon Pinots with no problem because they do not contain histamines." He went on, "It has to do with the latitude of Oregon. Yeah...it's northern so about the same as France. So the red wines don't have histamines." (FYI, all red wines have histamines).

Another customer said recently that "the best German wines come in blue bottles." He was told that this was remarkable information that it was news to the staff. "Well, good German wineries save the blue bottles for their best wines."

Routinely customers claim that European wines either have lots of chemicals or are chemical-free. Usually it has to do with sulfites. "Italian wines don't have sulfites," or "French wines don't have sulfites."

A lady comes into the wine store and asks if they have any wine from Puerto Rico. Turns out she wanted "Porto!" But she continues that she's interested in a really "smmmmmmmooooth" red wine "like Merlot." She is ushered to the tasting counter to sample some wines. Gerald pours her a good Merlot. She says its too tannic. Other things she tastes are too sour or too bitter. Finally he pours her a Pinot Noir (can't recall whose, but a good one). "Oh now this is marvelous!" she cries. So Gerald puts the bottle down on the counter and she looks at it. "Oh, Pinot Noir! I can't buy that," she tells him. She wanders out front and selects one of the most astringent, rough and leathery Cabernets in the shop. She paid and departed. Haven't seen her since.