

**Joe Swan:
Part Two**

PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Devoted to Pinoaficionados

Volume 5, Issue 28

March 18, 2006

Inside this issue:

New Pinot Noir Releases	6
IntelliSearch Wine Cellar Mngmt	8

New Insight About Joseph Swan

In Volume 5, Issue 25 of the *PinotFile* I wrote about the legacy of winegrower Joseph Swan and the aging ability of his Pinot Noirs. I received several responses to this feature and wanted to include further insight into this colorful man's history.

Don Baumhefner, who worked closely with Joseph (Joe) Swan for several years wrote some additional affectionate remarks. Don played tennis with Joe every week and things got quite competitive. There were a few disagreements as to particular calls which is always the case in tennis. Neither had a clear advantage in victories and it was not unusual for the two of them to fall onto the court during a match laughing their heads off.

When it came to tasting wines at a dinner at his house, which was done quite regularly, he became a different person. At first, he was a crotchety old fart. People would come to the winery and ask to be put on the mailing list and he would look at them and sometimes say, "no." Other times he would say, "sure." But, at dinner, after a few bottles, he would say to Don or Kermit Lynch or Bill Miller (Merry Edwards' first husband) or Bruce Neyers or Darrel Corti or Mary Ann Graff, go down into the cellar and open whatever you want! Kermit always chose the 1970 Gamay, Merry liked the 1969 Zinfandel. We tasted both wines again last month with Alice Waters and the 1970 Gamay was so young and fruity that we had to bow before the genius that was Joe!

Joe was married four times, had seven or so kids, and died without leaving a will. Don remembers Ken Burnap, who started Santa Cruz Mountains Vineyards, saying to Joe, as he was dying from cancer and had plenty of time to make a will, "Joe you should have a will." Joe replied, "Yeah, tomorrow." Joe is probably up there now laughing at the squabbles. Actually Joe's fourth wife, June, got the goods and her daughter, Lynn, married Rod Berglund, who became the winemaker after Joe died. Rod is doing a great job, especially with the Estate Pinot Noir and the Cuvee de Trois Pinot Noir.

One final bit of interest is that the pilot with whom Joe made his maiden solo Western Airlines flight was Jack Chambers, father of Suzanne Chambers of Chambers & Chambers, the first really exclusive small winery wine brokers in California.



GREAT NEWS

The PinotFile now has a new search feature. All of the 231 past issues have been fully indexed and can be searched for any specific wine, wine-maker, winery or other subject of interest. Check it out on the web-site at:

Princeofpinot.com
Pinotfile.com

Gary Konas wrote me from La Crosse, Wisconsin that he knew Joe just as Joe was getting started as a bonded winemaker. Joe shared some of his first home-made wines with Gary - Zin and Gamay from the late 1960s, as he recalls. They sampled them in the basement of his house, which was his winery until his "real" winery was bonded in 1974. He was such a classy, generous gentleman that Gary wrote a profile on him for a wine magazine that folded before it could be published. Fortunately for Gary, he still has a few bottles of Joe's legacy left: 1978 and 1980 Pinot Noir and 1975 Zinfandel.

Gary agreed to submit his manuscript (which he had to re-type as the hard copy from 1984 pre-dated his Macintosh days) for publication in the *PinotFile*. He made no attempt to update the article. Surprisingly, some of his quotes sound quite current, especially his complaint about monster wines winning tastings. The manuscript is published here in its entirety, uncut and original, twenty years after Gary penned it.

Gary Konas has degrees in math, enology, creative writing, and English (Ph.D.), all from UC Davis. His viticulture and enology classmates included Fred Brander, Cathy Corison, Merry Edwards, Tim Mondavi, Karl and Eric Wente, Doug Nalle, Jed Steele, and Steve McRostie. He made home wines off and on from 1973 to 1977. In 1974, he made two separate Cabernets from second crop grapes at Caymus and Diamond Creek. During the 1990s, he grew a row of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir just north of Napa. Since 1999 he has taught English at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. His cellar contains around 500 bottles, including an increasing number of nice Pinot Noirs from Kistler, Sea Smoke, Merry Edwards, Peay Vineyards, Martinelli, Pisoni, Roar, Siduri, Radio-Coteau, and Flowers, among others.

Looking for Balance

By Gary Konas

"Having to retire is quite a traumatic thing for some pilots because flying is all they're interested in. Well, I'd always had other interests." Joe Swan, pilot-turned-winemaker extraordinaire, isn't impressed by one-dimensional people, and he doesn't care for monstrous, one-dimensional wines either. He strives for balance not only in the wines he makes, but in all aspects of his life.

Young Joseph Swan discovered both flying and winemaking at age 15, but chose art for a career instead. He studied with a famous painter and struggled to make a living as an artist during the Depression. While still in his twenties he put painting aside and embarked on a 30-year career as a commercial pilot. Then, when Joe reached the mandatory retirement age of 60, he started yet another career, this time as a winemaker. This most recent endeavor has lasted 17 years so far, and there are enough twists and uncertainties ahead to keep Joe Swan looking forward to the next scene of what has been like a three-act play.

It's no accident that Joe and wife June ended up where they are, a dozen miles west of Santa Rosa in Sonoma county. He searched Northern California thoroughly before deciding he had found the perfect place for the premium grape varieties he wanted to grow. By the time he retired from Western Airlines, the 10 acres of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir planted on the rolling hills of his small estate were ready to bear fruit, and he had already established his reputation by making fine Zinfandel from Dry Creek Valley grapes.

This morning he's out prowling the vineyard with pruning shears in hand. Although he looks rather elegant in his white shirt and spotless work pants, Joe doesn't strike you as being a dilettante farmer. He fusses knowledgeably over his vines, snipping carefully at the springtime foliage that's just starting to emerge from the trunks. He fine tunes his 5000 vines with the same satisfaction and confidence as an auto mechanic working on his favorite old car during his day off. In contrast to most farmers, who look for ways to maximize production, Joe is always trying to produce *less*, because he wants his vines to yield a few great grapes rather than a lot of mediocre ones.

When he's finished he walks back home and shares lunch with a visitor in the enclosed porch. Years ago the old wood frame house contained the switchboard for a now-extinct town named Trenton. From a radio in the next room comes the Metropolitan Opera's live broadcast of *Der Rosenkavalier*. When Joe mentions that he and June have season tickets to the San Francisco opera, it comes as no surprise. Tall, with pure white hair that contrasts with his tanned skin, Joe looks as though he could feel comfortable hiking through the vineyard all day and then listening to Verdi all evening. He speaks articulately on subjects as varied as understanding modern art, feathering a propeller, making wines in different areas of France, and dealing with county building codes.

Joseph Swan Vineyards produces only around 1400 cases per year, a small amount even by premium wine standards, but Joe refuses to make more than he can personally supervise. He sells almost all of it by mail within California, and whenever a few cases make it to a San Francisco wine shop, the wine's arrival is announced in newsletters to connoisseurs. Yes, Joe is unquestionably successful.

Still, in listening to him talk, you can hear an occasional note of frustration. He's disturbed by what's going on in the wine business, and he can't change it. He's upset, for example, that high-alcohol wines that are unsuitable for accompanying meals seem to win a lot of awards at the prestigious wine tastings, thus setting the standard for the industry. "We're so hung up on the tasting syndrome here in California, I think it's been one of the worst things for quality. Then you get guys who denigrate food wines. They equate wines that are elegant and understated with those that have been stripped so that they're readily accessible early on. I don't think they're doing anyone a service." He's also no fan of the Viticulture and Enology Department of the University of California, Davis - a department widely viewed as the finest grape and wine research facility in the nation. "I don't understand those people. They only want to develop grapes that are reasonably clean and big producers. They've never been interested in quality. *Never*. It just flat aggravates me."

Perhaps Madison, South Dakota, where Joe grew up, seems an unlikely place to produce such an outspoken, sophisticated man. After all, South Dakota has never been a cultural or flight center, and even during non-Prohibition times, one would have had trouble finding any wine in Madison other than possibly a stray bottle of Muscatel in the store. Joe nonetheless found ways to develop his teenage interests.

Around 1930 some local bakers had a plane they flew around a pasture. Joe, age 15, washed the plane in exchange for rides. He began to do simple maintenance on the plane, and he soloed for the first time at 17. By this time he was already a home winemaker, his interest in wine having begun when he was still a boy. He read about "red velvet burgundy," which sounded intriguing to him, and he watched a neighbor make dandelion and chokeberry wines. Although varietal grapes were unavailable in South Dakota, rhubarb was plentiful. Picture a 15-year-old running rhubarb stalks through his mother's wringer washer to crush them, then adding baker's yeast to ferment the juice in empty five-gallon lard cans from the bakery. The problem was, his parents were teetotalers and would have been less than supportive of this junior science project. Joe therefore kept his lard cans in an empty chicken coop, then smuggled the fermented juice up to the attic for bottling.

Despite having both interest and talent in these two diverse areas, Joe decided to go to college and pursue art as a career. Attending the University of Iowa on scholarship, he studied with Grant Wood, creator of the famous painting *American Gothic*. Wood selected Joe to be one of three people to work on an 8-foot-by-45-foot mural supervised by Wood. The mural was later hung at Iowa State University (Ames), and is still there. Instead of graduating, however, Joe left college to begin work on WPA Easel Projects. During the Depression, when perhaps 200 people in the entire country were making a living as independent artists, this federal program was the only option open for young painters.

After several years of struggle, Joe decided to return to one of his earlier passions. America was gearing up for World War II, and the Air Force Reserve needed flight instructors. Soon Joe was flying and

teaching in a variety of training planes. He taught in the morning and practiced aerobatics in the afternoon. Not only was it fun for him, but all this experience helped him make a smooth transition to Western Airlines toward the end of the War. Joe started at the bottom of the seniority list for pilots, but, as he recalls, "I really took to the DC-3 and was released as Captain after only eight months, in 1945." Then came the recession of 1947 and belt-tightening for airlines. Joe returned to co-pilot status until 1950, when he was made Captain for good.

When asked whether he has any harrowing stories of near-catastrophes in the air, he calmly says, "Oh, not too many unusual incidents to turn your hair white." But after a moment's reflection, he recalls the time he took off from Pocatello, Idaho, and picked up a load of rough ice on the wing as he climbed. Rough ice can destroy your air foil, he explains, and the plane actually stalled. He managed to recover, though. One of Western's most experienced pilots, who happened to be a passenger, came up to the cabin and asked, "Is everything okay?" "Yep" was Joe's Chuck Yeager-style reply.

Oh, and Joe remembers one other incident. Once, approaching Cutbank, Montana at 800 feet, his DC-3 collided with a couple of ducks. "It was like an explosion. They came through the right-hand side of the windshield, just to the left of the co-pilot's head. Then they continued through the cockpit doorway into the cabin. As I recall, they hit a stewardess in the rear end. All I got was a handful of glass. I still have a piece of it somewhere." They landed safely, and the local newspaper carried the inevitable headline: **Duck Hits Swan.**

Even though Joe sees the humor in these incidents, he always took safety seriously. Sometimes he'd hold up flights for half an hour, then later have to explain these delays to the airline's chief pilot, who suggested that certain safety checks weren't really necessary. Joe says craftily, "I told him, 'Put it in writing.' That was that." While he resisted management's desire to cut corners, he realized that ultimately "you can quit or fly." Joe flew, and by the time he turned 60, he was ready to retire.

As early as the late 1940s Joe began to plan for retirement. He resumed his boyhood activity of home winemaking - in Utah, of all places. He made a Zinfandel Rosé that his pilot friends dubbed "José's Rosé," and he received some local notoriety for these wines. When Joe transferred his home base to Los Angeles in 1956, he started scouting for land in Northern California. By 1967, when Western established a base in San Francisco, Joe had enough seniority to relocate and choose his flight schedule, and enough money to establish his dream vineyard.

The winery - actually just a cellar under the house - was bonded in 1969. Later Joe converted a barn for storing the finished wines, and he put up a pre-fabricated building to serve as the permanent winery after the county rejected the barn as not being sufficiently earthquake resistant. About this time he reached the magic 60th birthday and became a full-time winemaker.

Joe candidly reviews his past successes and failures as a winemaker as he might evaluate the planes he's flown. "The 1973 Pinot Noir is beautiful. I picked it at the right time. The '74 is the only wine I've ever made that's over 14 percent alcohol. I had problems with the county over my new winery building, and that's why it's overripe. I wish to hell I'd diluted it. For the past several years I've picked sooner, and the wines are better. I'm a slow learner." On the other hand, he recalls that Andre Tchelistcheff, dean of California winemakers, once phoned to tell him, "This is the mountain coming to Mohammed. I just had your 1978 and I have to tell you that's the most beautiful California Pinot Noir I've ever had."

Joe sees one important parallel between winemaking and flying. "Perfectionism. If you want to be a perfectionist in one area, it tends to carry over into another area. In flying, you could always do this or that maneuver better. The day that you quit improving, you better quit. As a winemaker, I have done as well as I can do sometimes, but other times I haven't. I'm still learning."

Joe believes strongly that American winemakers can learn a lot from the European masters, and he makes frequent trips to consult with friends in France and Italy. When asked what makes the best European wines so great, he replies, "It's attention to detail, I think, and looking for balance. Balance in the fermenter is what's occupied my attention more in recent years." Now he frowns, thinking about foolish mistakes made by some of his California colleagues. "You know, these idiots are making Chardonnay with residual sugar? I mean, where the hell's your pride?"

What about future years? Does he plan to delegate more responsibility to an assistant? He shakes his head. "Winemaking is like cooking - it's very personal. You can't have others smell and taste for you." Besides, the vineyard needs more fine tuning. The Chardonnay's in good shape, but the Pinot Noir section seems to have clones of differing quality. He wants to try a clone that they're using in Oregon. "Over the years I may be replacing the whole damn vineyard." A small experimental plot of Cabernet Sauvignon is doing very well. He cocks one ear toward the sound of piano music now coming from the radio, "Moussorgsky, huh?"

In an echo of Act I, he's thinking of taking up art again seriously. In the living room he nonchalantly points out one of his own fine modern-style paintings from 1941, then proudly displays a much more recent painting by the eldest of his six children. "Look at her colors, isn't that nice?"

However Joe chooses to use his time from now on, you can be sure he won't be wasting it. "Some pilots I knew approached retirement age and didn't know what they were going to do. God, you better figure it out. You can only spend so many hours on the golf course. I'm a firm believer in finding *something* to do. Otherwise you'll rot," and rot is something that Joe wants neither for his grapes nor for himself.

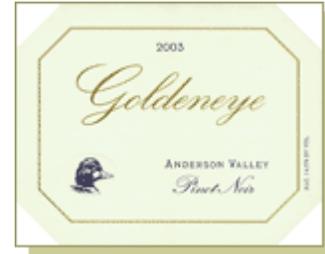


Joseph Swan Pinot Noirs are available retail and from the winery at www.swanwinery.com. Current wines for sale are: **2001 Joseph Swan Trenton Estate Pinot Noir** (\$45), **2002 Joseph Swan Trenton Estate Pinot Noir** (\$45), **2003 Joseph Swan Trenton Estate Pinot Noir** (\$45), and **2002 Joseph Swan Saralee's Vineyard Pinot Noir** (\$30). All are from the Russian River Valley appellation.

Recent Worthy New Pinot Noir Releases

Goldeneye

2003 Goldeneye Anderson Valley Pinot Noir 14.5% alc., \$52 (\$106 for magnum). Goldeneye is dedicated solely to Pinot Noir from the Anderson Valley AVA. 150 estate acres, with 49 combinations of clones and rootstocks are hand farmed to produce small lots of Pinot Noir. The 2003 vintage is the seventh from this winery. The wine is aged in 100% new French Burgundy oak barrels for 16 months. **2004 Migration Anderson Valley Pinot Noir** 14.5% alc., \$30. This is the winery's second label but is sourced from the same seven vineyards. It is a lighter style than Goldeneye, aged 11 months in 100% French oak, but still full-bodied and an excellent Pinot Noir in its own right.



Www.goldeneyewinery.com, 866-367-9945

L'Angevin

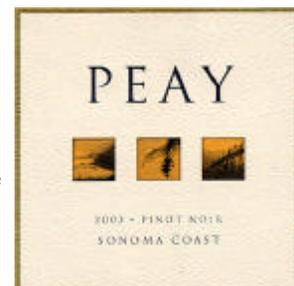
2004 L'Angevin Sonoma Stage Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 250 cases, \$50. The first Pinot Noir release from this producer of outstanding Chardonnay from the Russian River Valley and Charles Heintz Vineyard on the Sonoma Coast. This release is from the Hyde Family's Sonoma Stage Vineyard located in the southern most portion of the Sonoma Coast Appellation, a cool region with significant marine influence. The wine is a blend of Calera and Swan clones. The principals of this winery learned their trade at Peter Michael Winery, enough said.



Www.langevinwines.com, 707-944-1352.

Peay Vineyards

2004 Peay Vineyards Estate Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 14.0% alc., 575 cases, \$48. The 2004 growing season produced what winemaker Vanessa Wong and vineyard manager Nick Peay called "our first classic vintage." This Pinot Noir is a blend of seventh leaf selections/clones of 115 (29%), Pommard (29%), 777 (12%), Swan (8%) and Calera (2%). Yields were low at 2 tons per acre. The wine was raised 11 months in 42% new French oak. The winemaker notes, "It is not a syrupy or jammy style of Pinot Noir. The fruits are red not black. The acidity and relatively low alcohol keep the wine lively. There is elegance, balance, richness and pinosity without heaviness. Volume without weight." There is a brief slide show posted on the website, www.peayvineyards.com, that shows the new winery construction in process. Also in the Vineyard section of the site is a slide show that follows a single vine throughout the growing season. The winery's other releases, a Chardonnay, Voignier, Roussanne/Marsanne and Syrah are also excellent estate wines. This is an admirable project that was begun several years ago from scratch and has quickly reached prominence among the boutique wine producing elite. Most of the wine is sold through a mailing list which can be accessed at the website.



Whitcraft Winery

2004 Whitcraft Bien Nacido "Q block" Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir \$45, **2004 Whitcraft Bien Nacido "N block" Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir** \$45, **2004 Whitcraft Melville Vineyard Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir**, \$45 and **2000 Whitcraft Hirsch Vineyard Sonoma Coast Sparkling Pinot Noir** \$120. No that last one is not a misprint. Chris Whitcraft has been producing eclectic wines for years including a **2003 Whitcraft French Camp Vineyard Lagrein** (\$30). His latest special offering is his fourth and probably last sparkling wine. Chris actually started out in the winemaking business to make sparkling wine but found it too expensive to produce all the time. Imagine driving nine hours back and forth from his Santa Maria warehouse to Hirsch Vineyard to riddle and disgorge this wine. The wine actually cost so much to produce, he will probably lose money on it even at the \$120 price tag! 15% alcohol. No fining, filtering, pumping or dosage, but each bottle has a slight difference in bubbles and sweetness due to the high alcohol which stopped the second fermentation. Sparkling wine as it was made in the past, by hand. Extremely unique and rare and never to be repeated. Two bottle per person allotment. The website is www.whitcraftwinery.com, the phone is 805-965-0956.

Etude

2003 Etude Heirloom Pinot Noir 38 barrels, \$80. Those of you who read this newsletter regularly know that I am a big fan of this wine. This distinct Pinot Noir is produced from several heirloom clone selections of Carneros Pinot Noir. All of the fruit in this wine comes from shy-bearing clones with a marked tendency to produce small, irregularly shaped bunches and very small berries. These vines are usually held in low regard by growers. Heirloom Pinot Noir is made in small lots with traditional techniques. The wine is aged in new French oak barrels. Tony Soter supervises the production of this wine. It is a real treasure. Www.etudewines.com, 707-257-5300.

Lucia

Gary Pisoni purchased land in the Santa Lucia Highlands in 1982 and developed it into Pisoni Vineyard, now one of California's most notable Pinot Noir vineyard. Later, winemaker son Jeff and grape grower son Mark created the Pisoni label, releasing the first estate in 1998. A second label, Lucia, debuted in 2000. Jeff Pisoni is only 26 years-old but he has quickly become one of the hottest young winemakers in California. The **2003 Pisoni Estate Pinot Noir** \$60 in 3- and 6-bottle packs, was released a few months ago and is sold through an exclusive mailing list (www.pisonivineyards.com). I sampled this at the recent World of Pinot Noir and found it to be a powerful Pinot Noir with great balance and merit. **2004 Lucia Garys' Vineyard Pinot Noir** \$44, **2004 Lucia Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir** 14.7% alc., \$37, and **2005 Lucy Rose of Pinot Noir** \$18 are the Lucia current releases. Www.lucivineyards.com, 800-946-3130.

Scherrer Winery

2003 Scherrer Winery Fort Ross Vineyard 'High Slopes' Pinot Noir 150 cases, \$45. Fred Scherrer predicts this will be a very long-lived wine. Decreased yields led to great concentration. **2002 Scherrer Winery Russian River Valley Pinot Noir** \$35. The 2003 vintage will be released this year (I tasted it at the WOPN and it was perfectly elegant), but the 2002 is drinking beautifully now. Just a perfect example of the genre. 707-823-8980.




PrinceofPinot.com

Next Week: An extensive report on
Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir

Joe Swan: Part Two

© 2006
PinotFile is a Registered
Trademark

A friend, Wayne Nicklin, turned me on to a valuable product for managing a wine cellar: IntelliScanner Wine Collector. This is a barcode-enabled wine management system to keep track of wine collections of any size. The handheld barcode scanner and wine tracking software allows you to scan wines in and out of inventory, track bottle locations and rack placement, scan away from the cellar and then download to your PC or Mac, store tasting notes and keep a permanent tasting history, and print and save customized reports. The database is currently 62,000 wines, but is growing every day. If your wine does not have a barcode or is not in the database, simply add a pre-printed IntelliScanner Barcode Tags. Price starts at \$199. The website is www.intelliscanner.com.



Other Pinot Releases worth searching out:

2004 Red Car Amour Fou Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.7% alc., 375 cases, \$300 per six-pack. This wine is more aromatic, complex, elegant and layered than previous Red Car releases. Very popular at WOPN. Wwwredcarwine.com, 310-839-7300.

2003 Domaine Serene Evenstad Reserve Willamette Valley Pinot Noir \$42. Now one of Oregon's most reliable Pinot Noir wineries. This wine is a blend of Pommard, Wadenswil and Dijon clones. Its ripe flavors reflect the hot 2003 vintage in Oregon. In January at the Naples Wine Festival Auction, Domaine Serene donated a 5L of 2002 Monogram, Mark Bradford Vineyard, Grace Vineyard and Jerusalem Hill Pinot Noirs, along with a four night stay for three couples at Domaine Serene, vertical tastings of Domaine Serene Chardonnay and Pinot Noir and more - the winning bid was \$140,000! The wine is in wide retail distribution.

2004 Hug Cellars Rancho Ontiveros Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 14.9% alc., 69 cases, \$43 and **2004 Hug Cellars Orchid Hill Vineyard Paso Robles Pinot Noir** 14.9% alc., 92 cases, \$27. Augie Hug has been quietly making wine in the Central Coast since 1994. Augie's style is what he calls "hedonistic - rich and intense." Augie is a trained chef who learned winemaking from John Alban and courses at UC Davis. He teamed with Raquel Mireles Rodriguez to form Hug Cellars in 1994. The Rancho Ontiveros Pinot Noir is very typical of fruit from that vineyard made in a bold style. The new winery and shared tasting room at Coastal Vintners in Paso Robles is next door to Garretson Wines. Www.hugcellars.com, 805-828-5906.

2004 Sine Qua Non Covert Fingers Arita Hills Vineyard Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir 300 cases. I had previously noted in the *PinotFile* that SQN was no longer making a Shea Vineyard Pinot Noir and was concentrating on Rhone varietals only. Obviously I was wrong. Mailing list (full) only or secondary market.

New releases from Dutton-Goldfield, Lost Canyon, Green Truck Cellars, Talisman, Casa Colima, Topel, J. Wilkes, and Guerrero Fernandez will be reviewed in coming issues.