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PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Devoted to Pinotaficionados

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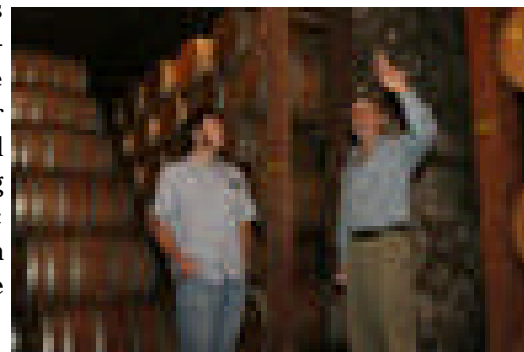
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From Ground to Glass

A year before film crews came to the Santa Barbara Wine Country to film *Sideways*, independent filmmaker and artist Rob DaFoe had begun to chronicle his own experience as a novice winemaker. DaFoe grew up in neighboring Goleta and after retiring from a professional snowboarding career, returned to the Santa Ynez Valley. He was a wine enthusiast intrigued by the possibility of making his own wine. As fortune would have it, an accident landed him in the office of a doctor who owned a vineyard and was willing to offer DaFoe some Syrah grapes. A local winemaker (Chuck Carlson at Curtis Winery) offered his expertise and equipment and by the end of summer, 2002, he was a budding winemaker with his own label, Crimson Ghost.

In his documentary and first feature film, *From Ground to Glass*, Dafoe initially began to focus on his personal winemaking experience. But, as he became more and more intrigued by the culture, art and science of wine, he hit the road and interviewed more than thirty vintners.. The movie evolved into a provocative look at the personal triumphs and challenges of winegrowers. "Many of these winemakers are people who caught the wine bug and went ninety degrees in their career paths to make a life of wine," said DaFoe. "They all have fascinating stories. They are diverse and eclectic as a group, but they are united by a passion for wine. This film invites the viewer into their world."



John Fitzgerald, Photographer

The film's website describes *From Ground to Glass* as: "In their own words, trailblazing vintners, growers, and home winemakers share the passion, triumphs, and epiphanies that shape their reverence for the crimson liquid."

The film features many notable winemakers from throughout California, including Pinot Noir legends Chuck Ortman (Ortman Vineyards, formerly of Meridian), Richard Sanford (Alma Rosa, formerly of Sanford), Jim Clendenen (Au Bon Climat), and Ken Brown (Ken Brown Wines, formerly of Byron). Several rising Pinot Noir stars were also included: Mike Sinor (Domaine Alfred and Sinor-Lavalle), Kris Curran (Sea Smoke), Norm Yost (Flying Goat Cellars), Ryan Beauregard (Beauregard Vineyards), Brian Babcock (Babcock Winery), Kathy Joseph (Fiddlehead), and Wes Hagen (Clos Pepe).

From Ground to Glass is a truly independent film, with Robert DaFoe writing, directing and photographing the film. It was co-produced by Sonnet29 Motion Arts. The film premiered at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival on February 10, 2006 and was very favorably reviewed by the Festival's Program Director, Cevin Cathell. He said, "With *From Ground to Glass*, Rob Dafoe delivers a stunningly beautiful, fascinating and often humorous film that truly reveals the passion for winemaking, through the eyes of artisans." The documentary will be shown this week, Friday, April 9, in Lompoc as part of the inaugural **Wine & Fire: A Celebration of Sta. Rita Hills** (tickets for the entire weekend's events are available at the Sta. Rita Hills Winegrowers Alliance, www.staritahills.com).

Visit the website, www.fromgroundtoglass.com, to view a video of the movie and to access DaFoe's wine blog.

Is Pinot Noir Sometimes Pinot Syrah?

Federal regulations require that wine labeled Pinot Noir be at least 75% Pinot Noir. Oregon has its own, even stricter law, requiring that 90% of the wine in the bottle be Pinot Noir. It is perfectly legal, then to add Syrah or another varietal to Pinot Noir to darken the color and "plump" the wine. Although rarely considered, even white varieties can be added (it is still legal in France to add up to 15% Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris grapes to red Burgundy). Of course, the addition of even 10% of another varietal such as Syrah to Pinot Noir completely destroys the varietal character of Pinot Noir. There is no truth-in-labeling law that requires producers to put the percentages of each varietal on their bottle. Some vintners do such as Domaine Alfred which makes a popular picnic wine labeled "Da Red." (the label clearly states that it is a 50/50 blend of Pinot Noir and Syrah).

In the April, 2006 issue of *Wine & Spirits*, author Jordan Mackay approached this subject. He found that very few winemakers admitted to blending small amounts of other varieties into their Pinot Noirs. Respected Pinot Noir winemaker, Greg La Follette, was an exception. He said, "It happens all the time. A lot of the bigger producers do it to make their numbers, and it's been done as long as Pinot has been made. It's done on a fairly regular basis; people just don't talk about it." The reluctance to admit adulteration of Pinot Noir is probably secondary to the stigma associated with the term "adulteration," as well as a holdover from the long ago prohibited addition of blending wine from Algeria or the South of France into red Burgundies.

I believe small artisan Pinot Noir producers are committed to 100% Pinot Noir. The bulk producers are probably not. There are a number of manipulations going on in the winery that no one talks about

**"Megapurple is added to almost every red wine selling for \$20 or less."
Dan Berger, Vintage Experiences**

- bleeding off juice and adding water, using megapurple (a super concentrate from grape skins and seeds that adds color and texture to wine), and probably blending in a small amount of other varieties. Maybe the less the consumer knows, the better. Really, the bottom line is how does it taste? Sure, the purist like myself wants 100% Pinot Noir, but the consumer usually could care less if the Pinot Noir he is drinking is actually 10% Syrah, if it tastes good. The French do not allow blending of vineyards, but we do it all the time here and

everyone is unfazed by this practice. The French model will never be strictly followed in this country - it's not in the American style or spirit. I am in favor of truth-in-labeling and I think the varietal composition should be printed on the label. Then the consumer can make the choice. But how do you enforce such a requirement?

It won't be long before the United States government will require a warning added to all labels: "Caution, the wine in this bottle may have been manipulated chemically, touched by human feet or hands, and enhanced in ways that are the secretive property of the winemaker."

Skewis Wines: Food-Friendly Pinot Noirs

Hank Skewis sweated through 25 vintages including several years at Lambert Bridge in Dry Creek before starting his namesake label in 1994. It was a trip to Burgundy to work the harvest there that gave him the incentive to make Pinot Noir. In 1994, grower Fred Peterson of Floodgate Vineyard in the Anderson Valley offered Hank three barrels worth of grapes. He now makes 900 cases of high quality Pinot Noirs from vineyards in Sonoma's Russian River Valley and Mendocino's Anderson Valley.

Hank works with growers to restrict yields by means of winter pruning, spring shoot thinning, and summer cluster thinning prior to veraison. Average crops in the vineyards he contracts with are between two and two and one-half tons per acre. Winemaking is traditional and minimalistic : grapes are gently crushed into small bins, fermented quite warm, pressed into French oak barrels where primary and secondary fermentation are completed. The aging period is 18 months. No fining or filtration is employed. The wines are aged an additional 4-6 months or more after bottling depending on what the wine dictates. The 2003 vintage is more approachable early than previous Skewis Pinots.

2003 Skewis Floodgate Vineyard Anderson Valley Pinot Noir

13.7% alc., 150 cases, \$45. This vineyard is located at the far western end of the Anderson Valley. There is a strong maritime influence with frequent summer fog and wind. The soil is fairly poor and the vines struggle. A light-bodied, feminine Pinot Noir (in a positive way). A very toasty nose with plenty of spice (think cinnamon) and herbal aromas. There are appealing plum and black fruit flavors with a citrus note. The fruit may be a bit austere for some, but the excellent acidic edge makes this a perfect food companion. A killer with grilled pork tenderloin.



2003 Skewis Demuth Vineyard Anderson Valley Pinot Noir 14.5% alc., 170 cases, \$35. The Demuth Vineyard consists of eight acres planted high above Anderson Valley at an elevation of 1500 feet. The soil is shallow, creating a desirable degree of stress for the vines. The vines are primarily Wadenswil clone. This is a pretty wine. The aromatics are sexy with spiced cherries and strawberries. The wine finishes with the same flavors with a hint of oak and fine tannins. This beauty drinks more elegant than its 14.5% alcohol would suggest. The best sipping wine in the lineup. (Magnums available).

2003 Skewis Salzgeber-Chan Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 13.6% alc., 200 cases, \$40. Planted in 1997, this three acre vineyard is planted to clone 115 on a north-facing hillside with excellent drainage. A pleasant nose of ripe cherries, spice and toasty oak. Dark fruits dominate the cola-tinged flavors. It closes with notable green tannins. An elegant style.

2003 Skewis Bush Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 185 cases, \$42. Bush Vineyard is located just northwest of Santa Rosa. This area offers the advantage of cooling summer fog, which often persists until late in the morning. The vines are Dijon 115 clone planted in 1998. The aromas here include cooked cherries, spice and cinnamon. Red fruits, herbs, rhubarb and mushrooms are featured on the palate. This lighter-bodied wine finishes clean due to lively acidity. There are subtle chewy oak tannins on the finish. This wine really captures the sensuous side of Pinot Noir and screams out for food.

Skewis Wines are widely distributed in California and available at many fine restaurants (check the website, www.skewis.com, for a listing). Wines may also be purchased on the website and by phoning 707-431-2160. A nice feature on the website is a section on matching Skewis Pinot Noirs with food and cheese. I love Paul Root's quote on the website: "God made Pinot Noir and lamb on the same day."

The Curious Phenomenon of Cult Noir

The concept of “cult” wines emerged in the 1980s with a number of collectible Napa Valley Cabernets (Araujo, Bryant Family, Colgin, Dalla Valle, Grace Family, Harland and Screaming Eagle). Marvin R Shanken, Editor & Publishes of the *Wine Spectator*, defined a cult wine “As one you can’t buy.” Wine industry analyst Eileen Fredrikson felt there was one quality cult wines usually had in common: “Exclusivity, either real or imagined.”

The original cult Pinot Noir was Williams Selyem. You had to be on the mailing list to obtain any of the Williams Selyem wines and virtually none was available outside of a few select restaurants. This of course all changed when Burt Williams and Ed Selyem sold their eponymous winery in 1997. Since then, a few new labels have reached cult status in California. The hottest current one is Sea Smoke. As soon as the three highly allocated 2004 Sea Smoke Pinot Noirs were recently released, at least 24 lots of Sea Smoke appeared on Wine Commune (a popular on line wine auction site). After only four vintages, but fueled by comments from critics such as Robert Parker, Jr. (he called the 2004 Sea Smoke Ten Pinot Noir a “tour de force”), Sea Smoke has quickly become the next hot cult Pinot Noir.

It is quite flattering to winemakers to be anointed a cult wine and very few achieve that lofty status. There are strict criteria for this rarified club and all criteria must be met for inclusion:

- ?? **Allocation** There must be very limited sale to a mailing list with a small window for purchase.
- ?? **Limited Production** Usually less than 300 cases of each bottling; the less the better.
- ?? **Unobtainable** Besides a few restaurants and a few select retailers, the wine can be purchased by those not on the mailing list only on the secondary market at an inflated price. The wines show up in droves on auction sites when the wines are released.
- ?? **Collectible** The wines are collected or bought as an investment and rarely tasted. Many buyers keep one bottle and sell the rest to cover their purchase. The problem is that it is often deep-pocketed collectors and restaurateurs who bid on the wines on the secondary auction market, further driving up prices until they soar beyond rationality.
- ?? **High scores** Scores in the mid 90s by either Robert Parker, Jr. or the *Wine Spectator* required.
- ?? **Infrequently seen in public**
- ?? **Perception of quality** This is everything, although the wines, when tasted blind against comparable quality non-cult wines, may show no distinction.
- ?? **Winemaker has a reputation** or quickly acquires one
- ?? **Hostage wines** The mailing list customer must purchase allocation yearly or be dropped unceremoniously off the list.

Besides Sea Smoke, there are only a few California Pinot Noirs (I know of none in Oregon) that warrant cult status: Aubert, Kistler, Kosta Browne, Marcassin, Peter Michael Point Rouge, Radio-Coteau, Rochioli Vineyard Designates and Sine Qua Non.

The fact is that although winemakers who achieve cult status are flattered by all of the notoriety, they would prefer to see the wine drunk by those who cherish it rather than sold by those who invest in it. As Sophie Kevany so perfectly stated in *The Journal of Fine Wine (2005)*, “The problem with escalating wine prices for desirables: When it comes time to sell, the price will exceed the value perceived by those who would actually drink the wine.”

More Mouthfeel

Andy Tan, who represents the wine arm of a large Asian wholesale distribution company, Auric Pacific Fine Wines, is also a winemaker with extensive knowledge and enthusiasm for all wines, but particularly Burgundy and Pinot Noir. His newsletter is a must read for all wine enthusiasts (write Andy at andytan@auric.com.sg to be included on his distribution list and retail wine offers). Last week's *PinotFile* featured an article on the mouthfeel or texture of Pinot Noir. After reading this feature, Andy sent me some excellent commentary and his personal opinions which I would like to summarize here.

Regarding tartaric acid, he feels that it does not give you the mouthfeel, but rather an inner-mouth energy and "cut," or pointy feel. He considers it essential to wine as it gives focus and precision.

The two main current winemaking techniques most often employed to tone down aggressive acid and tame harsher tannins, thereby creating a more silky mouthfeel in Pinot Noir, are cold soak or cold maceration (grapes and juice soak together with sulfur added to prevent fermentation) and whole cluster fermentation (grapes are not crushed). A third practice, less common, is microoxygenation (oxygen gas inserted to the must during fermentation to create a polished, seamless palate - a controversial technique that can strip a wine of its "terroir" and cause it to age prematurely). Finally, small amounts of residual sugar may add to a suave, gloss effect.

Andy notes that although a sensual, smooth palate is important, overall balance is for more important. Adequate natural acidity must be present to balance the smooth palate. According to him, some of the most important Burgundian producers are working to preserve natural acidity above everything else. This not only preserves the terroir, longevity, and color luminosity, it helps keep the wine fresh and lively on the mouth.

In summary, then, although aromatics, flavor and mouthfeel are all important to the enjoyment of fine wine, it is the natural acidity that is so critical for creating the "cut" and vibrancy. As Andy says, "Personally, I like edgy Pinots better, as it encourages one to drink more. If a Pinot Noir is too fat and rounded, it can become quite boring over time."

China Becoming Nation of Wine Drinkers

The statistics are eye-opening. China is the biggest alcohol consumer in the world. Currently they are the sixth largest producer of wine in the world and plan to compete both nationally and internationally with significant financial support from the government. About 10 wineries dominate more than 60% of the wine market in China, with 10% of China's wine sales coming from imports. According to Bloomberg News, pre-capita wine consumption rose annually 24% since 1997. Wine consumption is expected to rise 35% a year through 2008, compared to an estimated 5.4% worldwide and 16.4% in Asia.

Recently a team of international researchers have uncovered in China what appears to be the earliest evidence of deliberate winemaking on earth. The find dates from 6,000 B.C to 7,000 B.C. and was discovered by Patrick McGovern, senior research archeology scientist at the University of Pennsylvania.

According to Laurent Guinand, who authored "The Chinese Taste for Wine," in *Wines & Vines* (Dec., 2005), the Chinese wine drinking preferences and habits are different from the Western World. The Chinese often drink wine down in one gulp like a shot and like mixing it with lemon, ice or Sprite to achieve a sweeter taste. They prefer good value wines, red over white, and New World wines over Old World wines. "They usually seek sweetness in a red wine, and particularly like aromas of berries, plums and cherries. Strong woody characteristics were also appreciated." The primary reason for purchasing wine remains gift giving rather than daily consumption.


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Party Pooper

Dr. Hildegard Heyman of the University of California, Davis published a report in the March issue of the *American Journal of Enology and Viticulture* which denounces the long-held belief that wine and cheese are a marriage made in heaven. Her theory is that fat in cheese coats the mouth, dulling the taste of red wine. Serving cheese at tastings has been a ruse for retailers for a long time and apparently for good reason. Heyman's wine tasters couldn't tell the difference between fine wine and cheap plonk after eating cheese. In the study, she used a range of cheeses varying in intensity from Stilton to Emmenthal and red wines from Cabernet Sauvignon to Pinot Noir. The stronger the cheese, the more palate-dulling the effect. So if you are stuck with a so-so Pinot, break out some cheese and make the best of things.

Hospices of Sonoma Pinot Noir Barrel Auction

The recent nation's only Pinot Noir barrel auction raised more than \$350,000 for children in life-threatening circumstances. The third annual Hospices of Sonoma Charity Pinot Noir Barrel Auction raised enough money to allow ground breaking on the WCC House, a residence that will provide housing for needy families with children in Sonoma hospitals. The auction was held at goldridgepinot in Sebastopol, California and included 35 half-barrel lots of 2005 Sonoma Coast, Russian River Valley, Green Valley and Sonoma Carneros Pinot Noirs from the region's top producers. Auction goers included a mix of collectors, pinotphiles, retailers and restaurateurs eager to preview the excellent 2005 vintage.

The wines were auctioned as a ten case lot or two lots of five cases. The top five half barrels (ten 9 liter cases) were for Goldridgepinot (\$20,000 or \$2,000 per case), Kosta Browne (\$7,200), Radio Coteau (\$6,800), Lynmar (\$6,500), and Patz & Hall (\$6,000).

The three day Hospices of Sonoma concluded on Sunday, May 21 in the gardens of Iron Horse Vineyards in Sebastopol where a Paulee-style wine country luncheon was served.

Participating wineries included: De Loach Vineyards, Donum Estate, DuNah Vineyards & Winery, Dutton Estate Winery, Dutton-Goldfield Winery, Flowers Vineyard & Winery, Foppiano vineyards, Freeman Vineyard & Winery, Gary Farrell Vineyards & Wines, Gloria Ferrer Champagne Caves, goldridgepinot, Halleck Vineyards, J Vineyards & Winery, Joseph Swan Winery, Kosta Browne Winery, La Crema Winery, Landmark Vineyards, Lynmar, MacMurray Ranch, Marimar Estate, Olivet Lane, Patz & Hall Wine Company, Paul Hobbs Wines, Radio-Coteau, Russian Hill Estate Winery, Rutz Cellars, Schug Carneros Estate, Siduri Winery, Tandem Winery, TR Elliot, and Wild Hog Vineyard.