

**Pinot Noir is
the Chosen
One**

PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Devoted to Pinotaficionados

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WesMar Winery: *Scent of Pinot*

Those who read the *PinotFile* regularly know that this small boutique producer of fine Pinot Noir is very special to me. I like to refer to WesMar Pinot Noirs as FAAT, that is, sublime combinations of fruit, alcohol, acidity and tannin. It is the balance between these four components that give the WesMar wines their lovely harmony. There are two distinctive hallmarks here. First, there is consistency from one vintage to the next, and one bottle to the next, regardless of vineyard source. I can honestly say I have never had a bad bottle of WesMar Pinot. Second, the aromatics are always outrageously vibrant and distinctively Pinot Noir. I actually get more pleasure out of smelling their wines than drinking them. The scent of their Pinot Noirs is closely reminiscent of the great Williams Selyem Pinot Noirs of the early 1990s. For those of you who never experienced the Williams Selyem Pinot Noirs in their prime, the WesMar wines provide the closest incarnation of them on the wine market today.

You are probably asking at this point, “Why haven’t I heard of WesMar Pinot Noir or seen startling scores in the major trade magazines?” The fact is that WesMar founders and owners, Kirk **Wesley** Hubbard and wife, Denise **Mary** Selyem (below at Olivet Lane Vineyard) are a modest couple who shun the limelight. They do not submit their wines for comparative judging to anyone. The truth is, they don’t need to either. The quality of the wines speak for themselves.

“Terroir speaks in a very still, small voice. It’s not easy to hear it above the stentorian tones of 100% new oak, 15% alcohol, and extreme tannic extraction.”

Randall Grahm



The pair are extremely hard working and dedicated and want to focus all of their energies on winemaking and not on marketing. They are more than personable and warmly receive visitors by appointment in their modest winery at an old apple processing warehouse on Gravenstein Highway in Sebastopol. They are truly an unadulterated, honest winery.

Kirk and Denise first met in 1991 while working as managers for Costco Wholesale in the Bay Area. Denise's father, Ed Selyem, urged them to leave the corporate world and join him in the family-owned Williams Selyem Winery. They finally left together in 1995 and worked under Ed's tutelage for several years learning Pinot Noir winemaking and the business of wine. With Ed's retirement and sale of Williams Selyem in 1997, Kirk and Denise began to plan their own winery. In March, 2000, they left Williams Selyem and started their own label, WesMar (pronounced Wes - Mare). Today the two of them carry out all winemaking activities in a spotless 1500 square foot building that was formerly part of an apple processing warehouse. The two of them share all duties from hand sorting grapes, to crush, to punch downs, to bottling and finally to shipping and delivery. No employees, consultants, or brokers are involved.

What is their secret? How do they pull out the thrilling aromas, irrepressible flavors, and attractive textures? Although I spoke at length with Denise about WesMar's winemaking regimen, I really think it is the result of intuition and artistry rather than technology. Denise did offer a few clues. Generally they pick earlier than many producers because they feel the feminine aspects of Pinot Noir are best expressed at lower sugars (brix). Last year, for example, they picked two weeks earlier than anyone else sourcing the grapes from Olivet Lane Vineyard in the Russian River Valley. This turned out to be a sage move, for the Olivet Pinot required no adjustment of acidity post-fermentation. They believe that overly-ripe fruit is more singular in profile and lacks some natural fruit nuances. Also, wines made from grapes picked at high brix levels lacks natural acidity, leaving the wine flabby and short-lived. Destemming varies depending on the vineyard and vintage. Usually at least 33% whole cluster is used, with some years up to 50%. Kirk and Denise personally like the nuances and age ability that whole cluster provides, but they don't push it beyond 50% because it detracts from early drink ability that most consumers demand. No cold soak is employed and inoculation of the must with yeast is comparatively early, 24-36 hours depending on how cold the grapes are when they arrive at the winery (the warmer the grapes, the sooner the inoculation). Fermentation is short by Pinot Noir industry standards, from 7 to 10 days with an average of 9 days. Fermentation is carried out in old open top stainless fermentors that once functioned as milk containers (see below). If grapes are picked over a few days, the incoming grapes are never added to the existing must, but rather fermented separately. These practices give some hint about how Kirk and Denise achieve such bright aromatics. Denise likes this feature of their wines, happily smelling her Pinots for an extended time ("devouring the nose as she puts it) before tasting them. Gas chromatography has identified over 400 aromatic compounds in wine and somehow Kirk and Denise have managed to capture many of the best. The



ultimate compliment for a Pinot Noir, according to Denise, "is an aroma that dances in the glass."



The winemaking goal is clearly evident at WesMar. They want to produce a style of Pinot Noir that they personally enjoy drinking. "Aromatic, fruit-forward, not overly ripe, with balanced acidity, complimentary fruit tannins and subtle oak impressions, while still displaying richness of flavors, finishing with a cloying mouth feel and flavors that linger long after the wine has left your mouth." As the tagline says on the back of the WesMar t-shirts: Palate Pleasing Pinot Noir.

Although there have been only five vintages of WesMar Pinot Noir, some evaluation of age ability is available from Kirk and Denise. They have always suggested that their wines had the balance and structure to be cellared for five to seven years. This year they pulled the corks on the 2000 vintage wines. They found “wines with vibrant bouquets, lively fruit flavors, with harmonious acid, tannin and oak levels, and a seamless balance in the structure of the wines that suggests the road yet lies ahead.”

I recently tasted through the 2004 lineup of WesMar Pinot Noirs. This vintage marks the 5th Anniversary of the WesMar Winery. I apologize for not doing this sooner, as the entire production of 929 cases (including 52 cases of Chardonnay) is nearly sold out. There are 6-9 cases left of the Russian River Valley, Balletto and Olivet Lane Pinot Noirs. There is a good reason for waiting, however, as the wines are best appreciated after some time in the cellar after release (the wines were released in mid-February, 2006). It is always challenging to taste Pinot Noir when the outside temperatures are 98 degrees as it has been here in Southern California recently, but the excellence of these wines was clearly evident. The wines are sold primarily through a mailing list (www.wesmarwinery.com, 707-829-8824). The 2005 vintage goes into bottle next week and will be offered in February, 2007.

2004 WesMar Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., 395 cases, \$32. The foundation for this blend is the Oehlman Vineyard in the Russian River Valley which was bottled as a vineyard designate in 2002 and 2003. Stunning aromatics with crushed Bing cherries, spices and vanilla. How do we bottle that stuff? The wine is beautifully composed, and the black cherries, cola and tea flavors dance across the palate. Very light on its feet. The tannins are very fine. Finishes with lively acidity. Wowiee!



2004 WesMar Hellenthal Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 14.4% alc., 154 cases, \$50. Denise tells an interesting story behind this wine. For several years Kirk and Denise have pursued grapes from this well known vineyard farmed by the Hellenthal family who live on the property. Contiguous with the Hirsch Vineyard, the Hellenthal vines are 12-15 years old. Each year Kirk and Denise would drive out to the Hellenthal residence, leave a bottle of WesMar Pinot Noir at the doorstep with a note asking for grapes. Each year they would follow up with a phone call and were always told the grapes were all taken. Finally in 2004 they hit pay dirt and happily obtained some Hellenthal fruit. Denise says the fruit was incredibly nice. Again, the aromatics are spectacular here with spicy cherry, black raspberry and nutmeg notes. The nose is a dead ringer for the 1992 Williams Selyem Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir (I call it the WS nose for short). Beautiful Pinot fruit engulfs the palate with velvety richness and finishes long, soft and clean. The character of this Pinot is more Russian River than Sonoma Coast since it lacks the earthiness and edgy tannins so often seen from true Coastal fruit. My notes say unbelievable, a great, great Pinot. I guess that pretty much sums it up. Boo hoo, sold out.

2004 WesMar Balletto Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 14.3% alc., 151 cases, \$37. This bottling is 75% Balletto Vineyard fruit. John Balletto comes from a farming lineage that dates back to large vegetable farms in Sonoma in the 1970s. His home estate Balletto Vineyard is in the Goldridge area of the Sonoma Coast near Freestone. There is significant fog and breezes and the vineyard cools early in the growing season. Here we go again. This nose takes a little coaxing but the aromatics eventually arrive on stage with panache, strutting red and black Pinot fruits and spice. Plush in the mouth with luscious Pinot fruits and a little bit of Sonoma Coast earthiness. This wine is a little deeper, plumper and earthier than the others, but still is true to the house style with perfect balance and brisk acidity. Pinch me, I'm dreaming.

2004 WesMar Olivet Lane Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.4% alc., 177 cases, \$37. A staple in the WesMar portfolio from the famous heritage Pinot Noir vineyard farmed by Bob Pellegrini of Pellegrini Family Vineyards. It is becoming redundant to say it but this wine has another “Oh, my

God” nose perfumed with dark crushed stone fruits, a little nutmeg and a whiff of pie crust. In the mouth, luscious red and black fruits are highlighted by sweet vanilla and oak flavors and a good dose of cinnamon spice (Xmas cheer). There is some wet leaf and earthy notes as well. This Pinot has the most Burgundian sensibilities in the lineup and its zippy acidity portends a long healthy life in the cellar. A Surf (refreshing acidity) and Turf (earth and forest) Pinot.



A popular mnemonic for quality assessment is taught at the Master of Wine course: BLIC which stands for balance, length, intensity and complexity. Certainly the WesMar Pinot Noirs would be fine examples of BLIC. Add to that an A - BLICA - for aromatics and you have the whole package.

Grape Blossoms

I have heard that it is a wondrous experience to walk among the vines at the time of blossoming of grapes. I have always been curious about whether the perfume of these blossoms was significant enough to produce a distinctive scent identifiable with a particular varietal.

While in the Russian River Valley recently, I came across an article titled, “The Bud Break Mysteries: On the Scent of the Reluctant Grape Blossom,” written by Millie Howie and published in *Discovery* (Spring, 2006). Apparently, Andrew Walker, professor of viticulture and enology at the University of California at Davis is an expert on the matter. According to Walker, the first step in the reproduction of grapes are the formation of clusters which winter in the dormant bud until bloom starts in late March. At bloom the buds swell and floral clusters appear. These small green bumps that are a grapevine’s flower do not have petals. During bloom which lasts a week or two, the flower opens and pollen grains land on the pistil, fertilizing an egg which will develop into a pea-sized berry (what is termed set). During bloom, there is a distinctive perfume which has been described as sweet or spicy. Walker notes that it is not possible to tell a grape variety from the scent of the blossom and the aroma of the blossom does not have any similarity to the aroma or flavor of the specific grape that it develops into. So from April through May there is a heady scent in vineyards, but it would seem to be quite similar for all vines belong to the species *Vitis vinifera*.

Tasting of Older Vintages of Joseph Swan Pinot Noir

Joseph Swan was a pioneer winegrower in the Russian River Valley whose wines have proven to be remarkably age-worthy. Swan's story is well summarized on the Joseph Swan Vineyards website and in previous issues of the *PinotFile* (Volume 5, Issues 25, 28). In 1967, at the age of 45, Joe bought a run-down Zinfandel vineyard, barn and house on Laguna Road in the Russian River Valley. He planned to farm grapes and make wine after his retirement as a commercial airline pilot. He began a replanting of the vineyard to Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Cabernet in 1968. The original Pinot Noir field clonal selection was from Mt. Eden. The vines prospered and produced fine Pinot Noir and cuttings from the vineyard became widely distributed to other vineyards and were known as the Swan Clone. There are now 12 different clones in the vineyard, including some DRC suitcase clones given to Joe as a gift many years ago.

The first vintage of Joseph Swan Pinot Noir was 1973 and was produced with advice from the legendary Andre Tachelistcheff who was a friend of Joe's. Subsequently he made a string of excellent Pinot Noirs from his own vines. Despite their high quality, Joe was such a perfectionist that he never seem content. He traveled to France every year to improve his techniques. He experimented with whole cluster fermentation, manual punchdowns and the use of new French oak barrels- all unusual for California winemakers in the early 1970s. His legacy will include his popularization of the old, Burgundian wine-making methods, his search for better clones, and his openness to new ideas.

Many people can attest to the ability of his Pinot Noirs to age. Pinot Noirs from the estate vineyard often peak at 10 years. There have been sporadic reports of enthusiasts who have sampled Pinot Noirs from the 1970s that are still consistently youthfully fruitful and enjoyable.

On June 22, 2006, I attended a tasting in Palo Alto, California of 8 Joseph Swan Pinot Noirs from the 1970s and 1980s. The bottles came from the collection of Don Baumhefner (who worked with Joe for years and currently produces Pinot Noir under his own label, Copeland Creek). Don told many colorful stories about Joe. In 1983, for example, Joe was upset because too many buds were left on the vines. He walked through the vineyard cutting off at least 20% of the crop. Don walked along behind him, collecting the castoffs and made a sparkling wine out of them. He brought a couple of bottles to the event and they were excellent: straw yellow in color with good bubbles, nice yeasty, aged cheese and nut flavors. The sparkling wines had still been on yeast until opened that night. The photo below shows one of the bottles being opened with a saber (Left, Don in the yellow shirt instructs in the technique; right, an opened bottle with no injuries). 20 people attended the historic tasting.



Joe despised wines with high alcohol. For example, he hated the 1974 vintage because it had the highest alcohol. Most of the wines sampled did not state the alcohol percentage on the label. Rather the words "table wine" were used (meaning between 11.5% and 14% alcohol).

If you look closely at this photo of the 1977 Joseph Swan Pinot Noir, you will see the heavy sediment in the neck. This was evident in most bottles. Most wines had a noticeable brickish tone to their color.



My general impressions were as follows. All of the wines were light in body, displayed considerable finesse, and were balanced. Fresh fruits had not surprisingly dissipated and secondary characters and bouquet had taken over. All of them were drinkable with varying degrees of pleasure.

1986 Joseph Swan Estate Pinot Noir Labeled as Sonoma Coast Table Wine. This was still New World-like with plenty of attractive Christmas spices and good acid. My favorite (#6/8 for group vote).

1984 Joseph Swan Estate Pinot Noir Labeled Northern Sonoma. Plenty of sweet red fruits, a bit tart but not objectionable, still tannins in the finish. #7/8 for group.

1983 Joseph Swan Estate Pinot Noir Labeled Northern Sonoma Table Wine. This wine still had fruit in the nose. There was a notable peculiar taste like iodine. The most acidic wine in the lineup. #8/8 for group.

1979 Joseph Swan Estate Pinot Noir Terrific fruity nose with attractive spice. Flavors of sour cherry, graham cracker, and wet oak. My #2 wine and #2/8 for group.

1977 Joseph Swan Estate Pinot Noir A musty nose of wet leaf, mold and mint. Flavors highlighted by wood primarily. Not particularly interesting to me. #5/8 for group.

1976 Joseph Swan Estate Pinot Noir Heavy sediment. A rustic wine with cranberry, herbs and mint among the flavors. Not appealing at all to me, but #4/8 for group.

1975 Joseph Swan Estate Pinot Noir A funky nose blew off with time. Plenty of tart cherries and oak in the midpalate and finish. Good acid balance. #3/8 for group.

1974 Joseph Swan Estate Pinot Noir 15.4% alc.. Considerable sludge in the bottle. Still a lot of fruit. Notable sour cherry and wood flavors. The nose was lush with fruit. A little mint and iodine on the finish. #1/8 for group.

Don looks on below as the results of the tasting are announced. He was a good guy to share these wines.



Tasting of California Pinots 1997-2001

“Wine is made to be drunk as women are to be loved:
profit by the freshness of youth or the splendor of maturity,
but do not await decrepitude, buddy.”

Frank Sinatra

Jay Selman of Grape Radio fame holds informal monthly tastings in his offices in Tustin, California. Everyone attending brings a bottle or two and some light food and has at it. The wines are not presented blind and there is enough BS passed around the room to taint 20 cases of wine. At any rate, it is all in good fun and the results are quickly forgotten.

The most recent tasting featured California Pinot Noirs produced prior to 2001. The tasting was interesting for the vast scope of wines offered. The vintages ranged from 1997 to 2001 (someone attending did not understand that prior to 2001 did not include 2001 but we could not exclude the wine without hurting some feelings). What surprised me was that the quality of these aged Pinot Noirs was mostly abysmal. There were some Pinot critics at the tasting (notably Brian, also of Grape Radio) and they were having a grand time. I think what I noticed the most was that many of these wines aged poorly, and exhibited a paucity of interesting secondary characteristics and bouquet. Considering the hefty release price of many of these wines, this was a disappointing revelation.

The group's top three wines were: (1) **1999 Arcadian Pisoni Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir**, (2) **2000 Pisoni Pisoni Estate Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir**, and (3) **1999 Williams Selyem Ferrington Vineyard Anderson Valley Pinot Noir**. After these three wines there was no consensus with every wine receiving a vote or two from the group. Personally, my three favorites were: (1) **1999 Arcadian Pisoni Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir**, (2) **2000 Talley Rincon Vineyard Arroyo Grande Pinot Noir** and (3) **1999 J. Rochioli River Block Russian River Valley Pinot Noir**. Except for the Arcadian, none of these wines would send me searching to buy. The **2001 Arcadian Jill's Cuvee Bien Nacido Vineyard Pinot Noir** was also very good and a great wine for food. The Arcadian wines tend to have very good acidity and I am convinced that along with balance, acid is key to fine Pinot Noir. The acid backbone of Pinot Noir provides refreshment, compatibility with food and supports aging in the cellar. The wines in this tasting are listed below for reference and a few pertinent comments are included.



1997 Mt Eden Ville Vignes Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir Table wine. Last year for the original Martin Ray Pinot Noir vine plantings. Beautiful mature Pinot nose with some leather, barnyard and spice. On the austere side with plenty of acid. Tasted a few months ago out of magnum it was much better.

1997 Tantara Le Colline Vineyard Arroyo Grande Pinot Noir 14.0% alc.. Lovely aromatics but the fruit was edgy, thin and simple.

1997 Merry Edwards Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 13.9% alc.. Still retains a hefty amount of ripe fruit and tannins. High extraction here and one-dimensional. Some port flavors.

1997 Castle Durell Vineyard Carneros Pinot Noir 13.8% alc.. Brick color, oxidized, bitter, herbal, undrinkable.

1998 Talley Rosemary Vineyard Arroyo Grande Pinot Noir 14.5% A rustic wine that needs food.

1998 Flowers Pisoni Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir 13.6% alc.. Corked.

1998 Morgan Pisoni Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir Table wine. Lighter than many Pisoni bottlings. Some sweet fruit persists. The finish is all about oak and unpleasant.

1999 Arcadian Pisoni Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir 13.6% alc.. A very solid and enjoyable wine. Fresh as a daisy. Balanced, elegant, plenty of lively acid. Clearly the best wine on the table.

1999 Williams Selyem Central Coast Pinot Noir 13.9% alc.. Earthy wine with generous dose of leather and wood. Cooked, tart fruit.

1999 Truchard Carneros Pinot Noir 14.1% alc.. Enticing aromatics featuring bright Pinot fruits. Flavors do not follow suite and are dominated by stemmy/woody flavors. Smell but don't drink.

1999 Williams Selyem Ferrington Vineyard Anderson Valley Pinot Noir 13.3% alc.. A pleasant but not exceptional wine with a good acid backbone. Oak tannins were too prominent for me on the finish.

1999 J. Rochioli River Block Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.2% alc.. Earthy, Burg nose. A big boned wine with a nice mouth feel. Plenty of oak.

2000 Siduri Sapphire Hill Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.3% alc.. A pretty decent drink for oak lovers.

2000 Pisoni Estate Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir 14.3% alc.. A forward, jammy nose. Super-ripe fruit-driven wine with notable tannins. Needs a big steak.

2000 Foley Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir 14.1% alc.. Overripe, raisin dominated nose. Brown tinged. No fruit, all acid. Undrinkable.

2000 Talley Rincon Vineyard Arroyo Grande Pinot Noir 14.2% alc.. Lovely aromatics. Powerful structure with plenty of tannins. This is one to cellar another 5-10 years.

2001 Arcadian Jill's Cuvee Bien Nacido Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 13.4% alc.. An elegant wine driven by appealing cherry flavors and lively acidity on the backend. A good food wine.

2005 Kosta Browne Russian River Valley Rose A refreshing and delicious wine for summer. Everyone who sampled it loved it.

2005 Kutch Wines Amber Ridge Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (barrel sample). Very bright and appealing sweet fruit. Finishes clean. Great potential.


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Behind the Scenes: Crappy Pinot

Sometimes you just have to take one for the Crew. In the PinotFile, I only feature wines that have class and character: the good stuff at the right price. I am fully dedicated to this. Be aware, however, that there is a lot of crapola Pinot out there at absurdly elevated prices. This evening, for example, I ended up opening three bottles of expensive Cali Pinot Noir from well-known producers. I could not finish a glass of any of them. They were all of the same genre with flabby, super ripe fruit, highly oaked, and reeking of alcohol. I searched the labels for some sign of Petite Verdot added in. No refreshment here and no sign of balance. Please don't let your Pinots grow up to be Syrahs. I like Syrah and Petite Syrah for what they are, but they are a totally different animal than Pinot Noir. Just remember that the Prince is constantly screening juice so that crappy Pinot will never ever touch your tender and sensuous lips or insult your precious liver. If you drink no crappy Noir, you Pinot crappy Noir.

Recommended Summer Continuing Education

I just finished reading a captivating book about wine that filled in many of the blanks in my wine knowledge. *The Science of Wine: From Vine to Glass* is authored by well-known British wine writer, Jamie Goode, and published by the University of California Press (216 pages, hardbound, \$22 on amazon.com). The book is divided into three sections: the vineyard, in the winery, and our interaction with wine. The science presented is not so technical as to dissuade anyone with even the slightest interest in wine to thoroughly enjoy this read.

There are many terms bantered about in the wine world today and I am sure you have often wrinkled your brow and said, "What does that really mean?" Most of these terms are addressed succinctly and understandably in this book. Explanations are backed up by scientific research when appropriate. Some terms approached include minerality in wine, precision viticulture, global warming, GM crops, Phylloxera, lutte raisonnée, biodynamics, micro-oxygenation, reverse osmosis, reduction, Brettanomyces, and cork taint (TCA). Also, a thorough glossary is included with one sentence definitions of most terminology.

Here are a few gems I picked up. Experienced tasters are unable to detect more than four odors in a mixture (how often have you read a wine review where the writer lists innumerable aromas in the wine?). There is so much individual variation in how we taste wine that panel tastings where consensus is sought are doomed to failure. Most people can detect TCA at concentrations as low as five parts per trillion and some are even more sensitive! Brettanomyces is primarily a red wine problem because red wines have a high polyphenol content and generally a higher pH (both of which create a substrate appealing to brett). And finally, there is no scientific evidence that links the soil mineral composition and the flavor or aromas of wines.

