

Passion And Pinot Noir

Larry Walker

It isn't news that California Pinot Noir is earning more respect. (And that started long before the movie "Sideways" inspired a desolation of dumbed-down promotional efforts." For example, Wine International, the leading UK consumer wine magazine, recently published an article by Lynn Alley, a contributor to Wines & Vines, recognizing the quality of California Pinot.

We all know that it wasn't like that back in the day. Pinot was an afterthought, more often than not, treated as an orphan red grape to be thrown in the press and handled like any other red grape. For sure, there has always been a small group of Pinot prophets—Martin Ray, Joseph Swan in the Russian River Valley, Dick Graff at Chalone in Monterey and Josh Jensen at Calera in San Benito—to name only a few. André Tchelistcheff thought good Pinot could be made in California. Anyone who has had the good fortune to taste his exceptional 1968 Beaulieu Pinot Noir knows that he was right. But he admitted that he needed a bit of luck

At that time, Pinot was often planted in the wrong place and handled wrong in the cellar. The fact that California Pinot is now making a name for itself is, to a large extent, because winegrowers are starting to get it right when it comes to where to plant the grape, which can be very difficult, even under the best of conditions. Pinot has, in fact, been called the "heartbreak grape."

One of the new wave of California winemakers getting Pinot right is Scott Rich, owner of Talisman Vineyards. When asked why he decided to concentrate on Pinot Noir, Rich said, "I like challenges." He also had the good fortune to have a father who collected Burgundy. "I learned to love Pinot Noir," Rich said, during a tasting of his wine at Bouchaine in Napa Carneros, where he leases space for his small production lots of Pinot noir.

Rich, who started graduate work at UC Davis in 1990, said that his first winemaking job was at what was then called Mont St. John Cellars (now Madonna Estate). "I really wanted to work there because Larry Brooks



Talisman owner Scott Rich enjoys the challenge of growing and vinifying Pinot Noir.

said their Madonna Vineyard was one of the best Pinot Noir vineyards around," Rich said. (During Rich's time at Mont St. John, Merry Edwards, one of the world's Pinot Noir masters, was consulting there. How's that for getting off on the right Pinot foot?)

But it has not been all-Pinot-all-the-time. Rich put in some time at R.H. Phillips, handling all sorts of wine when that brand was just taking off, but got back to Pinot with Étude in Napa, working there with Tony Soter from 1995-2000, as well as consulting in Chile and at other California wineries. He is currently winemaker and general manager of Moraga Vineyards in Bel Air, next door to the Getty Museum, (an unlikely place for a winery) where he makes Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc. He is overseeing a new winery being built there, which he believes is the first winery to be built in metro Los Angeles since prohibition.

He released his first Talisman Pinot Noir in 1992. Talisman is a word for a charm, or an object possessing magical properties. In Rich's case, it refers to the logo on the label of his wines, which is a stylized image of a *paho*, a native American charm that was believed to protect the owner from harm.

Rich, whose mother is a Native American, said elements of the *paho* represent the circle of life and the four directions, reminding us of our place in the universe. The rays around the *paho* represent the sun, which provides energy for life and ripens the grapes, which brings us back to Pinot Noir, Rich's passion.

Having been around the wine business for way too many years, I've become more than a little cynical about the hoops people jump through to make their wines stand out in the market, but after talking with Rich, and tasting with him, I'm ready to believe there is a link between his choice of the *paho* as a symbol for his wine and his zest for Pinot noir. In a note Rich sent me by e-mail before our interview, he wrote: "The enigmatic qualities that make Pinot Noir so interesting continue to challenge my scientific and aesthetic nature."

Rich released his first vineyard-designated Pinot Noir in 2001, after making regional (Carneros and Russian River) wines. "The vineyard wines are my focus now," he said. "I like working with vineyards that are on the edge. I like to express terroir—that's the beauty of Pinot Noir—and that comes through in the more extreme vineyards."



Scott Rich's minimalist approach to making Pinot leaves him time to enjoy life with his wife, Marta.

Because he does want the vineyard to tell its story, Rich takes a minimalist approach to winemaking. "I do as little as I can get away with. Pinot Noir is such a transparent wine, it shows everything you do. I want my Pinot to reflect the vineyard, not the winemaking,"

Rich sometimes makes guest appearances at UC Davis classes. "Students will ask me, 'what do you do if your Pinot has this or that problem?' My answer is: 'Go home and have a beer. If I come back the next day, and I think there is still a problem, I'll go home that night and have a beer and think about it. And so on.' I think sometimes what we think of as a problem is just a stage in the development of the wine. Just leaving it alone may be the best thing to do."

Although Rich is aware of the "numbers" when making wine, he knows that is not what it is all about. "I prefer to let my sense tell me what is happening. Too much reliance on numbers can lead to safe wines that are not all that exciting."

For many years Rich sourced grapes mostly from Carneros, which he regards as a reliable growing area for Pinot, and one of the most uniform appellations in terms of soils, terrain and climate. "It is predictable and consistent, and the wines reflect those conditions." In 1999, he began to get grapes from the Russian River and Sonoma Coast appellations, and most recently from Sonoma Mountain, near the home he shares with his wife Marta, a partner in Talisman Cellars. He is also working at Steve MacRostie's Wildcat Mountain Vineyard, in Sonoma, the highest-elevation vineyard in Carneros, where the wind seems to blow 24 hours a day all year 'round, from all directions. "I'm very interested in those kinds of vineyards," he said. "Finding

new vineyards and new regions keeps me engaged."

Rich has two major gripes about the modern wine consumer and Pinot Noir: "Why do people worry about color in Pinot? Pinot Noir is not supposed to be inky black. And why don't people give Pinot Noir a chance to age?" To prove his point, he opened a bottle of his 1997 Carneros Pinot. Of course, 1997 isn't all that old as old wines go, but one rarely sees an 8-year-old Pinot Noir. It was a beautiful wine, all silk and lingering in the mouth and on the senses, like a Miles Davis solo. "It's a myth that Pinot Noir doesn't age. I make my wines to age, even if no one gives them a chance," Rich said. "I get bored with nothing but fruit. I want something more in a wine."

The Wines

We tasted Talisman 2000, 2001 and 2002 Pinots. The 2002 wines are just coming to market. The 2000 Carneros Pinot and the 2000 Russian River Pinot are both superb wines. The Carneros tasted brighter, more uplifted, while the Russian River showed darker fruit and a rounder finish. Rich believes that Russian River Pinot tends to be broader and more fleshy than Pinot from Carneros. "I think Russian River Pinot is what consumers consider the epitome of California Pinot Noir—big, voluptuous, ripe wines."

The 2001 Thorn Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir has good structure, but with a certain elegance in the center, leading to a

wrap-around finish. It might well be hard to distinguish from a top Burgundy in a blind tasting. Rich describes the vineyard as "one of the least hospitable sites I have ever visited." It's about five miles from Sebastopol, on the northern edge of the Petaluma gap, where Pacific winds keep the temperature low. Soils are low vigor silt. The site is virtually dry farmed, and the yield in 2001 was only 1.9 tons per acre. The vineyard was planted in 1995 to Dijon 115, Swan and Pommard clones on 1103P rootstock.

Grapes were destemmed, with about 25% retained as whole cluster. They were cold soaked until a native yeast fermentation kicked in. Part way through fermentation, a small amount of cultivated yeast was added. The wine was aged 16 months in 60% new and 40% 1-year-old French oak. Only 404 cases were produced. "The site tends to make more focused, structured wines that are akin to good Burgundies," Rich said.

The 2001 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir is from the Ted Klopp vineyard, planted on sandy/silty Goldridge soils. Clones are Swan, Dijon 115 and a Pommard selection. Native yeast started fermentation during cold soak. Grapes were destemmed into 1-ton fermenters and punched down by hand and *pigeage*. The wine was aged 10 months in 65% new French oak and 35% 1-year-old barrels. It's a pretty wine, showing black cherry and spice with a long, layered finish. Rich calls it his "mom's best pie" wine.

We tasted three wines from the 2002 vintages, young wines but showing tremendous promise. The 2002 Russian River (again from

the Klopp vineyard) showed remarkable fruit—ripe raspberry and rich black cherry that just kept on coming at you. The Sonoma Coast (Thorn Vineyard) has a darker, more

complex profile, rich and intense, the kind of wine to linger over and, more importantly, cellar for maybe 10 years. The 2002 Truchard Vineyard Carneros is all bright fruit, but with enough concentration to keep it honest. After the fruit is finished dancing across the palate, there is a lingering depth that promises happy endings.

For more information go to www.talismanwine.com.

