

Pinot Noir: Only Sexual Analogies can do it Justice

PinotFile

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Talisman Cellars: Pinot Terroir-ist

When you meet friendly Scott Rich, he strikes you as a rugged mountain man. The truth is, he loves the challenge of working vineyards in unusual and harsh locations. He says, "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." For example, he has labored at Steve MacRostie's Wildcat Mountain Vineyard in Sonoma, the highest vineyard in Carneros, where the wind blows from all directions practically all of the time. One of his current sources of Pinot Noir, Thorn Vineyard in the Sonoma Coast, is only five miles from Sebastopol, but is a very inhospitable site.

Scott has an impressive winemaking resume. He made the wines at Etude with Tony Soter from 1995 to 2000, consulted with numerous wineries including Carneros Creek, worked harvests in Chile, and made the wines (Cabernet and Sauvignon Blanc) as well as overseeing the construction of a new winery at Moraga Vineyards in Bel Air, California. But it was his desire for true personal artistic expression that led him, along with his wife Marta, to found Talisman Cellars in 1992.

At U.C. Davis, where Scott Rich guest teaches, the students will ask him what he does when his Pinot has a problem in its development. He tells them: "Go home and have a beer and think about it. 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."



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

(Wines & Vines, Feb, 2006)

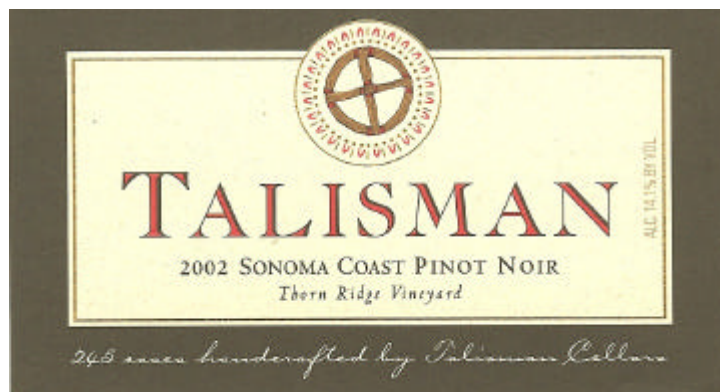
Talisman is a word for a charm and the Talisman logo on the label is a stylized representation of the *paho*, a Native American charm that has been imbued with the power to protect one from harm. The name and logo are a tribute to Scott's mother who is a Native American. The *paho* features a circle of life and the four directions showing our place in the universe. The rays around the edge represent the sun, which gives the energy for life on earth and allows the grapes to ripen.

Scott released his first Talisman Pinot Noir in 1992, and he has been on a quest ever since to find sources for Pinot Noir grapes that have "unique site characteristics and the potential to convey distinctive and singular terroirs." One of the characteristic features that has drawn Scott to Pinot Noir is that it expresses itself uniquely from different vineyards. Initially he sourced grapes from Carneros, making a regional Carneros Pinot Noir. By 1999, he began to make a Russian River Valley Pinot Noir from Ted Klopp's Klopp Ranch Vineyard off Guerneville Road near Dehlinger and Kistler vineyards. In 2001 he made the switch from regional wines to vineyard-designate wines with the release of Ted Klopp's Thorn Vineyard located on the northern edge of the Petaluma Gap in the Sonoma Coast. In 2003 and 2004, he found still more new sources including Engel Vineyard on Sonoma Mountain and Wildcat Mountain Vineyard in Carneros. Currently he uses custom-crush facilities at Bouchaine Winery to craft his Pinot Noirs.

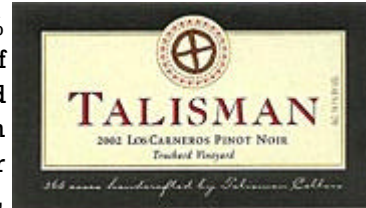
At Etude, Scott needed to craft Pinot Noirs that were ready to drink on release, for over 75% of the production went to restaurants. With the Talisman wines, he can create Pinot Noirs that have ageability. He says, "I make my wines to age, even if no one gives them a chance." It is the secondary characteristics of Pinot Noir that develop with cellaring that hold the most interest for him. The tasting notes which follow are a testament to the interest that develops in older Talisman Pinot Noirs. Opened bottles of wines from more recent vintages were still excellent 3 days later.

Scott is not a fan of jelly-jar blockbusters. If you prefer muscular plum puddings with alcohol and oak aromas under massive fruit, you will not like his Pinot Noirs. On the other hand, if you seek classic Pinot Noirs that are balanced, exquisite, gorgeous and pure, you are in store for a few winegasms after popping some Talisman corks. Many wine drinkers equate intensity of color in a wine with quality or flavor. With Pinot Noir there is no such equation. The greatest Pinot Noir I have ever drank, a 1990 DRC Romanee Conti, was as transparent as a red negligee, yet it possessed more layers of complexity and interest than any Pinot Noir I have had from the dark side.

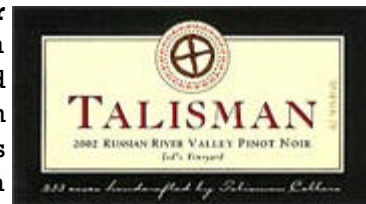
Scott was gracious enough to allow me to taste through a vertical of Talisman Pinot Noirs from 1997 to 2002. I spent a lot of time with these wines and I can tell you that these are consistently elegant examples of Pinot Noir that do reflect their origins. The Carneros wines were more old school Carneros style with dried cherries, herbal, exotic wood and earthy notes which add interest with age. The Russian River Valley Pinot Noirs were more fruit-forward with characteristic voluptuous red fruits, Asian spices and cola. The Sonoma Coast bottlings had tightly wound acidity, more backbone and grit and full dark fruit flavors. I think it is a tribute to Scott's minimalistic winemaking practices that he is able to bring out the distinctive features of each *terroir*.



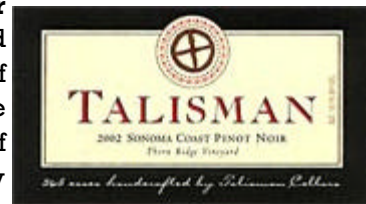
2002 Talisman Truchard Vineyard Los Carneros Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., 365 cases, \$38. The Truchard Vineyard has been a reliable source of Pinot Noir for a long time. It is located close to Brown Ranch Vineyard (Saintsbury) and Hyde Vineyard in Los Carneros. The grapes came from two blocks of the Truchard Vineyard: an established planting of over twenty-year old vines and a third--bearing-year block. Clones are Swan, Pommard, Dijon 115 and 777. Aged 16 months in new and one-year-old French oak barrels. This is a beauty that actually looks like Pinot Noir. Everything here is gentle and subtle. Plenty of dark cherries, herbs, chocolate and a kiss of oak. The wine finishes cleanly with racy acidity. A delicious sucker for immediate gratification.



2002 Talisman Ted's Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., 233 cases, \$38. The vineyard, planted in 1994, is located in the rolling hills just west of Laguna de Santa Rosa. The climate is cool and vigor of the vines is controlled by irrigation. Clones include Swan selection, Pommard and Dijon 115. Yield is 2.4 tons per acre. The wine is aged in 50% new, 40% one-year-old French oak barrels. The wine has a lovely perfume of cherry pie and spice. The opulent dark cherries are enhanced by gregarious Asian spices, licorice and cola. A sweet finish with dusty tannins leaves a nice impression. This is an opulent wine that tasted terrific two days after opening.



2002 Talisman Thorn Ridge Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., 245 cases, \$44. This vineyard lies in a rugged, cold, and foggy location on the edge of the Petaluma Gap at the lowest point of California's Coastal Range. Ted Klopp farms this desolate outpost. The soils are low-vigor and water is very limited. This Pinot is full of character and just plain terrific. Harmonious and balanced with a velvety mouth feel. A lot of subtle Pinot flavor featuring red and dark berries, cherries and earthiness. This is a wine that needs some time and attention to show its charms. But give it some air and it becomes silky and sensuous. You can even enjoy it as it evolves over several days (it was delicious from the opened bottle three days later, becoming less about fruit and more about interesting notes of leather, tobacco, exotic wood and wet leaves).



2001 Talisman Cathy's Cuvee Carneros Pinot Noir 13.5% alc., 81 cases, sold out. While Scott and Marta were bottling their 2001 Carneros Pinot Noir in 2003, they learned of the tragic death of a dear friend, Kathy Polucha-Kessler, who was one of seven skiers killed in an avalanche in British Columbia. The Richs' bottled this special wine made from the grapes of Las Brisas Vineyard in Carneros. A portion of the proceeds from the sale of this wine went to the Truckee Donner Land Trust, a cause that Kathy espoused. This was a challenging wine for me - a Jekyll and Hyde Pinot. Initially it had really no aromas and was flat, bitter and stemmy. However, decanting the wine and waiting a couple of hours brought forth an interesting Pinot Noir which actually was even better two days later. The nose blossomed with earthy cherries and nutmeg. A silky platform developed with flavors of cinnamon-laced cherries, leather, spice, mushrooms and sandalwood. An argument for giving wines time to open up.

2001 Talisman Thorn Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 13.5% alc., 404 cases, sold out. The 2001 vintage was marked by a cold, damp spring and the worst frost since 1980. As a result, yields were very small (1.9 tons-per-acre). This Pinot offers attractive aromas of cherries and warm cookie dough. The fruit is enhanced with notes of earth, mushrooms and *sauvage*. The structure is firm but the style is elegant and silky. A rustic, Burgundian-styled wine that takes awhile to come around. Three days later the edges softened and it was still pumping out flavors.

2001 Talisman Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 13.5% alc.. Don't be fooled by the color of this wine. Almost transparent, it is well-stocked with flavor. A spicy nose leads to delicate notes of cherry, raspberry, leather and spice. Very feminine, if not a little too light. The prominent acidity may not appeal to everyone.

2000 Talisman Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 13.5% alc., 300 cases. The grapes come from Klopp Ranch Vineyard probably made most famous by Merry Edwards. Aged 10 months in 65% new French oak. Elegance with a capital E. The nose is weighty with cherries and toasty oak. The sappy red cherry fruit is tinged with mocha and spice and flows over the palate with a refined mouth feel. The lingering finish is lip-smacking. Once this wine lands its hooks into you, there is no tearing away. A reference wine for neophytes trying to find out what the excitement about aged Pinot is all about. Excellent!

2000 Talisman Carneros Pinot Noir 13.5% alc., 280 cases. The grapes were sourced from two different blocks of the Truchard Vineyard. This Pinot has more body and structure than the RRV bottling of the same vintage. The nose is appealing with sweet, ripe fruit and earthy spices. The red and dark fruits are highlighted by earth and underbrush. Notable tannins still persist on the oaky finish. The next day, the finish had noticeably softened and the tannins were beautifully integrated.

1999 Talisman Carneros Pinot Noir 13,5% alc., 331 cases. The 1997-1999 wines have a very slight brickish color. The nose is very funky initially but this soon blows off. The hardy flavors of wet leaf, rich baking chocolate, cinnamon spice, and vitamin tension are satisfying and even better the next day. The mouth feel is like satin.

1998 Talisman Carneros Pinot Noir 13% alc., 171 cases. A nice hint of spiced raisin and licorice in the nose. Full compote of cherries, herbs and leather which picks up steam with air time. Plenty of stuffing left and thoroughly enjoyable. Impressive for a difficult vintage. A Hugh Hefner wine: showing a little age but still perky.

1997 Talisman Carneros Pinot Noir 13% alc., 267 cases. Astonishingly fresh and alive upon opening. I had to keep looking at the label to be sure this was from 1997. Great body, full mouth feel, perfect balance, nice acid backbone. The nose offers a hint of port and cinnamon toast. Cranberries, rose petal, herbs, licorice and mint in profusion. A complete wine. Drink this Pinot blind and you might think it is a recent vintage. This beauty lost a little intensity over time - forget the foreplay and drink up.

Talisman Pinot Noirs can be purchased on the website at www.talismanwine.com. The phone number is 707-996-3705. A limited number of older, library wines are available by contacting Scott. Talisman was one of the featured Pinot Noir producers at this year's World of Pinot Noir in Shell Beach, California. Decanting the more recent vintages will add to their appeal. Drinking any of these Pinots with food will set your soul on fire. Deft winemaking here, bro.