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Behind the Scenes at Etude

Interview and Tasting with Scott Rich of Etude



BUSY WINEMAKER SCOTT RICH makes more than 5 different wines for the Etude label, plus 3 different cuvées of his own *Talisman* Pinot Noir.

NOTE: Soon after I wrote this article, Scott Rich left Etude to become winemaker for Cameros Creek – a winery in nearby Cameros, long known for its Pinot Noir. He will continue to make and market his own Talisman wines.

(April 3, 2001) IN THE LAST TEN YEARS, the wines of Etude have gone from strength to strength and their flagship Cab in particular has been a consistent show-stopper. Much of the credit deservedly goes to proprietor Tony Soter, who launched the label while he wasn't consulting for the likes of Spotteswood and Araujo.

But today we'll meet Etude's mystery man -- Scott Rich, who actually makes the wine now. Scott not only crafts more than 5 different wines for Etude, but turns out his own superb Pinot Noir under the Talisman label, and more besides.

Let's talk with him now, as we taste some new and upcoming releases:

APJ: *How long have you been with Etude, Scott?*

SR: I joined up with Tony in 1995 and started making the Etude wines in that vintage. Then in 1997, I also started making wines here at Etude for Moraga Vineyards.

APJ: *Who's Moraga?*

SR: Interesting story. The vineyard is actually down in Bel Air.

APJ: *Bel Air? You don't mean the neighborhood next door to Beverly Hills?*

SR: Yes I do! The vineyard is right next to the Getty Museum. They grow Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc. We make both wines for them.

APJ: *Don't they have a problem with Pierce's disease down there?*

SR: Yes, they're always replanting part of the vineyard.

APJ: *How are you dealing with the quarantine?* [NOTE: In an effort to keep the glassy-winged sharpshooter spreading North, agricultural shipments from Southern California are being carefully monitored.]

SR: It used to be pretty easy to handle things by remote control. Anytime we wanted to sample the grapes, they'd FedEx them up here overnight. But we're managing. Now we crush and press the grapes down there -- then truck the juice north to ferment and make the wine.

Discussions turn back to Etude as we taste the ***+1999 Etude Pinot Blanc Carneros**. It's apple-scented, with a biting attack and initially it's a little astringent on the palate. Then it broadens and shows flavors of apple and bread,

finishing pretty well.

APJ: *Where do you get the grapes for this Pinot Blanc?*

SR: From Shafer's Red Shoulder Ranch in Carneros. The vines are 15 years old.

APJ: *Shafer's own Red Shoulder Chardonnay is non-malolactic. Is this too?*

SR: Yes. We barrel-ferment it in 30% new oak -- with 70% fermented in stainless steel barrels. Then we leave it on the lees until bottling.

Now we pour the ****1999 Etude Pinot Gris**. It's similar in some ways to the Pinot Blanc, but seems a rung up on the quality ladder. Riper, fuller and longer, with a nice thick texture. Apple and pear flavors mingle, and the finish is pleasingly creamy.

APJ: *This will make a lovely restaurant selection. Also non-malolactic?*

SR: Yes, but the winemaking is a little different. For one thing, all the fermentation is done in stainless steel barrels.

APJ: *How do you stop the fermentation?*

SR: Sulfur dioxide. The grapes all come from Lee Hudson's Vineyard in Carneros.

APJ: *I notice that you don't have any Rosé in the lineup today. I used to be a big fan of the Etude Rosé of Pinot Noir. Don't you make it anymore?*

SR: No, we stopped making it a while back.

APJ: *Why is that?*

SR: Basically, because we're getting better in the vineyard with Pinot Noir.

APJ: *You mean you don't need to do a "bleeding" anymore to get your concentration?*

SR: Right. The Rosé was a by-product. But now no adjustment is needed.

It's time to start tasting Pinot Noirs. We begin with Scott's own ***+1998 Talisman Pinot Noir Carneros**. Medium ruby in color, it's got pleasing aromas of ripe red cherries, good cherry-flavored fruit on the palate and a decent finish. A nice wine in a tough vintage for Carneros.

By contrast, the ****1999 Talisman Pinot Noir Carneros** is a bigger and more complex wine. The color is darker, the aromas are more penetrating and there's a sprinkle of cinnamon and allspice in the flavor profile. Moderate but balanced tannins tingle your palate, and I would guess this wine will taste even better in six months to a year. The finish is very good.

APJ: *I like this '99 a lot. What vineyards did it come from? How much is available?*

SR: It's all from Truchard. I made 300 cases.

Scott's ****+1999 Talisman Pinot Noir Russian River Valley** is my favorite of the three. The nose is really seductive, with a slight fragrance of rose petals. There's lots of delicious black cherry flavor on the palate, and the texture is silky and supple. Sexy stuff.

APJ: *This is terrific! Reminds me a little of Dehlinger.*

SR: The fruit comes from the Klopp Vineyard, which is near the Dehlinger and Kistler Vineyards.

APJ: *Is it available now?*

SR: We'll be releasing it in August of 2001.

APJ: *How much will it cost?*

SR: My suggested retail for both the Carneros and Russian River Valley is \$32.

APJ: *Great! I'll be looking for some.*

Now we move onto the **1999 *-Etude Carneros Pinot Noir**. This is a friendlier, fleshier, more forward wine than the '99 Talisman Carneros, with very ripe cherry flavors that verge on plummy. The mouthfeel is a strong suit of this wine -- very smooth and full.

APJ: *Tell me a little about what you're doing here.*

SR: Well, to start with, it's crucial to know that 77% of this wine is destined for restaurants. So when I came on board, Tony told me that my mission was to improve the wine -- but to make sure it would be approachable early on.

APJ: *Tastes to me like you're doing both. What's the oak treatment for the Etude Pinot Noir?*

SR: It's 60% new oak, but it doesn't age there for long. We bottle it just before harvest of the following year.

APJ: *That's interesting, because the oak is not that obtrusive. Do you filter?*

SR: We don't tie our hands. The decision is made on a case-by-case basis. Some wines will benefit, some won't.

Our final Pinot Noir is the ****1997 Etude Heirloom Pinot Noir**. This is a fascinating wine, worlds apart from anything else in the PN lineup. The nose is strongly influenced by cola and allspice, and there's more cola and spice on the palate. It's got lots of presence on the palate and an excellent finish. Quality-wise it's outstanding, but be prepared for exotic flavors.

APJ: *Wow! What's going on here? Why do you call it "Heirloom?"*

SR: It's a fascinating project. It's made from what we call legacy grapes -- clones that are no longer in vogue. But they're grown on some really extraordinary sites, and we think the results are very special. Ready to taste some Cabernet now?

APJ: *Sure am! You know I've been buying and drinking Etude Cabernet Sauvignon in every vintage since 1991. I loved the 1997 -- the quality is better than ever -- but the price has gone up so much, I can't drink it as much as I'd like to.*

SR: I certainly hear you about the price, but here's the context. You've got lots of Napa Valley Cabs out there commanding even higher prices, and we think Etude is up with the best of them.

APJ: *No argument about the quality.*

SR: Well, we've found that if the prices are too low, we tend not to be taken seriously by reviewers. If you want to be discussed alongside the very best wines, you have to be in the same price category.

APJ: *I've heard that from others and I guess there must be some truth to it. I also know you're not charging as much as some. But listen, if prices ever come down, I promise I'll take you even more seriously!*

Certainly, the *****1998 Etude Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley** is a serious success for the vintage. It's deep black, with aromas of licorice, chocolate and lots of blackcurrant. On the palate, the tannins are big but very smooth, and the finish is long.

APJ: *Scott, the Etude Cabernet style is sooo rich. It's got structure, but the tannins are so sweet and supple, it's irresistible right now. How do you manage the tannins so well?*

SR: Well, to start with, we get all our fruit from benchland vineyards -- these are the areas higher up than the valley floor, but not too high up on the hillsides.

APJ: *So you figure that if you go too high, the tannins may get too tough?*

SR: Something like that. The benchlands seem to get everything just right for us.

APJ: *Where in particular did you get the grapes for the '98?*

SR: Two different vineyards. About 30% came from a vineyard on the Oakville Bench and the remaining 70% came from the lower slopes of Mt. St. Helena.

APJ: *What about the winemaking? What was your strategy?*

SR: Well, we start with a 2 day cold soak, adding a *small* amount of cultured yeast, just to kick-start the fermentation.

APJ: *Why kick-start the fermentation? Why is that necessary?*

SR: Native yeasts can be tricky -- because you never have just one native yeast. You'll have whatever happens to be present in your vineyard and your cellar, and various yeasts will kick in and out and different times.

APJ: *That's fascinating. I never thought out those implications.*

SR: Plus, always bear in mind that *water extracts softer tannins than alcohol does*...and you'll always have less alcohol in the early part of your fermentation. So you want to emphasize that *early* part. That's when we keep the tanks warmer and do a lot of pumping over.

APJ: *I think I get it. Do your pumping over when there's still a lot of water and you'll get more supple tannins.*

SR: Right. For supple tannins, you want to pump over and emphasize heat at the *start*, not the end of the fermentation.

APJ: *How about your clones?*

SR: There are four different clones represented in our 1998 Cabernet Sauvignon. We've got 04, 337, plus clonal selections from Spotteswood and Martha's Vineyard.

APJ: *I remember that the Shafer Hillside Vineyard also has a large amount of Spotteswood clone.*

SR: *Want to taste the 1999 now?*

APJ: *Oh yeah!*

The *****+1999 Etude Cabernet Sauvignon** is a while yet from release, but it seems pretty clear to me this is a big winner. Very similar to overall character and flavor to the 1998, it's understandably a little less evolved and less integrated with its oak, but a big wine with a walloping finish. Great juice!

For more information about Etude wines and howto obtain them, write to Etude Wines, P.O. Box 3382, Napa, Calif. 94558. Telephone: (707) 257-5300. Fax: (707) 257-6022.

[Top of page](#) [Return to interviews contents page](#)

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[Main Contents](#) [Under \\$16](#) [Search](#) [Blog](#)