

PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinot Noir

Namasté Vineyards: Yin-Yang Pinot

There is plenty of Pinot Noir out there, but it is the small boutique producers who labor passionately to produce high quality and unique Pinot Noir that attract my attention. Namaste Vineyards is a small winery located in the southern part of the Willamette Valley in the town of Dallas, close to Corvallis. The entrepreneurial spirit here comes from Chris and Sonia Miller, a young couple with a dream who purchased 200 acres in the Willamette Valley in 2001, and Dave Masciorini, a native of Sonoma, who converted the old hay barn on the property into a luxury home and designed and constructed an onsite winery.

The word Namaste has its origins in eastern practices and translates to “the spirit of within one, honors the spirit within you.” The yin-yang symbol on the label reflects the spirit of peace, balance, and harmony the winery stands for. The tasting room is open daily and visitors are welcomed to the estate which is a breathtaking combination of rolling hillsides, wooded acreage, and views from every vantage point. Currently 32 acres are planted to Pinot Noir and several white varieties. Some vines are 25 years old and crop loads are kept to around two tons per acre. The small lots of Pinot Noir are aged in a combination of American, Hungarian, and French oak.

2003 Namaste Vineyards Abundance Block Pinot Noir 12.5% alc., 176 cases, \$20. Grapes from Dijon 115 block of Pinot Noir and aged in previously-filled Burgundian barrels. Like a ballet dancer— graceful, smooth, eye-catching. Lighter-styled with attractive nose of Pinot fruits, spice and cream. This would be the blonde of the trio— not a lot of substance, but attractive.

2003 Namaste Vineyards Prosperity Block Pinot Noir 13% alc., 164 cases, \$25. More, more, more of the good stuff. More fruit, more interest, more complexity. Tastes bigger than 13% alcohol. Aftertaste is appealing. This would be the brunette of the trio— a lot of spunk and charm.

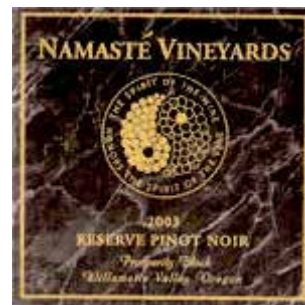
2003 Namaste Vineyards Reserve Pinot Noir 13% alc., 97 cases, \$30. Wow! 25 year old vines. A terrific mouthfeel and a lovely, long finish that has a very attractive gingerbread spice flavor. This is really good. Probably the redhead of the trio— flashy, dramatic, and uniquely eye-catching.

Well-priced, hand-crafted, superb Pinot Noirs from a great vintage in Oregon. Burgundian *je ne sais quoi*. Highly recommended. 503-623-4150, namastevineyards.com.

If You Drink
No Noir, You
Pinot Noir

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Aussie Larry McKenna Knows Pinot

Larry McKenna hails from Adelaide, Australia and is one of the most outstanding Pinot Noir winemakers American wine consumers have never heard of. His wine epiphany occurred while tasting Pinot Noir in Martinborough, New Zealand, in 1983. Shortly thereafter, he became the winemaker at Martinborough Vineyards. Known affectionately as “The Professor”, he has furthered the cause of Pinot Noir both in the New and Old World and is well-admired for bringing New Zealand viticulture and winemaking to world-class levels. In 1998, his Martinborough Reserve Pinot Noir won the trophy for the top Pinot Noir at the International Wine & Spirits competition.

In 1998 McKenna teamed up with Robert Kirby of Village Roadshow Movie Production fame and the two founded Escarpment. A vineyard was planted at Te Muna (Maori for secret or special place) one valley over from Martinborough and adjacent to Craggy Range. Some three acres of the vineyard was planted densely, crowding 6600 vines into an hectare. (the rest of Escarpment is planted at 3300 vines per hectare). The densely-crowded block will be bottled separately as a reserve, single vineyard Pinot Noir to be released soon. The production facilities at Escarpment are yet unfinished but will be state-of-the-art.

McKenna has also had a consulting winemaking role at Yabby Lake, the new winery and vineyards on the Australian Mornington Peninsula owned by the Kirby family. (see the *PinotFile*, Jan 23, 2005). Yabby Lake has forty hectares planted to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay along Tuerong Road. In addition, McKenna is involved in producing a Northern Rhone style shiraz in Heathcote (the shiraz here is produced using many of the techniques traditionally reserved for Pinot Noir including punch-downs in open-top fermenters, gentle extraction, and minimal racking). Sonier's former winemaker, Tod Dexter, is also collaborating with McKenna in the wine-making duties at Yabby Lake and Heathcote.

2003 Escarpment Martinborough Pinot Noir 13% alc., \$35. A warm, muscular and heady Pinot Noir. The color is a gorgeous shade of burgundy. The taste features plenty of dark fruits with earth, citrus and smoke. A nice cherry-toned finish features a high-toned acid backbone. This wine needs decanting or some time to soften and smooth out. Website: escarpment.co.nz. Limited availability in the United States.



2003 Yabby Lake Mornington Peninsula Pinot Noir 14.3% alc., 2,000 cases. Vineyard clones are MV6 (Australian), 114, 115, D4V2 (Pommard). The second vintage from 4-year-old vines but what an incredible Pinot. This wine has the refinement and breeding of a great Pinot Noir. It reminded me of the Williams Selyem 1992 Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir— one of my all-time favorites. The first sip made my knees weak and tears almost welled-up in my eyes. My God, the Aussies have done it. Really indescribable except that the fruit flows over the tongue in waves and leaves you with a smile. Maybe not the persistent finish of a great grands cru Burgundy, but a damn good Pinot. Mercy. Yabby Lake will be imported to the US by Paterno Impots beginning in August. Website: yabbylake.com.



Burgundy 2003: Worth the Hype?

Some of the red Burgundies from the wild and crazy 2003 vintage in France are beginning to appear on retailer's shelves and futures offers are now available. The vintage was marked by early frosts and then by extreme heat (hottest since 1893) resulting in reduced yields. Lowered quantities combined with the rising Euro has sent prices up, up, and away and severely stretched the cost/value ratio. In spite of this there is considerable hype about the quality of the 2003 vintage. So what is the skinny?

Retailers say: Paul Root of Root's Cellar in Healdsburg feels they are "the perfect hybrids. The wines possess the rich, forward fruit which we associate with West Coast— ie Russian River/Sonoma Coast/Central Coast— while adding the ageability, acid-pH balance, and feminine strength of the best examples from France." Steve Zenotti at the Wine Exchange in Orange (California) says that "the reds we have tasted so far have ranged from curious to monumental. Most have saturated color, fleshy texture, and are rather dense for Pinot Noir if not as bright of fruit. We have had some mind-blowing stuff, but even those are far from what you would call typical Burgundy. We joke that some of them are like Burgundy soup...some concentrate that requires water to be added before serving! But those are as lavish, gregarious, and fabulously sexy as any Pinots we have ever had. But they are also freaks. It is our opinion that the American press and the American public will by and large love these, and we expect the press to anoint a few holy grails. Our take so far is check out the lesser sites because those sites are 'lesser' because they don't always get lusciously ripe. It's hard not to like the best examples from 2003, but are they 'Burgundy'? 2003 is most like 1990, only riper."

The press says: Bruce Sanderson from *Wine Spectator Online* feels "the wines will become legendary. I couldn't get over the freshness in the reds...the richness of the tannins...these wines express more black fruit than red flavors in general (think California)...most growers agree they will be long-lived. Being 'New World'-like, they are drinking great right now. The grapes were very ripe in this vintage, supported by dense, mature tannins...very concentrated with flavor and color. Unfortunately the small quantities combined with the weak dollar will make the wines very, very expensive.

The wine critics say: Jancis Robinson commented that "No Burgundian will ever forget the summer of 2003 (and I suspect no Burgundy lover will forget tasting the wines). Trains melted, streams dried up. Wine producers moved their beds into the cool of their cellar in search of sleep. The first thing to say is that this truly was and is a quite exceptional vintage. The wines take Burgundy's notorious capriciousness to new limits." Allen Meadows (aka the "Burghound" at Burghound.com, the acknowledged world's top Burgundy critic) after returning from France in April said "I found plenty of atypical and downright weird burgundies, but the most amazing discovery was that despite the extreme conditions, the underlying terroir is slowly beginning to emerge. It is a great vintage for lower level wines (ie Bourgogne) which have more concentration, power, and size than usual. Some wines are too ripe and extracted. Quantities are 40-60% less and with the rising Euro, the wines are expensive." He cautions about the variability of the vintage, not nearly as consistent as 2002. Also, the high prices stretch the price/value ratio.

If you plan to purchase some of the better wines from the 2003 vintage, it is a good idea to rely on a dependable and knowledgeable retailer who you trust and has tasted the wines or subscribe to a reliable reference such as the Burghound.com newsletter. The advantage of the Allen Meadows' Burghound.com newsletter is that he has no axe to grind, states the facts directly, and his impressions are written without superfluous and extravagant publicity statements. To play it safe and thrifty, buy the 2002s while they are still available.





“Vita brevis, vino longis”. All of the tyrants and troublemakers who stomped across this Earth eventually fade from memory, but the vineyards they marched past keep producing great wine, just as they have done for centuries. The vineyards have outlasted Caesar, Napoleon, the Nazis, and they will outlast us. Musician Al Stewart spoke to the human value and enduring quality of wine: “I have looked back at people in history who were wine buffs and was very pleased to see people like Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Winston Churchill. And then I looked at who the teetotalers were and it was a roll call of horrible people like Hitler, Pol Pot, and the Ayatollah Khomeini.”



Maison Lucien Le Moine: Gargiste Negociant

Maison Lucien Le Moine is a new micro-negociant (“gargiste”) firm that has burst onto the scene recently with great acclaim. The firm was founded by Mounir Saouma in 1999. Saouma is of Lebanese origin, and spent several years in training as a Trappist monk before directing his energies to wine. For six years he made wine for a French monastery in Isreal before moving to Burgundy. The name of the firm is a play on words: Lucien is the French equivalent of Mounir, and Le Moine translates as ‘the Monk’. Pierre Rovani, writing in *The Wine Advocate*, says “This bright, hard-working, extroverted man has created in a few short years, one of Burgundy’s finest independent negociant firms.”

He works with top organic and biodynamic growers in the Cote D’Or. All of the wines are matured in 100% new Seguin Moreau oak, which is toasted specifically to the requirements of the individual cru. While in barrel the wines remain in contact with their lees, are gently stirred 3 or 4 times a month, and not racked until bottling, which takes place by hand. Fermentations are extended often into the summer following the vintage.

Only 65 barrels, covering 31 1er and Grand Crus of both red and white, were produced in the 2002 vintage. There are only an average of two barrels of each wine or about 50 cases! The wines are more terroir-driven than many estates. Winex.com has the 2002 Chambolle Les Charmes (\$79) and the 2002 Clos de la Roche (\$90). Also try wine-searcher.com

