

PinotFile[®]

The FIRST Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinot Noir

IPNC - Dirt Matters

I am a little late getting this issue of the *PinotFile* written as it has taken a couple of days for my head to clear. The onslaught of great Pinot Noir at the 19th Annual International Pinot Noir Celebration (IONC) in McMinnville, Oregon left me delirious. It reminded me of that song from the 1950s: "Sugar (Pinot) in the morning, Sugar (Pinot) in the evening, Sugar (Pinot) at suppertime, Be my little sugar (Pinot), and Love me all the time."

The setting for this wondrous event is bucolic Linfield College, an intimate campus marked by majestic oak trees, stately brick buildings, and ubiquitous hanging petunias. The total of 650 conferees included 125 representatives of the 65 featured wineries. In addition, there were 45 guest chefs to prepare the gourmet fare assisted by staff from their restaurants and 40 other professional and amateur chefs who volunteer their time for the IPNC. Over 50 volunteers from all over the United States work throughout the Celebration in the background insuring that the "dirty work" of setting up and cleaning up goes smoothly. Everyone seems transformed by the ambience of the event. Lively conversation spawned by a spirited passion for Pinot Noir leads to multiple new friendships. There is no room for competition or judging wines at this event. It is a true celebration of Pinot Noir, offering the wine lover the chance to discover the many different styles of Pinot Noir and the colorful people behind the wines.

Since the first IPNC in 1987, over 10,000 pinotphiles have made a pilgrimage to this occasion. The IPNC has hosted 118 winemakers from France, 23 winemakers from New Zealand, 12 from Australia, 11 from Italy, 8 from Germany, 7 from Switzerland, 5 from Canada, 3 from South Africa, 2 from Chile, and one each from Austria, England, Israel and Spain, for a total of 193 foreign wineries. Guest speakers at the IPNC have included such wine notables as Lalou Bize-Leroy, Jancis Robinson, Robert Parker, Remington Norman, Michael Broadbent and Christophe Roumier. Attendees have the opportunity to taste more than 250 wines at each Celebration (and I failed miserably, losing track around 175). The IPNC is the granddaddy of Pinot Noir conferences with spin-offs now held in California, Tokyo, Australia, and New Zealand.

The opening ceremonies is held at an outdoor amphitheater in front of a grand old oak tree where some of the world's greatest Pinot Noir winemakers are introduced. The photo below hints at the setting and shows Tony Soter (hat) and Jim Clendenon introducing themselves at the podium

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I saw a t-shirt in Oregon with the inscription across the front: "It's all about the money". The word money had been crossed out and the word Pinot inserted. This t-shirt summarized perfectly the lives of the people who toil day in and day out as grape farmers and vigneron. The harsh reality is that growing and making Pinot Noir is expensive and profits are small. The majority of producers are just not in it for the money. Many wine people told me that the payoff is the lifestyle. The closing remarks of the Conference echoed this sentiment, when Rob Stuart said, "Pinot Noir is all about a passion and a lifestyle. It's not about money."



This year for the first time, proceeds from the IPNC are supporting Salud, an Oregon program that provides medical and dental care to seasonal agricultural workers.

One of the themes of this year's Conference was dirt or what the French more eloquently call *terroir*. A film titled "The Real Dirt on Pinot Noir" was created by Matt Giraud and Mike Corrigan especially for this year's event. This beautiful documentary reviews the geological history of the *terroir* of Burgundy, Oregon and New Zealand. Volcanoes, glaciers and shifting oceans on this earth millions of years ago has shaped the current geology, resulting in today's terrain and soil composition in the vineyards. A few generalizations were presented for each region. In New Zealand, the alluvial soils lead to Pinot Noirs that are structured similar to Pomard and Gevrey-Chambertin with typical dark colors. Wines from the Central Otago region of New Zealand tend to be more elegant. In Oregon, there are basically two soil types: volcanic and sedimentary. There is no calceric rock found in Oregon that is typical of the Cote d'Or in Burgundy. The volcanic soils of the Dundee Hills produce Pinot Noirs that are more floral and expressive of red berries, and are more Chambolle-Musigny-like exhibiting lightness and elegance. These features are thought to be due to the high moisture-holding capacity of the deep soils. The sedimentary soils found in Eola Hills, in contrast, produce Pinot Noirs marked by dark berries presumably because the vines are more stressed. The wines are more akin to Gevrey-Chambertin. A full glossary of terms is on page 6. The main thought to take away? Dirt matters.

The food at this Conference was astonishingly fresh and delicious. Oregon is blessed with a bounty of gastronomic riches - wild mushrooms and salmon, shellfish of all types, an array of berries and fruits, organic dairy farms, artisan cheeses and bakeries, home style sausages and hams, coffee roasters, and a crop of outstanding chefs. The sustainable food movement that began in Berkeley with chef Alice Waters has now become centered in Portland, Oregon. "Sustainable food" refers to a short chain of supply and demand that emphasizes the consumption of local food. I had always thought Sonoma, California was most representative of a successful sustainable food program, but the food served at this Conference made me really sit up and take notice. I will never forget courses like "Roasted Guinea Fowl with Garlic Tapioca, Northwest Mushrooms and a Smoked Bacon Nage" or "Northwest Seafood Sausage with Saffron-Apple Rouille, Kohlrabi Sprouts and Wild Fennel Pollen" or even the most basic of offerings that soared with freshness like "Local Heirloom Tomatoes with Lemon Oil, Basil, Sea Salt and Black Pepper." Breads and desserts were marvelous. At the Traditional Salmon Bake

dinner alone there were fifteen desserts including “Double Chocolate Brioche Stuffed with Cherries and Chocolate” and “Blue Cheese and Red Plum Tart with Rosemary-Pinot Noir Caramel.” I could go on and on. The Portland Roasting Co coffees were actually the best I have ever drank and that is no exaggeration.

The Traditional Northwest Salmon Bake is the highlight of the gustatory pleasures. Salmon is prepared native Northwest style on alder stakes over a huge fire pit (see photo below) and is accompanied by an extravagant outdoor buffet.



At The Grand Dinner on Friday night, I had the pleasure of sitting next to Frank Ostini of the Hitching Post II Restaurant in Buellton, California, made famous by the movie, *Sideways*. He has been a regular attendee of the Conference since 1992 and his dedication to the event is unrivalled. He brings a few helpers from his restaurant and barbecues all day of the traditional salmon bake. He cooks smoked prime rib of pork, oak grilled Oregon top sirloin of beef, grilled corn salad and grilled farmer’s market vegetables with smoked tomato ancho chile mayonnaise. He fires up the grill at 10:00 AM and doesn’t finishing feeding the 1,000 people at the salmon bake until 10:00 PM. The day before, he poured his excellent **2002 Hitching Post Highliner Pinot Noir** at an afternoon tasting of California wines featured in the movie *Sideways*. Hitching Post wines are made by owner/chef Frank Ostini and his good friend, former fisherman Gray Hartley. They work with some of the best growers in Santa Barbara County, including vineyards in the Santa Maria Valley, Santa Ynez Valley, and Santa Rita Hills. Their first Pinot Noir under the Hitching Post label was 1984. From 1991 until 2000, the wines were made at the Au Bon Climat/Qupe Winery on the Bien Nacido Vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley and were served and sold primarily at the Hitching Post II Restaurant. In 2001, Hitching Post Wines moved to Central Coast Wine Services in Santa Maria. Sales of the wines ballooned with the release of the movie *Sideways* which featured the wines and the Hitching Post II Restaurant and production has grown to 4700 cases a year. At dinner I had the **2001 Hitching Post Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir** from magnum and the **2002 Hitching Post Julia’s Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir**. The style is very drinkable and food -



blend of several top barrels from a few different quality vineyards. “Highliner” refers to one of the best fisherman in a fleet and honors the men of the Alaskan Salmon Fishery alongside whom Gray Hartley worked for 28 years and is meant to be the “best of their fleet” of Pinot Noirs. In actual fact, the whole lineup of Pinot Noirs are terrific examples from this region and very sensibly priced. The wines can be enjoyed at the Hitching Post II Restaurant or purchased at various retail outlets and on the website at hitchingpost2.com. You can’t miss Frank with his trademark pith helmet (below).



A featured conference at the event was “Everybody’s A Critic” which was chaired by Andrea Immer-Robinson, a former “Best Sommelier in the U.S.” who has written five wine books and stars on a television program which will premier October 3 on both the Fine Living and Food Network. The panel was composed of the most influential wine writer in France, Michel Bettane, legendary wine writer and Master of Wine, Michael Broadbent (who will release a book on Domaine de la Romanee Conti in the fall), New Zealand wine guru Bob Campbell, noted wine writer Elin McCoy, who recently wrote *The Emperor of Wine: The Rise of Robert M. Parker, Jr. and the Reign of American Taste*, and wine critic for *The Wine Advocate*, Pierre Antoine-Rovani. The panel discussed how to access value and quality in a wine and how they personally taste wine. Five wines were poured: **2003 Domaine Bouchard Pere et fils Beaune Greves Vigne de l’Enfant Jesus**, **2003 Felton Road Block 3 Pinot Noir**, **2002 Bethel Heights Vineyard Casteel Reserve**, **2001 Au Bon Climat Knox Alexander Estate Grown**, and **1999 Domaine de l’Arlot Clos des Forets St. Georges**. There was quite a lot of spirited disagreement about the wines among the panel members and audience proving once again that everyone’s palate is unique. There were a number of pearls thrown out by the panel and I list them here for your reference:

A major criticism of Oregon Pinot Noir is that the wines are more about fruit than complexity.

Many tasters make the mistake of judging young wines by looking for secondary characteristics they want in an older wine. Young wines speak of fruit, older wines speak of *terroir* characteristics. The first 5-10 years, Pinot Noir fruit dominates, in later years there is more a sense of soil expressing itself.

A young wine may be slightly reductive when first opened. It may smell of burnt electrical cord or eraser. This is often a sign that the wine will age.

When tasting red wines, always wear a black shirt!

Tasting a lineup of wine samples does not do justice to the wines. There are so many other “real world things” that go into evaluating wine: style, what the winemaker is trying to do, the desirability of a second glass, and compatibility with food.

Swirling wine in your glass not only frees up aromas, it also cleans the glass!

When you taste a series of Pinot Noirs, there is a build-up of tannin in the mouth making subsequent wines taste more tannic. Green olives can counteract this effect.

Michael Bettane and Michael Broadbent came off as the most erudite of the panel. Pierre-Antoine Rovani as the most confrontational and opinionated. When asked if winemakers today are forced to make wines in a style favored by wine critics such as himself, he answered by saying there might be a few, but the majority of winemakers are dedicated artisans who remain loyal to their own style. Personally, and I discussed this with several others afterwards, I thought this response was ludicrous. An analogy proves my point. As a chef in a restaurant, food is offered that the customer prefers, not necessarily what the chef wants to cook. Can you go into any restaurant today and not find seared ahi or hanger steak on the menu? The same reasoning applies to wine and winemakers. Certainly many wines are styled to appeal to a majority of the perceived public's taste.

Another seminar was also led by Andrea Robinson and focused on “wine speak”, the often bizarre wine descriptors wine critics use that strangely, but often accurately, describe the aromas and flavors of wine. Certainly wine critics can have a pretentious vernacular, but these terms have real meaning. Here are some examples:

“brambly” - the aroma and taste of the foliage of dark berries and black currents; a hot leaf smell; a descriptor the English like to use.

“pyrazine” - green pepper smell

“beef jerky” - big, heavy, older red wines; a byproduct of fermentation; bacony, bouillon, soy.

“bubble gum” - secondary to whole cluster fermentation without crushing; the fruit under carbon dioxide gas produces a bubble gum gas; typical of Beaujolais.

“cotton candy” - from aging wine in American oak; also coconut.

“sweaty saddle” - from *Brettanomyces* which is ubiquitous in the winery on barrels and equipment; barnyard.

“band aid” - typical of South African and South American wines and undesirable - *Brettanomyces* run amuck!

“foxy” - a funky, animal smell; often in concord grape wines.

“metallic” - a steely or wet metal taste; a hallmark of *terroir* and typical of French Chablis.

“wet dog” - an aroma found in older French Chablis, White Burgundy, and Loire Chenin Blanc.

“beeswax” - typical of Semillon wines; also wines from Loire and White Bordeaux.

“lanolin” - associated with Semillon wines.

“lead pencil and cedar: characteristic of Left Bank Bordeaux; from the soil and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes.

“sexy” - a term used when the wine arouses you; arouses your attraction.

“sulfur” - sulfur dioxide is used as a preservative and antioxidant in wine; a lite match smell; usually dissipates shortly after the wine is open to the air.

“rotten eggs” - the smell of hydrogen sulfide is a flaw in wine; may also take on a bike tire or tar aroma.

“vegetal” - a positive attribute to some wines; commonly New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc; not desirable in Pinot Noir usually.

“corked” - from TCA in the cork or from TCA in barrels and winemaking equipment; wet newspaper smell.

Next week the *PinotFile* will focus on the IPNC Pinot Noirs I found of special interest and the producers who continue to captivate me. I would reiterate that all of the Pinot Noirs offered at this year's Celebration were wonderful gifts of nature and worthy of any wine lover.

For further information on the International Pinot Noir Celebration and to be included on the mailing list, call 503-472-8964, e-mail to info@ipnc.org, or visit the website at ipnc.org. The 20th Annual Celebration will be held at Linfield College, July 28-30, 2006.

Most of the wineries in Oregon are small and do not have tasting rooms. The two major events of the year for Willamette Valley wineries are Open Houses held over Fri-Sat-Sun on Memorial Day Weekend and on Thanksgiving Day Weekend. For more information consult the following websites: yamhillwine.com, winesnw.com, and oregonwinepress.com.

GLOSSARY OF SOIL TERMS

(only for the most hard-core wine geeks)

Alluvial Soil: unconsolidated terrestrial sediment composed of sorted or unsorted sand, gravel and clay that has been deposited by water.

Clay: large class of very fine-grained soils from various origins.

Glacial Loess: fine, wind-borne deposit of silt carried along the edge of a glacier.

Limestone: sedimentary rock consisting of at least 50% calcium carbonate by weight.

Schist: metamorphic rock of laminated layers of chiefly micaceous minerals (say what?)

Sedimentary Soil: loose, unconsolidated deposit of weathering debris, chemical precipitates or biological debris that accumulates on the Earth's surface. An example is Shea Vineyard in the Yamhill/Carlton AVA of Oregon (pictured right)

Silt: sedimentary material of very fine particles intermediate in size between sand and clay.

Volcanic Soil: formed in one of several ways, notably: the erosion of hardened lava flows, the breaking down of small chunks of igneous rock formed when magma is spewed from an erupting volcano, or the deposition of volcanic ash. An example is Stoller Vineyard in the Dundee Hills of Oregon (pictured right)



Photo © Mike Haverkate

Most wine producers gravitate toward Pinot Noir rather than moving away to the dark side. Oregon Pinot pioneer, Dick Erath, has taken the opposite track. As owner and winemaker at Erath Vineyards in Dundee, Oregon, he is investing in 200 acres 11 miles southeast of Willcox, Arizona. The property is at 4,300 feet above sea level and next to the Dos Cabezas Wineworks Vineyard, which has produced quality wines since 1984. The climate features warm days, cool nights and is very dry. So far it is mostly pest-free. He feels there is tremendous potential here to grow and make warmer climate reds and blends. Erath plans to plant here in the spring of 2006.

The Scoop on Recent Oregon Vintages



At the IPNC I was able to gather some useful generalizations about recent vintages in the Oregon's Willamette Valley. **2002** was just about a perfect vintage with outstanding fruit concentration and acidity. A consistently excellent vintage that should be in every pinotophile's cellar. **2003** was a freakish year where unseasonably hot weather produced wines with high alcohol. Unless water was added or other alcohol reduction techniques were employed, alcohol levels on labels are frequently above 15% and can approach 17%. This is a vintage for fruit bomb lovers who admire the expressive fruit noses and the lush and flattering fruit bounty. The over-the-top styles do not have the acid to age so drink up early. **2004** is similar to 2003 but the wines generally have less alcohol and higher acid. The Pinot Noirs are not as concentrated as in 2002, but overall may exceed 2003 in quality. **2005** had a light set like 2004. The rains from March to July led to plenty of foliage on the vines and relatively few grapes to ripen. Assuming the weather remains dry, the grapes should achieve good ripeness and flavor with desirable acidity and appropriate tannins.

Above are Sokol-Blosser vineyards in foreground and Archery Summit Winery and vineyards in distance.