

**Pinot Noir is
the Chosen
One**

PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Dedicated to Pinoaficianados

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Trendy in 2005

As Pinot Noir popularity zoomed P.S. (Post Sideways) and wine became the preferred drink over beer in America, a number of other trends emerged in the world of wine in 2005.

- 1 Burgundy popularity soared along with prices. It used to be fashionable to trot out first growth Bordeaux wines as a mark of success and wealth, but now it is Burgundy that demands the most attention. The five first growths have been overshadowed by the five "R's" of Burgundy: Romanee-Conti, Rouget, Romaine, Rousseau, and Roty. The appeal of Burgundy is its scarcity (30,000 cases of Mouton are produced each year compared to 50 cases of top Chambertin). In addition, Burgundy's new-found prestige has sent it to the top of the wine auction world with 1999 DRC Romanee-Conti bringing more at auction (\$5,665 per bottle) than 1961 Chateau Petrus or 1982 Le Pin. The skyrocketing prices for great Burgundy has been fueled in part by the conversion of many wine collectors from California Cabernet drinkers to classified Bordeaux enthusiasts to Burgundy lovers who prize older great vintages.
- 2 Foreign investment in Burgundy. Anne Colgin of Napa Valley's Colgin Cellars started the trend by purchasing the old and honored Maison Camille Giroud in Burgundy in 2002. American Alex Gambel runs a small 4,5000 case negociant winery in Beaune specializing in handcrafted red and white Burgundies from the Cote d'Or. Michael Twelftree, an Australian (Two Hands) and Michael Ragg, a Brit (Berry Bros) have collaborated to form the Mischief & Mayhem negociant project specializing in wines from Aloxe-Corton.
- 3 Opportunities for wine enthusiasts to make their own wine without the capital investment involved in owning vineyards and leasing winery facilities. CrushPad in San Francisco and Swirl in Dallas allow consumers to make as little as a barrel of custom wine.
- 4 Wine varietal-specific advocacy groups. ZAP (Zinfandel Advocates & Producers) and the Rhone Rangers have been popular in California for a number of years. Now there is PS I Love You (Petite Sirah), Wine Artisans of Santa Lucia Highlands, TAP (Tempranillo Advocates and Producers) and RAP (Rosé Avengers). Pinot Noir advocacy groups are still fragmented, primarily into appellation organizations such as the Russian River Valley Winegrowers.

One unpleasant trend is the continuing battle with pests particularly in marginal growing areas that are filled with wildlife. The pests include voles and gophers, birds, deer, wild pigs, mealbugs, leaf hoppers and green sharpshooters. Voles (*Microtus townsendi*) will eat the bark of vine stems and roots when food and water are scarce. The causing stress on the vine eventually leads to death of the vine.

- 4 Farming Pinot Noir on the edge. More and more vineyards are being planted in marginal viticultural areas like the Sonoma Coast where harsh climate, pests and other challenges make the risks of growing wine grapes high but the result potentially sublime.
- 5 California sparkling wine houses are making good still Pinot Noir: Domaine Chandon, Gloria Ferrer, Roederer Estate and Domaine Carneros.
- 6 A younger generation of winemakers in Burgundy. Trained in modern winemaking techniques, the concern is that an international style of Pinot Noir is developing and the resultant wines will become too much the same.
- 7 Consolidation of the wholesale wine tier. In 1980 there were 2,000 wine wholesalers, down to 400 in 2002. The downside of this trend is that large wholesalers won't promote small production Pinot Noir labels.
- 8 Recycling of oak wine barrels. An astonishing 200,000 handcrafted oak wine barrels made from 200 year-old trees are discarded in California alone each year. Instead of planters or firewood, the barrels are now being crafted into furniture, floors and other useful items. See www.whitmcleod.com for example.
- 9 Blending wine from different vineyards. The terroirists believe in single-vineyard bottlings of Pinot Noir. This can be a selling point over blends which are perceived as cheaper and less desirable. Blending, however, can increase a wine's complexity and make up for poor performance of some vineyards in a difficult vintage.
- 10 Proliferation of "garage" Pinot Noir producers who typically make 500-1,500 cases.
- 11 Proliferation of negociant-style Pinot Noir labels. These producers typically own no vineyards but buy bulk juice in unfinished or finished form. The wines are typically in the \$8-12 range. Examples include Castle Rock, Twin Fin and Mark West in California and A to Z in Oregon.
- 12 Rising grape prices. Premium Pinot Noir grape prices have increased significantly. Overall California grape prices have increased 7.7% for the 2004 vintage compared to 2002 and a similar increase can be expected for the outstanding 2005 vintage. Expect resultant increases in bottles of quality Pinot Noir as prices also increase for oak barrels, corks, labels and bottles.
- 13 Emerging experts in wine regions. For Burgundy look to Allen Meadows (burghound.com), for Oregon, Cole Danehower (*Oregon Wine Report*) and for California, Steve Heimoff (*Wine Enthusiast*), James Laube (*Wine Spectator*), Gregory Walter (*Pinot Report*) and the *PinotFile*.
- 14 Caves. Not just for wineries anymore, caves are being built for individuals as hideaways at home, dining rooms, libraries, retreats, home theaters, and oh yes, wine cellars.
- 15 Wine enters the mainstream media. Podcasts allow live internet access to winemakers, wine personalities, wine writers and more. One of the first and best is graperadio.com. In early 2006, an internet TV channel, Wine-TV.com, will focus on wine 24/7. The channel will feature an interactive online chat and online sales in addition to videos provided by vintners focused on the world of wine. Can celebrity vintners be far behind? There is no reason why talented winemakers can't become exalted for their skills, and like chefs, become famous personalities.
- 16 Vineyard REITs. Vintage Wine Trust Inc. (VWT) is the first real estate investment trust in the United States focused on acquiring, developing and leasing wine grape vineyards in North America.
- 17 Wine storage security became a concern. The disastrous fire in the Wines Central warehouse in Vallejo, California, led to significant losses to Pinot Noir producers Relic, Sean Thackrey, Saintsbury (entire wine library) and Goldridge (lost debut vintage).

- 18 Attention turns to the “millennials” in wine marketing. The millennials, ages 21-29, are the largest US consumer group in history - approximately 76 million. They are also referred to as the entitlement generation because they expect to live like their parents did. They tend to buy image-driven wines that they can show off.
- 19 Girls just want to have fun. A 2005 Gallup poll showed that women purchase 55% of the wine consumed in the United States and a Wine Market Council survey revealed that 56% of wine drinkers are female. This has led to a blitz of female-focused wine marketing and products including wine clubs (womenwine.com), web sites (lolawines.com), a wine magazine (*Wine Adventure* - a mix of *Wine Spectator* and *Oprah*), books (*Wine for Woman: A Guide to Buying, Pairing and Sharing Wine* written by William Marrow in which Leslie Sbrocco raises the question “Are men from Bordeaux and women from Burgundy?”), low alcohol wines (Beringer Blass Estates White Lies Chardonnay, and wines directed at women, so-called chick wines (Two Wives Sauvignon Blanc, Mad Housewife, Working Girl Wines, and Meditrina). Marketing wine to women definitely requires a different tack from selling wine to men. As Barton O'Brien of O'Brien Family Vineyard (producer of the wine Seduction pictured to right) stated: “The Neanderthal man takes his prized bottle of wine to his cave and shows it off to his buddies, saying 'Look what I've got and you can't have it.' The Neanderthal woman takes her wine to the cave, invites her girlfriends over and shares the bottle with a rack of yak.” Some wineries are using the female form to market wine to men: Cleavage Creek Cellars, Marilyn Merlot and Pin Up Wines.
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- 20 Increasing use of technology in making wine. First Venture Technologies Corp of Vancouver, British Columbia has developed a carcinogen-reducing yeast technology to decrease the carcinogen, ethyl carbamate, in wine and spirits. Dyosystem (French firm Sferis) is a new process similar to an x-ray machine to probe the content and make-up of grapes. It can determine color, acidity, sugar content and maturity. Vaslin Bucher has developed a new machine to decrease the sugar concentration in grapes by 1-3 degrees to reduce a wine's resultant alcohol. Memstar makes mobile equipment from Australia that utilizes evaporative perstraction to allow the winemaker to choose a desired alcohol level. Spinning cone distillation (Cone Tech) can be used for alcohol adjustment. The wine makes two passes through the machine, first to remove the delicate flavors, second to remove the alcohol. The flavors and the de-alcoholised wine are then recombined. Reverse osmosis (Vinnovation Sebast) can be employed for flavor concentration, alcohol adjustment, volatile acidity removal, taint treatment and tannin fractionation. The figures are not clear but it has been reported that about 1,650/2,400 wineries in California are customers of either Vinnovation or Cone Tech. (Laurie Daniel, Mecc News) Some wineries have purchased reverse osmosis units themselves. A Bordeaux company has a technology to extract alcohol from wine without affecting the taste, producing a finished product called Lir in France. Dream Taste (Embaq) is a French invention from Burgundy that can remove cork taint from a contaminated bottle in less than one hour. Amorim, the world's largest cork producer, has a new process of steam cleaning corks that reduces the risk of cork taint in wine. The new treatment removes on average 77% of the releasable TCA in cork stoppers without degrading the visual quality of natural cork. CryoClean is a barrel-blasting sanitation technique using dry ice that can breath new life into the inside of a used oak barrel and allow the user to get an extra 1-2 years of use from each wine barrel. The blast of carbon dioxide particles cleans old wine residue and tartrate crystals from the inside of a barrel and is the only process that gets 99% of the barrel clean. The cost is \$50-70 per barrel. Another process for cleaning barrels is barrel-shaving in which a quarter inch of wood is planed from the inside of the barrel which is then retoasted. Its use is controversial as some feel that off flavors are produced by retoasting the barrel. Enologix in Napa Valley is a large wine consultant firm that uses software to analyze wine chemistry and advise makers how to fashion wines that critics prefer.

DRC: The Best Wine on the Planet?

On November 6, 2005, a tasting of a selection of wines from Domaine de la Romanee Conti (DRC) was held in Hinsdale, Illinois. The event was hosted by Damien Casten and Scott Kerrigan of Candid Wines and Tanya Har of A Taste of Vino. The honored guests were Gregg Popovich, coach of the NBA Champion San Antonio Spurs and Sean Elliott, a former professional basketball player who is the voice of the Spurs for a San Antonio television station. Both Popovich and Elliott are wine enthusiasts who had never drunk a DRC wine. The event turned out to be very successful with over \$30,000 raised for the Bear Necessities Pediatric Cancer Foundation. (Below, Damien with Coach Popovich and Elliott)



Pictured below are Damien Casten (left) and Scott Kerrigan with the lineup of DRC wines which included: 1966 Richebourg, 1983 La Tache, 1983 Richebourg, 1986 Echezeaux, 1986 Romanee Saint-Vivant, 1989 Echezeaux, 1989 La Tache, and 1996 La Tache.



One of the auction items at the event include Robert Parker's *The Greatest Wine Estates* autographed by Robert Parker and Aubert de Villaine of Domaine de la Romanee-Conti. de Villaine also provided a copy of Richard Olney's *Romanee-Conti* dedicated and gifted to Coach Popovich.

Damien's general comments about the wines echoed the praises others have given the magnificent DRC wines. "The wines were different than any wine I had ever had before. I have never had as clear a sensation of tasting a living thing as with these wines. They reveal themselves one layer at a time, changing in the glass any number of times in ways I did not expect. Tasting a series of DRC wines provides an education into what great wines can be. I was and continue to be blown away. The 1966 Richebourg has become my new favorite wine - it was unreal. These wines demonstrate the futility of scores and ratings for wines of a certain class for I can only have an emotional reaction to a wine like this."

What is it about the magic of DRC? Richard Olney in his landmark book, *Romanee-Conti. The World's Most Fabled Wine* (1991), begins his book: "A fabulous thing - mysterious, sensuous, transcendental, the greatest wine in the dukedom of Burgundy, once reserved for the table of princes, its origins blurred in the mists of time - cannot help but spawn fabulists." And Marq de Villiers in *The Heartbreak Grape*, "No other red wine can balance spice and fruit so ... flirtatiously, can seem at once so ripe and fragile, so decadent and clean, so irresistible." Clive Coates M.W. waxes, "This is the purest, most aristocratic and most intense example of Pinot Noir you could possibly imagine." And finally, George Saintsbury writing in *Notes on a Cellar-Book*, "It is the fashion of course to put Clos Vougeot at the head of all Burgundies and very delicious Clos Vougeot can be: but I never drank any specimen thereof equal to this (1858 Romanee-Conti) for the combination of intensity and delicacy in bouquet and flavour, for body, color and every good quality of wine."

Perhaps some background and facts about DRC can shed some light on the origins of this magic.

Domaine Romanee-Conti consists of seven climates each of which is a Grand Cru: Echezeaux (11.5 acres), Grands Echezeaux (8,7 acres), Romanee Saint-Vivant (13 acres), La Tache (15 acres), Richebourg, (8.67 acres), Romanee-Conti (4.46 acres) and Montrachet (1.67 acres) La Tache and Romanee-Conti are monopoles of the Domaine.

Each of the wines are vinified in the same fashion, but are distinct expressions of different terroirs. It is difficult to specifically put into words that the character of each wine but author Richard Olney and others have tried:

Echezeaux: typically the most forward and least complex

Grands Echezeaux: more variety, depth and mystery than Echezeaux.

Romanee Saint-Vivant: flirtatious, delicate and feminine with underlying strength. Allen Meadows says, "It is like a dazzling beautiful woman that you can't help but stare at but at the same time one that you don't really want to sleep with." Andy Tan feels that "Often this wine is said to have the most captivating and seductive aroma profile but falls short on the palate for size and richness standing along side such dramatic Grand Crus as La Tache and Musigny."

Richebourg: the greatest power in the lineup. Intense, but less nuances.

La Tache: the ultimate in elegance and rigor. Per-Henrik Mansson says, "When La Tache is great, it's celestial, a fantasy come true, tasting both ripe and elegant. It starts out, in its youth, much firmer and more structured than any other wine in Vosne-Romanee. But in the top vintages, age softens the angles, and the richness orchestrates the complete flavors.



Romanee-Conti: Richard Olney calls it “bottled velvet and satin.” Voluptuous with infinite complexity. According to Allen Meadows, “La Tache comes to you and seduces you, Romanee-Conti makes you come to it - it doesn’t care.” Interestingly, Romanee-Conti is one of the smallest appellations in France - it is entitled to Appellation Controlee in its own right. 400 cases produced each year, less than 5,000 bottles for the world.

Domaine Romanee-Conti is now a company-owned estate run by the de Villaine and Leroy families. There have been nine owners in over 8 centuries. The original vines that became La Romanee originally belonged to a monastery, the priory of Saint-Vivant de Vergy. Louis-Francois de Bourbon, Prince of Conti, bought the vineyard La Romanee in 1760. After his purchase, he reserved all production for himself and the wines became famous. The name Conti, joined to La Romanee first appeared in 1794. During the French Revolution, Prince de Conti emigrated and the vineyard was assumed by the State, then sold in 1794 to Parisian Nicolas Defer. After several other owners including Jacques-Marie-Duvault-Blochot who acquired several top growths in the Cote d’Or, it was Edmond Gaudin de Villaine, who married one owner and became managing director. He instituted many major improvements in the estate during his 30 year tenure and registered the name Domaine de la Romanee-Conti as a trademark. In 1933, he acquired La Tache from the Liger-Belair family. Henri Leroy, a wine negociant and friend of Edmond bought a share in the Domaine in 1941. He and Edmond removed the failing vines of Romanee-Conti in 1945 and replanted the vineyard to grafted young vines in 1947. Andre Noblet began working in the cellars of the Domaine at age 16. His wife, Madeleine, was the only person to prune the vines of Romanee-Conti for many years (in Burgundy at the time it was commonplace for women to do the pruning). Andre became cellar-master in 1953, the first year the Domaine’s labels contained the number of the bottle, the total number of bottles produced and Henri de Villaine’s signature. Bernard Noblet is cellar master now. Beginning in 1973, Aubert de Villaine and Mme Lalou Bize Leroy ran the estate as co-directors. Their signatures first appeared on the labels of the 1971 vintage. In 1991, Mme Bize-Leroy was fired as DRC’s sales agent after a long legal battle. She eventually lost her 12 million dollar lawsuit against the property and the de Villaine family.

30% of the Domaine’s output is shipped to the United States and distributed by Wilson & Daniels. An interesting bit of history came to light while recently talking with Chef Richard Wing of the Imperial Dynasty Restaurant in Hanford, California. The restaurant was known since its opening in 1958 for gourmet chinoise cuisine and its extensive wine cellar started by Richard’s brother, Ernie. Richard told me that from approximately 1968 until 1969, 25 cases from each DRC vineyard were sent to the United States, with 5 cases reaching the West Coast. The Imperial Dynasty was allocated 1 case of each vineyard and were charged initially \$200-300 per case, increasing to \$1,000 per case by 1970. On his wine list at the time, Romanee-Conti was \$200 per bottle with the other DRC wines ranging from \$80-\$100 a bottle. In 1969 he stopped purchasing the wines as they were deemed too expensive!

The DRC wines have become deservedly expensive. Richard Olney said about Romanee-Conti: “The price of Romanee-Conti, above all, assumes a life of its own, soaring to startling heights thanks to its rarity and to its immensurable power as a status symbol.” In a great vintage, Romanee-Conti is now the most expensive and most sought-after wine in the world. At Sotheby’s auction in New York in March, 2005, one case of 1999 Romanee-Conti sold for \$61,657. In other United States wine auctions in 2005, one case of 2001 Romanee-Conti sold for \$26,070, a jeroboam of 1990 Romanee-Conti \$30,810, and 1 bottle of 1985 Romanee-Conti went for \$4,600. Mixed case assortments of DRC wines are prized depending on the vintage: 1978 - \$17,625, 1985 - \$12,925, 1990 - \$18,800 and 2001 - \$9,480. John Kapon of Acker-Merrill auction house and writer of *Vintage Tastings* who has tasted practically every great vintage of every great Burgundy producer feels the 1945 Romanee-Conti is the best wine he has ever drunk. 608 bottles were produced. I have had the good fortune to drink the 1990, 1999, 2001, and 2002 Romanee-Conti. I have never had the opportunity to taste a fully mature vintage of this wine (it takes at least 15 years to mature and, if well cellared, will last over 50 years as indicated by the excellence of the 1945 referred to above).

As fabled as Romanee-Conti is, in many great vintages Le Tache may equal or even surpass it. La Tache in French means 'work which was remunerated' as well as a task. It refers to a type of payment by job completed rather than by the hour or day and may have originally referred to the difficulties in working this vineyard. Some of the greatest vintages have been: 1923 ("never seems to change, may live forever"), 1942, 1943, 1949 ("if well-stored said to be the best of all time"), 1959, 1971, 1985, 1988, 1990, and 1999 (a favorite of owner de Villaine). I had the good fortune of drinking the 1943 La Tache on my 60th birthday. It was a bottle that had been well-cellared in France until recently. This was a wartime vintage so there was no intervention and no sugar for chaptalization. The wine was sublime and mere words cannot do it justice. As John Kapon has remarked, "This is a wine I want to lick from cork to punt." A remarkable experience and one of the top three Pinot Noirs I have ever had (the other two being the 1990 Romanee-Conti and 1992 Williams Selyem Rochioli Vineyard). The optimum window for drinking La Tache is at least 8-15 years. However, I had the 2000 La Tache last week and it was incredible. Perfectly balanced, it was the epitome of power in a velvet glove. 2000 is definitely a vintage you can enjoyably drink now.



There have been a number of outlandish rumors for years that the Domaine has some secrets to their farming and winemaking. This, of course, is untrue. Around 1900, the old vines of the Domaine were treated with carbon disulfide and others were replaced with young vines on American rootstock. Only the Romanee-Conti and a portion of Richebourg were left untouched until 1945. In 1947 Romanee-Conti and the old vines in Richebourg were removed and replanted with grafted vines from La Tache cuttings which were originally propagated from old Romanee-Conti. Today, all of the vineyards are farmed organically with a portion of Grands Echezeaux and La Tache farmed biodynamically as an experiment. Grapes are harvested late in the season, often later than other neighboring domains. No grapes less than 15 years old are used for the Domaine's Grand Cru wines. In poor vintages the Domaine's wines are sold to negociants as AOV Vosne-Romanee. No wines were bottled in 1968 and in 1950 and 1951, only La Tache was produced.

In 1999 and 2002, the Domaine de la Romanee-Conti produced a Vosne-Romanee 1er Cru from a second harvest of young vines that followed the first harvest a few days prior. This bottling is only released in exceptional vintages. The wine is labeled "Cuvee Duvault-Bloch" after Jacques-Marie-Duvault-Bloch who acquired La Romanee-Conti in 1869. He was one of the most important proprietors of top growths in the Cote d'Or at the time with vineyards in Richebourg, Grands Echezeaux and Echezeaux. His total holdings consisted of 329 acres of Grand Cru and Premier Cru vineyards. This accumulation of top growths was never to be replicated.

Vinification is meticulous and traditional. The grape clusters are not destemmed. Strict triage of bunches is employed and DRC was one of the first to utilize this practice. Chaptalization is used. Wines are aged in 100% new Francois Freres oak barrels for 16-24 months. Malolactic fermentation proceeds without assistance. Racking is either omitted or done once. All wines are fined about two months before bottling. Several casks are now blended together before bottling. The bottles are traditional Burgundy style but a little taller and heavier than the standard Burgundy bottle. The corks are the among the best available.

Much of the factual information in this feature on Domaine de la Romanee-Conti came from these sources: *Romanee-Conti* (Richard Olney), *The Heartbreak Grape* (Marq de Villaine), and the burgundy-report website. These are all excellent sources for further research and reading about the Domaine de la Romanee-Conti.


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More on Glassware

A few readers responded to last issue's feature on wine glassware with some valuable insights. One Burgundy enthusiast wrote that the Riedel Vinum Extreme glass (middle, right) works particularly well with New World Pinot Noir. He feels the diamond shape tones down or traps the high alcohol of New World Pinot Noir that is perceived on the nose. It also amplifies the fruit and the subtle aromas of Pinot Noir. He feels the Sommelier Burgundy glass is too big and top heavy for useful swirling (I agree). Another reader who owns a wine store found that a number of people have felt they lose the focus of the aromatics from Pinot Noir in the big, open mouth glasses like the Riedel Sommelier Series and the Bottega del Vino Burgunder. He likes the Burgunder glass for its sturdiness and durability but actually prefers the Bottega del Vino's Amarone Rosso glass for tasting red wines. He commented that this glass offers a perfect chimney for the aromas and has that big Burgundy glass feel.



I tried an experiment using 3 Riedel glasses pictured above: Sommeliers series on the left, Vinum Extreme in the middle and Vinum series glass on the right. I tasted three California Pinot Noirs with alcohol in the 14.1 - 14.5 range. I could not honestly detect a significant difference in the aroma profile offered by the Vinum and Vinum Extreme glasses. I did think the aromas were more elusive in the Sommelier glass. Taste and finish seemed the same in all three. The Sommelier glass is awkward to hold and swirl as the stem is very thin and the glass top-heavy. This glass is more show than function. The Vinum Extreme is very sturdy and comfortable to hold. I approached a talented engineer/physics friend to try to explain how the Vinum Extreme might reduce the perceived alcohol in aromas and enhance the desirable volatile compounds. He thought about it for a day and gave up. I might have known, he used to be a Cabernet drinker.