

**Bonus  
Issue**

# PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Devoted to Pinoaficionados

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## Williams Selyem Off-Shoots

Williams Selyem is a legendary winery started in 1981 by Burt Williams and Ed Selyem and families. Their accomplishment was amazing given the fact that they went from making wines in a garage to producing world-class Pinot Noir without any formal training or experience in winemaking. Burt was a home grape wine-maker and Ed a home beer and fruit winemaker. They began making wine from Sonoma grapes for their own use in Burt's garage in 1979. Burt and Ed continued to raise their families and pay for their houses using income from Burt's job in San Francisco as a printer for the San Francisco News Agency and Ed's as a wine buyer and accountant at Speer's Market in Forestville. Burt's desire was to make world-class wine and Ed's to create a successful business from local agriculture. They started with no capital, never borrowed, and grew 25% every year by starting small and putting all of their income back into the business.

In 1981, they decided to go commercial and founded their winery, Hacienda del Rio. Their first commercial wine was a 1982 Pinot Noir which was a hit with Burgundy lovers. Initially, they rented space at various wineries and produced both Zinfandel and Pinot Noir from purchased grapes. A complaint from Hacienda Winery led the partners to drop the original name and use their own. They were fortunate to successfully established relationships with the very best growers in the Russian River Valley. At the time, the greatness of Pinot Noir from western Sonoma County was unrealized. All grape contracts were on a handshake basis. The grapes were checked by Burt and Ed constantly in the fall until they were ready.

The partners never set out to make Burgundy but to craft Russian River Valley Pinot Noir reflective of the region's terroir. Actually they initially thought their success would come from producing Zinfandel! Demand for their Pinot Noir spread quickly and with the release of their 1985 vintage, they knew they were on to something. Sweepstakes winnings at the State Fair alerted the press and the demand for their wines snowballed.



Don't Miss the ultimate Pinot Noir lover's adventure: **The 4th Annual Pinot Noir Shootout** March 11, 2006 in San Francisco, California. Further details on page 8.

From 1983 to 1989, they made wines in a rented garage on River Road in Fulton, California. In December, 1989, they moved to their unpretentious small winery on Westside Road on the Allen Ranch. Howard Allen, who owned Allen Vineyard (farmed by Joe Rochioli across Westside Road), built them a winery building.

There were two secrets to their success. First of all, they selected only high-quality Russian River grapes for their wines. Their Rochioli came from the best blocks of J. Rochioli Vineyards. The Allen Vineyard noted above also provided grapes for their Chardonnay. Cohn Vineyard and Olivet Lane are respected older plantings in the Russian River Valley. On the Sonoma Coast they sourced grapes from Summa Vineyard (now bottled by Littorai and Brogan Cellars), Coastlands Vineyard (now used solely for wine under the Cobb label) and Hirsch Vineyard. Their only source outside Sonoma County was Ferrington Vineyard in the Anderson Valley. From 1981 through 1992, they produced Zinfandel from fruit grown in by Leno Martinelli on the Jackass Hill Vineyard.

A second key to their accomplishments was the old-fashioned traditional production techniques that were utilized. Although these techniques were born out of necessity due to lack of funds, they found that Pinot Noir benefited from the old technology. Their winemaking approach is now widely used in California and Oregon for producing premium Pinot Noir and this will be their legacy. The grapes were hand sorted at the winery, fermented in small double-walled, stainless steel, recycled open top dairy tanks (see photo taken at WesMar Winery).



The grapes were destemmed and the skins lightly pressed. The wine was gravity racked, never saw filtration, fining, or a pump. Initially naturally occurring yeasts were used. Beginning in the mid-1980s they began using a cleaned-up version of an indigenous strain from Jackass Hill isolated by Vinquiry, a commercial laboratory in Healdsburg, California (now available to winemakers as the Williams Selyem strain). They punched the caps down by hand, Burgundy-style. After a long, cool fermentation the wine went directly into barrels by gravity flow. Aging was done in new French oak (mostly Tronçais) 225-liter barrels made by the same cooper that produced casks for Domaine De la Romanee-Conti. The barrels were never used more than twice. The wine was hand bottled, labeled and foiled. In 1990, they made exactly 1,572 cases and barely 200 cases of their best Pinot Noir from Rochioli Vineyard. Eventually they peaked at about 8,000 cases which was virtually sold out the day it was released.

Early on they sold their wine primarily to other winemakers and retailers with good palates. The more they made and the more press that followed created a big demand. The winery developed such a cult following that Ed was spending too much time on deciding how to allocate the wine. Finally, Ed Selyem created a mailing list in 1995 and 85% of their wine was sold directly to individuals whom they enjoyed being in contact with, visiting with and learning from. The idea of a mailing list was unique for the time. The initial goal was to avoid diluting allocations of existing customers. The list quickly became full and about 100 potential new customers per month were added to a waiting list that required a minimum of a 2 year wait. The attrition rate of the existing customer base was essentially zero. A letter was sent to Burt and Ed that said, "Please hurry the next release because I had missed the last one and my friends have stopped coming over."

The Williams Selyem wines seemed to age better than many other Pinot Noir in California. Burt used to say that the wines peaked at seven years after release. Although the unlikely owners, Ed with his T-shirts and Burt with his colorful sport shirts with suspenders, and the scarcity of their wine created a mystique, it was the wine's quality and consistency that was the big attraction. I was one of the lucky ones to join the mailing list in 1989 and I have many, many fond memories of drinking their Pinot Noirs through the years. It was largely these wines that sparked my interest in Pinot Noir. Other wine writers were exuberant with praise. Dan Berger said, "Best Pinot Noir in America and rival to the best in the World." Matt Kramer called Williams Selyem the "Best Pinot Noir in California." And Anthony Dias Blue claimed that "Williams Selyem Pinot Noir shines above all the rest."

The fanaticism for Williams Selyem wines was exemplified by this story a customer sent to Burt and Ed: "We are a little concerned about my brother-in-law, who had never tried world-class wine until we shared a bottle of your 1991 Olivet Lane Pinot Noir with him. Now he's lost interest in work and has moved the La-Z-Boy downstairs into the wine cellar. He claims he just wants to watch but it's hard to say what needs watching down there. We're hopeful that he's just displaying the initial zeal of a new convert and that he will return to a more or less normal life when he gets accustomed to venerating your wine."

Unfortunately, although Ed and Burt lived simply and shunned publicity, the winery eventually grew beyond their means to manage it. Staring at a waiting list of 10,000 names, the pressures of the business led them to sell their beloved winery for 9.5 million dollars in 1998 to New York vintner John Dyson. In actual fact, they were only selling the name, Williams Selyem, since they did not own a winery or any vineyards. Many of the long-time customers were devastated and a pall hung over the winery for several years. The last vintage Burt Williams crafted was 1997.

Every cloud has a silver lining and propitiously, family members and others who had trained at Williams Selyem, ventured off on their own and began to make Pinot Noir in the Williams Selyem style and spirit. Burt and Ed were always open to sharing their skills with fledgling winemakers and their winery became a fertile training ground for future generations of California winegrowers. They enlisted the volunteer assistance of many aspiring vintner during their 17 vintages and although many of their wines have reached their downward slope, their winemaking legacy has been preserved in the off-shoots that now exist.

Recently when I was in the Russian River Valley I organized a tasting of wines from producers who all spent time at Williams Selyem. It seemed fitting after 25 years of Williams Selyem vintages to raise a glass for the benchmark of New World Pinot Noir. Although we looked for a common thread among the diverse group of Pinot Noirs, we found that the wines reflected their makers more than any identifiable "Williams Selyem style" and all were fine examples of contemporary Pinot Noir. This is as it should be. The tasting panel included two Pinot Noir winemakers, Jamie Kutch and Don Baumhefner, and four consumers including myself. As always, there were great differences of opinion regarding personal preferences so I will only include some general comments here. I have included a synopsis of each producer along with the fourteen wines tasted.

## Williams Selyem

In 1998, after Williams Selyem was sold, Bob Cabral took over the winemaking duties. He was trying to replace a legend in Burt Williams and the initial press was unsupportive. Many long-time fans of Williams Selyem wines were flat out vitrolitic. Burt Williams had chosen Cabral as his successor and he preached patience. Since his first vintage in 1998, he has silenced critics by producing wines that have been well crafted. Cabral was a relatively unknown winemaker in his late 30s when he took over. He had a Fresno State enology degree and began his career making bulk wine in the San Joaquin Valley. He moved on to stints at DeLoach, Kunde, Alderbrook and Hartford Court before coming to Williams Selyem. Cabral has tried to remain true to Williams' winemaking methods. He does admit that he does a little more lab work than Burt did and one of the first things he purchased was a microscope. Production at Williams Selyem has increased by about 2,000 cases so far but plans are to increase the total production to 15,000 cases. Chardonnay and Zinfandel have been reintroduced. The mailing list has grown to some 15,000 customers, with another 1,200 on a waiting list. All eagerly prepared to buy whatever the winery offers, at virtually any price. The latest Spring 2006 offering includes a Central Coast Pinot Noir (\$29), a Sonoma County Pinot Noir (\$32), a Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$39), a Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$42) and a Westside Road Neighbors Pinot Noir (\$62). To be placed on "The List", fax 707-431-4862 or mail your request to 6575 Westside Road, Healdsburg, CA 95448.

### 2002 Williams Selyem Rochioli River Block Vineyard

**Russian River Valley Pinot Noir** 14.2% alc., \$69. The fabled West Block bottling was lost with the sale of the winery, but the grapes for this wine are the same except for the age and location of the vines. The River Block was propagated from the Allen vines in the mid-1990s. This dark ruby wine sports a hi-toned cherry nose. There are ripe, unctuous flavors and a sweet, smooth finish. A good dose of oak is evident. A couple of tasters were gaga for this wine.

**2003 Williams Selyem Weir Vineyard Yorkville Highlands Pinot Noir** 14.4% alc., \$49. Light violet color. Nose is showing more alcohol than fruit. Flavors are of rich, soft dark fruits. Decent but not delightful.



## WesMar

WesMar ("wesmare") is a partnership between Kirk **Wesley** Hubbard and Denise **Mary** Selyem. Kirk and Denise were managers at a Northern California Costco warehouse in 1995 when they left the business world to join Ed Selyem and work under his tutelage for several years. When the Williams Selyem winery was sold, they embarked on planning for their own wine venture and left Williams Selyem in 2000. In March of 2000 they moved into an old apple processing warehouse (VacUDry) on Hwy 116 and Occidental Rd in Sebastopol. With 1500 sq ft of space, they set up a artisan winery where all phases from crush to bottling to shipping is carried out. Besides marriage partners, they are equal partners in all phases of winemaking. They source grapes from excellent local growers including Olivet Lane Vineyard and Piner Ranch Vineyard. Their philosophy is: "What is in the best interest of great wine." Working to adhere to old world methods this pair learned at Williams Selyem, their Pinot Noirs for me have a style that more closely resembles the Williams Selyem wines of old than any other current producer. Most of their Pinot Noir is sold by mailing list. To join, call 707-829-8824.

**2003 WesMar Piner Ranch Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir** 14.3% alc., \$38 Bright violet color. A typical Russian River nose of cherries, spice and cola. A complete wine that is balanced, exquisite, gorgeous and pure. Favorite wine of four of the tasters.



## Seven Lions

Fred Williams, the son of Burt Williams followed in his father's winemaker footsteps. He gained his experience at Merry Edwards, Topolos, Kendell-Jackson and Williams Selyem. Along with co-owner Alyssa Barlow, they founded Seven Lions and released their first wines in 1999 from Russian River Valley fruit. The initial wines were well-received by the press. Tragically, Fred passed away in September, 2003. Burt Williams's daughter, Margi Williams-Wierenga (Brogan Cellars) helped finish the 2002 and 2003 Seven Lions wines. These vintages were labeled Fred's Hand in his memory.

**2000 Seven Lions Russian River Valley Pinot Noir**, 13.9% alc., \$45. A restrained, Burgundian-styled Pinot. Very light violet in color. The nose has a little barnyard. Pommard clone. Fruit is delicate. The finish is soft with a citrus edge.

## Brogan Cellars

Winemaker and owner Margi Williams-Wierenga is Burt Williams's daughter. A 1998 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir was the first offering. It was made in a small garage much in the fashion of Burt's early winemaking. The 2001 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir gained notoriety for Brogan Cellars when it won the Red Wine Sweepstakes Award at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair. Margi works out of a small facility in Healdsburg next to the Irish Rose Inn (3232 B Dry Creek Rd) and a winery in development in Hopland about 30 miles north of Healdsburg. Her goal is 1500 cases of hand-crafted Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. Her Pinot Noir style has been described as "an iron fist in a velvet glove." Perhaps you saw her wine on the Ozzie Osbourne TV show or heard of her colorful slogans: "If it ain't Brogan, don't drink it," "Red, white and Brogan," and "Break out the Brogan." Production is small and nearly all of the wine is quickly sold through a mailing list. To join the list, call 707-473-0211.

**2003 Brogan Cellars Summa Vineyard Young Vine Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** 13.4%, \$48. The Summa Vineyard was planted in the 1970s and Margi produces two Pinot Noirs from the old and newly planted Williams Selyem blocks. Dark ruby. A full-throttle rock and roll Pinot that is still a bit tannic and rough on the edges. In her newsletter, Margi advises a few years of cellar time for this wine and I definitely agree.

## Woodenhead Vintners

Nikolai Stez founded this winery with partner Zina Bower. He was an assistant winemaker at Williams Selyem for 17 years and his domestic partner, Zina, has worked in a number of winery tasting rooms. His initial release was from an obscure vineyard in Humboldt County that is dry-farmed. Perhaps his most noted bottling is from the Buena Tierra Vineyard, one of oldest vineyards at 26 years in the

Russian River Valley. A recent bottling from Wiley Vineyard in the Anderson Valley (2003) won a Double Gold at the recent San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition. Some retail distribution and available from the website at [www.woodenhead-wine.com](http://www.woodenhead-wine.com).

**2001 Woodenhead Buena Tierra Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir** 14.1% alc., \$38. A very enjoyable Pinot. Big aromas of ripe red fruits and nutmeg. Flavors of dried fruits and smoky oak with a finish of root beer. Soft and cozy like silk pajamas. Several tasters liked this wine.



## Cobb Wines

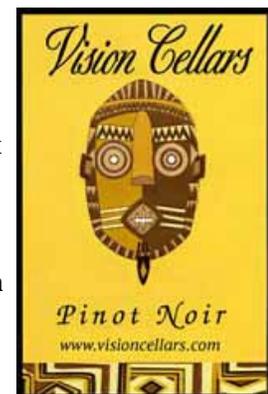
Cobb Wines was established in 2001 to produce small-lot Pinot Noirs from the Sonoma Coast of California. Diane & David Cobb are the owners and farmers of the Coastlands Vineyard. Ross Cobb is the winemaker. The Cobbs got their badges working at Williams Selyem in the 1990s. Williams Selyem used grapes from the Coastlands Vineyard in a number of bottlings. The Coastlands Vineyard is on a ridge above the Pacific Ocean four miles from Bodega Bay, near the town of Occidental in western Sonoma County. The initial release was 202 cases of 2002 Coastlands Vineyard Pinot Noir. The winery's current offerings are a 2004 Coastlands Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$62) and a 2004 Coastlands and Rice-Spivak Vineyards Pinot Noir (\$62). The wines are sold through a mailing list: 707-874-1962 or e-mail at [info@cobbwines.com](mailto:info@cobbwines.com).

**2002 Cobb Coastlands Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** 13.7% alc., \$58). Plenty of plump, ripe fruit here but the wine is still awkward and tannic.



## Vision Cellars

Mac McDonald worked for Pacific Gas & Electric for 32 years, but he always thought about making wine. His father was a Texas bootlegger and he grew up around distilled spirits and fruit wines. After tasting his first Burgundy in 1955 (a 1952) he fell in love with fine wine. He began his career making Pinot Noir in his garage in his spare time. His friends liked his wines and encouraged him to start his winery. In 1995 he relocated to wine country and started his winery in 1997. He picked up the art of winemaking from Chuck Wagner of Caymus Cellars and Burt Williams of Williams Selyem. He became one of the few African-American winemakers. He relishes pouring wines at country clubs and fancy restaurants in the south. Mac currently produces 2,000 cases per year from purchased grapes from quality vineyards in Marin County and Santa Lucia Highlands. The wines have decent retail distribution or you can call 707-837-9314 or order from the website at [www.visoncellars.com](http://www.visoncellars.com)



**2002 Vision Cellars Rosella's Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir** 14.2% alc., \$45.

**2003 Vision Cellars Rosella's Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir** 14.3% alc., \$48 The 2003 vintage was a prettier wine with an alluring nose of dark fruits, mocha and spice. Both wines are made in a bigger, ripe style and display generous oak. One taster liked the "smoke on water" oak here and the dark cherry fruit.

## Papapietro Perry

Ben Papapietro and Bruce Perry were friends who worked as pressmen alongside Burt Williams at the San Francisco Newspaper Agency. By 1980, Ben was producing his own garage wines and Bruce joined him a few years later. Both of them worked harvest and hung out with the crew at Williams Selyem. After years of praise of their homemade wines by friends and family, they released their first 75 cases of commercial Pinot Noir in 1995. They currently source grapes from the Russian River Valley and the Sonoma Coast. The 2004 releases include a Sonoma Coast Mukaide Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$59), a Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$39) and a Elsbree Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$39).

**2003 Papapietro Perry Peter's Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** 14.5% alc., 1050 cases, (\$39).

This Pinot did not show well at this tasting. The nose was pleasant enough, but the flavors were bitter and the alcohol was too prominent.

**2002 Papapietro Perry Russian River Valley Pinot Noir** 14.25%, 904 cases, \$34. A dark violet wine with a big fruity nose. Flavors of dried cherries, herbs, and toasty oak. Finishes with noticeable tannins.

## george

George has a background in bond trading but his interest in Pinot Noir was sparked by a dinner companion who brought the 1991 and 1992 Williams Selyem Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir. By the time dinner was finished, George had declared his intent to move to Sonoma and try his hand at producing great Pinot. Four years later he sold his house and quit his job to do just that. He was able to convince the crew at Williams Selyem to allow him to work the 1999 harvest and he continued at the winery in the 2000, 2001 and 2002 vintages. At the same time, he also worked at Brogan Cellars, a small producer whose model he wanted to emulate. With grapes and assistance from David Hirsch of the famous Hirsch Vineyard, he made his inaugural vintage of 2003 Pinot Noir, the Block 3A with the Pommard clone and the Block 4A made with the Mt Eden clone. The wine quickly became a darling of Las Vegas restaurants. The 2003 and 2004 vintages quickly sold out. Call george for 2005 release at 707-495-7783.



**2004 george Nuptial Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir** 14.0% alc., \$50. This wine has a very pretty fresh strawberry nose. A sexy, feminine wine that is balanced in every way. Finishes clean with a bracing note of acidity. A delicate style that turned me on but left other tasters indifferent.

## Whitcraft

Chris Whitcraft has been a long time producer of unique Pinot Noir from various sources in California. I have been a fan of his wines for years as they are distinctive and a touch apart from the crowd. When Burt Williams left Williams Selyem, he started his own vineyard in the Anderson Valley, the Morning Dew Ranch. He has released grapes from his young vineyard to Chris Whitcraft and Brogan Cellars.

**2004 Whitcraft Winery Morning Dew Ranch Anderson Valley Pinot Noir** 14.3% alc., \$48. A terrific nose of cherry compote and cola with an Anderson Valley acid kick at the end. I really liked this wine but others were not convinced. The nose is a dead ringer for some of the great early 90's Pinots of Williams Selyem. Join the Whitcraft mailing list at [www.whitcraftwinery.com](http://www.whitcraftwinery.com) or call 805-965-0965.

  
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**If You Have Been Seduced by Pinot Noir**

**Attend **The Pinot Noir Summit****

**March 11, 2006, San Francisco, CA**

**Taste 35 top rated Pinot Noirs selected by a special panel at the Annual Pinot Noir Shootout. Meet and taste with top Pinot Noir winemakers. Enjoy Pinot Noir Workshops. Judge the wines and compare your results with the expert panel. Attend the reception with the winemakers and the gourmet dinner after the reception. Help determine whether women and men prefer different styles of Pinot Noir. Limited to 150 Pinot Noir lovers who are passionate about the sexy grape.**

**Details and registration at  
[www.affairsofthevine.com](http://www.affairsofthevine.com).**

## **Allocation Blues**

All Pinot Noir lovers have suffered the allocation blues one time or another. Since premium Pinot Noir is often of limited availability, who hasn't felt the pain of rejection from being left on the outside. Recently I received a release newsletter from a small Pinot Noir producer. I purchased from the inaugural release, but failed to buy any wine the year after. This year I received an allocation of 2 bottles for one bottling and 0 bottles for another - thanks for small favors! So here is my ode to allocations sung to the tune of "Return to Sender" made famous by Elvis Presley.

I gave a order to the postman  
He put it in his sack  
My allocation was very small  
But he brought the letter back

The winery wrote upon it  
Return to sender  
Address unknown  
No such person, no such zone

We had a quarrel  
A wine buyer's spat  
I write I'm sorry  
But my letter keeps coming back

I dropped another letter in mailbox  
Sent it special 'd'  
I swear to take all I can  
But the letter returns to me

Next time I'll take a loan  
And promise to buy more  
And if it still comes back  
I'll learn to live with little Noir

