

PinotFile[©]

End of a (Imperial) Dynasty



Over the last 20 years I have many fond memories of traveling to Hanford, California and dining at the Imperial Dynasty Restaurant. After an eight course dinner, our dining group often sat with chef Richard Wing (above) into the early morning hours listening to the marvelous stories of his experiences as food taster, chef, and chief aid to General George C Marshall. Now 83 years old, Wing is in the twilight of a career marked by a unique culinary expression in good food, wine, and taste at the Imperial Dynasty in historic China Alley (see photos, page 4). Like General George C Marshall himself, who despite being called the greatest General of the 20th century by Winston Churchill and Harry Truman, never sought the limelight. Wing is an extraordinary man who has remained simple and humble. His culinary legacy as the creator and master of *chinoise* cuisine is well-established. Chinoise cooking, a fusion of Chinese and Continental (French) cuisines is now popular everywhere. It was highly unusual for a self-taught chef in a small farming town to serve gourmet food to customers who traveled from all over the state of California to eat at the mecca of Continental-Chinoise. Beyond his culinary genius, Wing knew wine, and the former *Wine Spectator* Grand Award winning Imperial Dynasty was one of the first restaurant accounts for Stony Hill, Heitz, and Stag's Leap. My last, and probably final dining experience was on April 3, when Wing, now hobbled by bad knees, agreed to cook for our group. Still creative, and like he has done since 1958, Wing delivered a gastronomic feast that captured the soul of the ingredients. A gift from heaven.

Pinot Noir is a feminine wine: fickle, moody, sensual, sexy, perfumed, and capricious.

Volume 3, Issue 33

April 12, 2004

Wing always believed in supporting California wineries. He did it before it became fashionable. He was born in California and always felt a kin to the wines that originated here. But he is not a chauvinist. He would rather have a good Burgundy with Peking duck than California Pinot Noir.

Inside this issue:

Ambullneo	2
Giant Steps	2
Oregon vs Calif Pinot Blind Tasting	3
Reynolds Family-Winery	3
Pinot ok if Hi BP	4
Oregon Value Pinot Noir	4

Ambullneo Wines

Another small-production, handcrafted Pinot Noir producer has surfaced in the Central Coast region of California. Greg Linn (pictured) spent years following his passion for wine by running a successful wholesale fine wine business. He bought personal wine cellars and resold the wines to restaurants, retail wine stores, and personal customers. In addition, he orchestrated some legendary wine tasting dinners. Like many wine enthusiasts have done in recent years, he pursued his dream of making his own wine, and the label Ambullneo was born. His goal is to produce very high quality Pinot Noir and Chardonnay and he appears to be on the road to success. His initial releases from the 2002 vintage have won some blind tastings against tough competition, and the wines have been snapped up by some of the finest restaurants in San Francisco, Las Vegas, and Southern California. Greg was willing to share his winemaking and tasting notes with me which are summarized below.



2002 Ambullneo Big Paw Chardonnay (\$40). This Chardonnay has a great steeliness on the nose combined with a citrus character the Santa Maria region is so well known for. Sourced from several different parcels of Bien Nacido Ranch W Block, this wine reminds one of a great Meursault from a ripe vintage like 1989 or 1995. Wet stone and a floral aspect coat your mouth with a great acidity that holds it all together in perfect balance. 40 cases produced.

2002 Ambullneo Bulldog Reserve Pinot Noir (\$65). The Pinot Noir is 2/3 Dierberg Vineyard and 1/3 Solomon Hills Vineyard, both in the Santa Maria appellation. Yields were low— 1.5 tons per acre. Fermented on native yeast, crushed with 33% whole cluster, aged in 50% new oak and 16 months in barrel. No fining or filtration. This wine is the true definition of raw power and great finesse. It shows great plum and dark fruits on the nose along with a hint of crushed strawberry. The wine on the palate explodes with plums, smoky spiciness, and a rich thoroughly seductive texture. The finish goes on and on. 140 cases produced.

In 2003, production of the Pinot Noir will be increased to 350 cases with the addition of the Laetitia Vineyard into the mix. The cuvee and true production will vary from year to year depending on the barrels that make the cut and the quality of the three vineyards being used. In 2004, a Northern California program will be added that includes among others, the well-regarded Hyde Vineyard.

To purchase the wines, phone Greg at 714-227-3464. Also available at klwines.com.

Giant Steps Pinot Down Under

Although the potential for great Pinot Noir has never been fulfilled in Australia, there are a number of producers in the cool-climate region of the Yarra Valley who have the ambition to succeed. Owner Phil Sexton is developing 75 acres of beautiful hillside vineyards one hour east of Melbourne to produce world-class Pinot Noir. The vineyards are planted to seven different clones sourced from Burgundy, Australia, and New Zealand. The goal is to grow fruit and make wine less overt and obvious than is encouraged in Australia. The winery's byline is "looking for structure rather than breadth, finesse rather than largesse, fruit rather than artifact."

The **2002 Giant Steps Pinot Noir** (\$25) is the second vintage release. *BountyHunter* exclaims: "Wonderfully supple and round in the mouth, it has an almost regal air about it. When this producer becomes one of the benchmarks for Pinot Down Under, you can say you heard it here first." Available at www.bountyhunter.com, phone 1-800-943-9463.

California vs Oregon Pinot Noir Tasting

A blind tasting featuring six top Pinot Noirs each from California and Oregon was recently reported in *erobert-parker.com*. There were 35 participants (although it was not specified, I assume Robert Parker Jr was not one of the participants since Beaux Freres was in the tasting). Overall, the winner was Oregon, but several notable California Pinot Noirs were absent, including Rochioli, Dehlinger, and Williams Selyem. The tasters were disappointed by the number of wines with excessive sweet fruit and very high alcohol (what Ted Lemon has termed the “Ultracalifornian” style). Overall, the wines were not textbook Pinot Noirs. The consensus winners:

1. **2000 Domaine Serene Evanstad Reserve**, (\$50), 2. **2001 Elk Cove Roosevelt Vineyard**, (\$55), 3. **2001 Pisoni Estate**, (\$70), 4. **2001 Martinelli 7 Mules Vineyard**, (\$60), 5. **2000 Domaine Drouhin Laurene**, (\$55), 6. **2000 Rex Hill Seven Springs Vineyard**, (\$55), 7. **2000 Merry Edwards Klopp Ranch**, (\$60), 8. **2000 Archery Summit Arcus Estate**, (\$80), 9. **2001 Etude**, (\$45), 10. **2001 Beaux Freres The Beaux Freres Vineyard**, (\$70), 11. **2002 Adrian Fog Savoy Vineyard**, (\$75), and 12. **2001 Siduri Hirsch Vineyard**, (\$45).

One should not read too much into these types of tastings. Naturally Domaine Serene sent out an immediate press release to all members of their mailing list extolling the first place finish and advising purchasers that the wine was available from distributors and the winery (1-503-864-4600). I personally have drunk all of these wines at one time or another. From my memory I would put 2000 Domaine Drouhin Laurene first, 2000 Merry Edwards Klopp Ranch second, and the 2001 Beaux Freres third. Several of the others were way “over the top” to me. It is all a matter of personal taste, who you are sharing the wine with, what you are eating with the wine, and the stage in the wine’s development. Pinot Noir is such a finicky grape that I have had the experience often of drinking a terrific bottling and one week later, opening the same wine and having a totally different, and unfortunately, a disappointing tasting experience. The Beaux Freres is a perfect example: I have had experienced wine tasters try these wine and find no redeeming value in it; and I have drunk it on three different occasions and found it to be delicious each time. The blind tastings as reported above can best serve to give some general over-all information and impressions, but can never be duplicated on another date or time. One sure thing to be learned is that the expression, “the more expensive the bottle, the better the wine,” is often pure marketing hype only and never a dictum to consider seriously.

Reynolds Family Winery

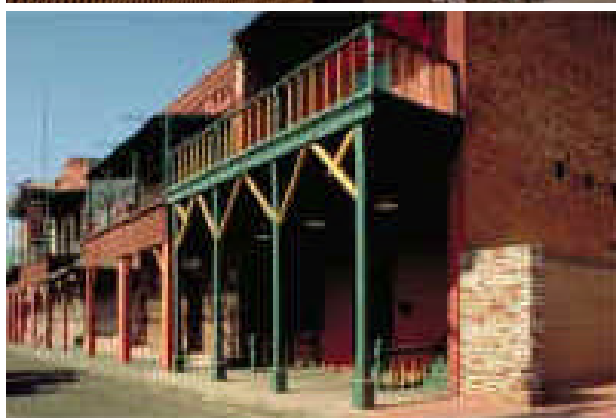
A former commercial diver, dentist, and now winemaker, Steve Reynolds, renovated an old, 14-acre ranch in the proposed Silverado Bench appellation of the Napa Valley and built a 7,000 square foot winery facility and tasting room. Wines here are truly hand-crafted and produced to emphasize rich body and intense varietal flavors. Another new winery to watch. Among the 2002 releases are two Pinot Noirs.

2002 Reynolds Family Winery Carneros Pinot Noir (\$45). The source of the grapes for this wine is the Corotto Vineyard in Carneros which has a rich history of producing outstanding Pinot Noirs. The vines are 10 years old and are clonal selection 667 grafted onto St George rootstock.

2002 Reynolds Family Winery Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$45). The Pinot Noir grapes came from 19-year-old vines on the Buena Tierra Vineyard (Wente clone). 250 cases produced.

Available through the website, www.reynoldsfamilywinery.com.





It has been well established that moderate wine drinking reduces the risk of heart disease and stroke through its anti-clotting properties, ability to boost high-density lipoprotein levels, and reduce stress. Also, a recent five-year Physicians Health Study concluded that the overall risk of death was 28 percent lower among moderate drinkers with hypertension compared to hypertensive nondrinkers. The more alcohol consumed— as long as it was moderate— the lower the risk of dying. The current American Heart Association guidelines that recommend hypertensive patients avoid alcohol completely need to be reconsidered in the light of these new findings.

**If You Drink No Noir, You
Pinot Noir**

Great 2002 Oregon Pinot Values

2002 Raptor Ridge Yamhill County Cuvee Pinot Noir (\$18). This wine is a blend of fruit from the four vineyards the winery bottles. Only 450 cases produced. The winery says: “Dark purple-blue, forward aroma and fruity with hints of Baker’s chocolate, nutmeg and mint. The wine has ripe tannins, articulate acidity, and a sweet finish.”

2002 Argyle Pinot Noir (\$17.50). A *Wine Spectator* 90, named “Wine of the Week” in *Wine Spectator*’s weekly e-mail newsletter (4/5/05). Beware, this wine is bottled with a screwtop. The winery says: “Russian River’s concentrated raspberry with Oregon’s mineral structure and a long, long finish.”

2002 Patricia Green Cellars “Dollar Bills Only” Pinot Noir (\$17). Patricia Green’s second label. Only 100 cases made this year because there was not a lot of wine from this excellent vintage that did not get blended into the single vineyard bottlings. This wine is only offered at the winery and at www.avalonwine.com. Of course, it is claimed to be better than last years wine (aren’t they all?).

2002 Ponzi “Tavola” Pinot Noir (\$19). A *Wine Spectator* rated 91 point wine, this is Ponzi’s basic entry-level Pinot Noir. *Wine Spectator* gushes: “Sour cherry, currant and plum fruit emerge, shaded with hints of mushroom and dusky spices, all of it persisting as the finish broadens uncontested against fine-grained tannins.”

Be warned. These wines are NOT as good as the winery’s top-notch bottlings. But for everyday slurping and to serve your relatives and wine-ignorant friends on Easter or with a Spring buffet, they can make you look good and keep a few extra bucks in your pocket to buy some really good stuff for yourself.