

# PinotFile<sup>©</sup>

The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinot Noir

## Joe Rochioli, Jr. - No Ordinary Joe

Last week a small group of pinoficionados had the distinct pleasure of talking with Joe Rochioli, Jr, the patriarch of Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. The day was clear and sunny and our anticipation high as we strolled out to rows of the historic West Block Pinot Noir amidst a sea of Pinot Noir vines. Joe is a very humble but proud man with a charming sense of humor. He was in good spirits as he eagerly shared his personal history which is marked by many notable successes and achievements and is inseparably linked to the history of Russian River Valley.

Joe's family history begins with his grandfather who was born in Northern Italy. At a very young age he was left on a doorstep in town. The family that initially cared for him was extremely poor and subsequently he was sent to an orphanage. He had no name at the orphanage so he was given the name "rochioli" which in Italian had no meaning. At this point in the story, one of our group drew a big laugh when he remarked "maybe so, but it sure looks good on a wine bottle!" Joe's father, Joe Rochioli, Sr., was also born in Northern Italy. He immigrated to the United States in 1912 and like so many other Italian-American immigrants including Sebastiani, Seghesio, Pedroncelli and Martini, was drawn to Sonoma County.



## Russian River Valley, Part I

Volume 4, Issue 42

June 15, 2005

The Russian River Valley (RRV) is only sixty miles north of San Francisco, but it is world apart. The RRV became an AVA in 1983. It is named after the Russian explorers who first landed at Fort Ross on the Sonoma Coast. The Russians eventually abandoned their settlement, leaving the area to Italian-American immigrants. The area is just 15 miles on any side and four cities make up the Valley's four corners: Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, Guerneville and Healdsburg.



Joe was born in Sebastopol in 1934. A few years later the family moved and Joe's dad leased ranch land along the Russian River from the Walters family. Solomon Walters and his wife had come from North Carolina in a covered wagon and in 1885 they bought about 500 acres which included the portion on Westside Road that Joe's dad farmed. Joe, Sr. was primarily in the hop business. The property also had 50 acres of grapevines dating to the 1890s, primarily a "field blend" which was typical for the time consisting of Grand Noir, Alicante Bouschet, Zinfandel, Petite Syrah, Sauvignon Vert, and Black Malvasia. Vineyards were planted primarily in the hills and crops were grown on the flat land. When the hop business went bad in 1953, string beans were planted. Starting with 10 acres, they broke the state record for production. In the mid 1960s they started inter-planting - two rows of beans in-between two rows of grapevines. The old vines were ripped out and French Colombard and Cabernet Sauvignon were planted. These were wrong choices for the climate. Joe, Sr. eventually purchased the property he had been leasing. When Joe returned from college in 1959, his father turned over the grape growing to him, but Joe, Sr. was still the boss. Joe wanted to plant varietals, but his father was reluctant since varietals produced less and did not attract more money in those days. Joe knew that the land here, which was seven feet of fertile soil over gravel, was ideal for certain grape varietals. Finally he talked his dad into planting Sauvignon Blanc in 1959. Joe traveled to UC Davis where Sauvignon Blanc was planted to various clones. He went along the rows and tasted the grapes and ended up taking budwood from the one row he thought tasted the best. The ten acres of Sauvignon Blanc vines were so vigorous he had to trellis them on a double-Geneva configuration (see photo below). They are still producing today and have won more awards than any other wine he produces. The vines at UC Davis were subsequently pulled out and Joe was never able to obtain more budwood. The type of clone remains forever a mystery. For several years the Sauvignon Blanc grapes went into mixed whites and it wasn't until 1969 that Windsor Winery took it to use as a distinct varietal.



Joe begged his father to try Pinot Noir. UC Davis had developed a clone of Gamay Beaujolais that was very vigorous, but the wines produced from these grapes were more like a rosé with very little color. Joe said “no way I was going to plant that stuff!” When asked why he thought of Pinot Noir, Joe said that he was aware of the quality of French red Burgundy and had a hunch that the grape would do well on the Rochioli ranch. After his father died in 1966, Joe pulled out the French Colombar and Cabernet Sauvignon and planted Pinot Noir in spite of many who felt he was crazy at the time. There was no Pinot Noir budwood available so Joe sought out a Frenchman south of St. Helena in Napa who reluctantly gave him some “suitcase” French Pommard budwood. Most likely, the clone is UCD4 (and possibly a field selection). He planted 4 acres of East Block Pinot Noir in 1968, the earliest planting of Pinot Noir in the Russian River Valley. In 1970 (some literature references 1969 but Joe told us 1970), 4 acres of West Block Pinot Noir were planted using budwood from Karl Wenté. Again this is most likely a form of UCD4 Pommard. The planting is typical for the time with 14 ft rows and 8 ft between vines (see photo below). The rootstock is non-resistant AXR1. West Block Pinot Noir is often referred to as the “mother block” as cuttings from this block were used for several other blocks on the Rochioli farm and many other vineyards in the Valley including Allen Vineyard across Westside Road from Rochioli. The first Chardonnay vines were planted on the ranch in 1970.



Three Corner Vineyard was planted in 1974 with nursery UCD4. This vineyard was originally part of the Allen Vineyard but was deeded to Joe as a favor for farming the Allen Ranch for many years. Little Hill is 2.2 acres planted in 1985 from cuttings from West Block. River Block consists of 13 acres established in 1995. More recently several blocks have been planted on both sides of Westside Road (the blocks on the uphill side of Westside Road are called “Sweetwater Ranch”). In these newer blocks and as replacement vines in the older blocks, newer clones including 115, 667, and 777 have been planted. Today, of the ranch’s 160 acres, 128 are planted, one-half to Pinot Noir. The oldest vines in the East and West Blocks are virus ridden and some are being pulled out. Joe never thought he would have to do this in his lifetime, but the vast number of funguses, viruses, and other pests today mean shorter life spans for vineyards. People beg him not to pull the vines out, but at production levels of one ton per acre or less, it doesn’t make economic sense to keep them.

Joe grew up in a poor family that spoke only Italian and lived completely from the land. When he entered school at the age of six, he could hardly speak any English. At the one-room schoolhouse two miles up the road he was ridiculed for his lack of English and home-made lunches. He worked hard on his father's farm in his formative years and by age 12, he was doing a man's work, dumping 60 pound sacks of hops. When he entered Healdsburg High School, he was 6-foot tall, weighed 160 pounds and wore size 12 shoes. His mother thought there was something wrong with him. As a freshman, he got caught fooling around by the football coach who ordered him to do 100 push-ups. Joe was so strong he quickly did them without a sweat. The coach asked him to come out for the football team and he obliged. He had never seen the game played, but he quickly became a star linebacker. He also started playing baseball his freshman year and earned all-league honors in that sport as well. He was one of the first athletes to be elected into the Hall of Fame at Healdsburg High School. He helped start the first Future Farmer Fair in Healdsburg which is still held today and was President for both the Future Farmers of America and the Block H (athletic) Club. He won just about every award offered in high school including the Bank of America award. Having accumulated "tons" of trophies and with scholarships in hand, he headed off to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo where he played four years of baseball. He majored in Animal Science, but took all the agricultural electives he could. In 1957 he was drafted into the army where he did research on radiated foods and vitamin deficiencies in K rations. In 1959 when he got out of the service he was offered a high-paying civilian job but his dad expected him to come home and work on the ranch. Instead of the \$10,500 which the civilian job paid, his dad gave him barely \$3,000 a year or \$1.00 an hour. He continued to play semi-pro baseball for ten years for the Healdsburg Prune Packers.

The first viable Pinot Noir crop from the ranch was in 1971 and was sent to a co-op crush facility for Gallo in Windsor. Since there were limited roads at the time, straw was put across the Russian River bed so that horses could draw the grape-laden wagons directly to Windsor. Until the early 1970's, all of the grapes from Russian River grape growers like Seghesio and Martini & Pratti went with those from Rochioli into "Gallo garbage." There were no other buyers for grapes. Joe recalls how sick he was to send his beautiful Pinot Noir grapes from East Block and West Block to Gallo who then threw them in with other varietals from Sonoma and the Napa and Central Valleys to make his highly successful Hearty Burgundy. Hearty Burgundy had Zinfandel and Petite Sirah as its base. In Ellen Hawkes book, *Blood & Wine, The Unauthorized Story of the Gallo Wine Empire*, she states "Hearty Burgundy was praised by some critics for its depth and complexity, and even gained popularity among 'wine snobs' who usually scorned the Gallo label." Grape farmers were not organized and were victimized by Gallo. The grower would deliver the grapes to Gallo in September not having a clue as to what he would be paid. In December, before property taxes were due, the farmer would receive a check in the mail from Gallo who paid whatever he wanted. In the mid-1960s the grape growers formed the North Coast Grape Growers Association and fought this unfair practice of delivering grapes without knowing the payment they would receive. Finally, the farmers got Gallo to commit to \$100 a ton with a \$5 bonus if the grapes were really nice. Toward the end of the 1960s, Joe had some contracts for his grapes. In 1972, Dry Creek bought the Sauvignon Blanc grapes under contract. It was a long time before a law was passed that a winery had to have an upfront written agreement on the price they would pay.

In 1973 Davis Bynum, a San Francisco newspaperman, bought a hop kiln on Westside Road and converted it into a winery. He purchased Rochioli's Pinot Noir and put the name Rochioli on it. The Davis Bynum Rochioli Pinot Noir was the first wine from the area labeled as Russian River Valley. Joe still has a bottle today. In 1976 Joe made 1,000 cases of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay at Davis Bynum under the Fenton Acres label. In 1979 he sold some West Block Pinot Noir to Williams Selyem who made it famous (since 1998, Williams Selyem only receives Pinot Noir from River Block). Gary Farrell, the winemaker at Davis Bynum, made 50 cases of Rochioli Pinot Noir from West Block and Allen Vineyard which launched his Gary Farrell label. Also, in 1982 he made 150 cases of Pinot Noir for Rochioli to start the Rochioli brand. Shortly after this, Joe's son, Tom, returned from the business world, disenchanted with his job and joined the farm. He used his business acumen to build a 10,000 case winery which was constructed on the estate in 1985. The name was changed to J. Rochioli Winery. A winemaker was hired, but after the first year, Tom took over and has made the wines ever since. Tom is a self-taught winemaker who never took any formal schooling in winemaking. He lives on the property in a house on the hill above the estate which Joe built entirely himself over a two year period.

Joe, is responsible for a number of important innovations in grape growing. All of his ideas came from intuition and common sense. He was one of the first to pull leaves to reduce vigor and open up the grape clusters to sunlight. He started doing this with the Sauvignon Blanc and noted that it made better quality wine. He then started pulling leaves on the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. From the beginning of his grape farming career, he realized the importance of limiting yields and even today people cry when they see him throw clusters of West Block Pinot Noir on the ground. The Pommard clone planted here will produce five or six tons per acre when young but he noted the grapes had sugar, acid, and pH, but no color or flavor. He found that if he kept yields under four tons per acre it made a big difference. He was also one of the first and most adept field budders. Up until the 1970s, all grafting was done in nurseries (so-called "bench graft"). With the widespread demand for vines, field grafts became the norm. Joe was able to field graft an extraordinary 500 vines per day and through the years budded practically every ranch in the county. For years he traveled the county in his 1947 International pickup with a top speed of 35 mph to work in other's vineyards. Owners would not trust anyone else. In recognition of his innovative farming practices, he was awarded the prestigious Copia Wine Grower of The Year Award in 2003. Most of his life he has risen at 4:00 AM and worked 10 hours a day, 6 days a week. He looks very healthy, but he has numerous physical problems related to the years of hard labor including two poor knees and a shoulder that will be operated on soon. He has had ten surgeries from back to internal operations. But his spirit is evident and he continues to be in charge of the entire Rochioli vineyard holdings and continues to work long hours six days a week. Throughout his life he has spurned vacations, but tomorrow leaves for Hawaii with all of his extended family (five children, eleven grandchildren) for a well-earned rest.



The Rochiolis now have 600,000 vines. There are eight steady men who have worked on the estate for up to 20 years who know how to prune and trim the canes. Vines are lost every year. In the River Block alone, 4,000 vines were lost last year so replanting goes on continuously. The perimeter of the vineyard is thick with brush and is a source of pests. In recent years, the blue-green sharpshooter and the meelybug have been the most ferocious predators. 60% of the grape crop are sold to others including Davis Bynum ("Le Pinot" is from East Block), Gary Farrell (parts of West Block and River Block), Bannister, Solitude, and Castalia (Castalia's Terry Bering works as an assistant to Tom Rochioli and bottles some Pinot Noir under his own label). There are 31

**“Miss West Block 2005”****Renate Cohen**

wineries on the waiting list to get Rochioli fruit including most of the small prestigious producers of Pinot Noir in California. Joe tells them they will never get any fruit, but they insist on being put on the waiting list. The estate blend of Pinot Noir (2,500 cases) is bottled under the Rochioli name, and the five single-block vineyard-designated Pinot Noirs are labeled J. Rochioli. The single block releases include East Block, West Block, Three Corner, Little Hill, and River Block. The estate Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc are available from the winery and limited retail. The J. Rochioli Pinot Noirs are highly allocated to a mailing list which has a waiting list. There are no plans to increase production of Rochioli Estate and J. Rochioli Winery wines beyond 10,000 cases. Currently, Rochioli fruit demands about \$4,000 per ton compared to an average of \$1,500 a ton for fruit from other vineyards. Cuttings from the vines are no longer sold or given away.

In all of the years Joe has worked the estate, he has never seen two vintages the same. Last year, 2004, was very unusual in that the growing season was very cool for a long time. When a heat spike occurred at the end of the summer, all of the fruit from all of the vineyards ripened all at once. The ageability of his wines depends on the vintage. Some years age gracefully for more than ten years, while others seem to peak at five to six years. His Sauvignon Blanc is considered the best made in California, the Chardonnays are first-rate, and his Pinot Noirs are ethereal. The Pinot Noirs have a consistent style of rich fruit that is succulent and spicy and tastes damned good. They are benchmark wines for Russian River Valley Pinot Noir.

Quite a man and quite a story. Joe summarizes it best when he says “I was never in it to make a lot of money. I do it for the pride. When somebody asks how we do it I answer that it’s the combination of soil, climate, clones, instinct and farming practices.”