

Problems In Pinot Land

Welcome back to Wine in Easy English on What's for EnglishDotCom. I'm Gerald Wright.

Today I'm going to talk about Pinot Noir, a great grape that makes super fine wines. But there are some problems in Pinot land. Some controversies as well as some trends that not everybody is happy with.

But first, thanks as always for coming back to listen. As I've said before, a very good way to develop your fluency in English is to read or listen to material on a subject that you know about or love. This is known as extensive reading or extensive listening. Since you have knowledge about the subject, you should be able to comprehend more - or even to guess better. And since you are interested in the subject, you should have more motivation to study.

I talk about wine for adult learners of English who also love wine. I try to speak a little more slowly and without too many complicated words.

In this podcast, I assume that you will have some degree of knowledge. Anyway, it may help if you are familiar with Pinot Noir, with Burgundy, and certain terms like body, aroma and so forth.

Let's get started.

Pinot Noir has always been a wine that I've liked a lot. I've never been a fanatic. I've never collected it or studied it systematically or seriously. But when I see a bottle of Pinot that I'm about to open, it always gives me a thrill. There's always something new to learn about Pinot Noir. There's something elusive about the grape. (Elusive means hard to grasp; difficult to understand). I guess it has to do with the sensual, hedonistic or pleasurable aspect of great Pinot Noir. You just know it's going to deliver pleasure and excitement. And the taste of a Pinot Noir gets so much influence from the terroir and from the vintage that you can get some intellectual stimulation at the same time. Pinot Noir really is a grape for the mind and body.

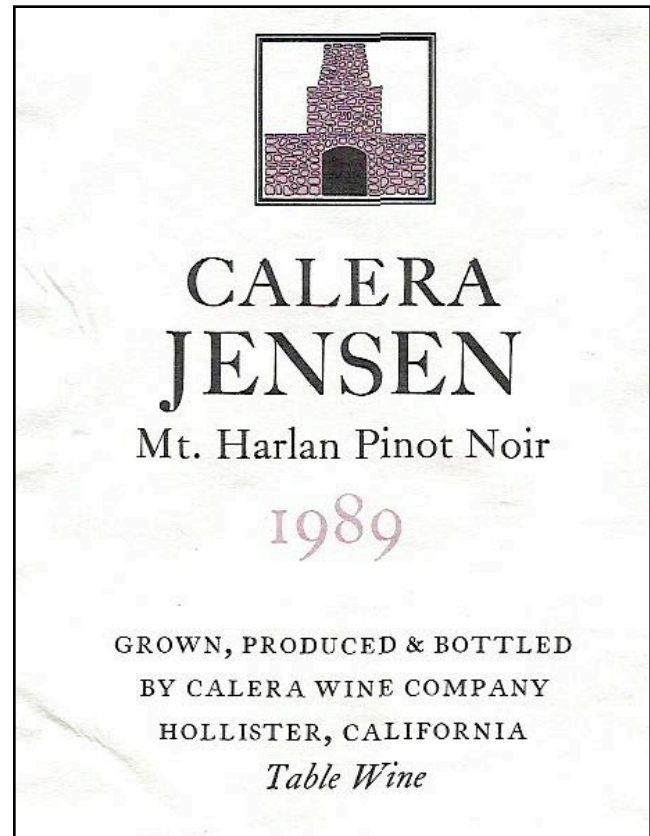
Most Pinot Noir lovers began by discovering Burgundy. But I developed my taste for Pinot Noir by drinking California Pinots. I started drinking Pinot somewhat seriously in the early nineties. You should know that this was a time when California Pinot Noir was not highly regarded. In fact, at that time

most critics said that Pinot Noir was difficult to grow well outside of Burgundy. It was a fickle grape (fickle means changeable, not steady). They said Pinot Noir ripens quickly and needs cooler climates and limestone soils and would never achieve the greatness it achieves in Burgundy.

But the Pinots I drank back then remain in my memory more clearly than almost any other wines. I remember quite vividly drinking Calera and Chalone from the Central Coast, the Au Bon Climat, Byron and Sanfords from Santa Barbara; Gary Farrell and Rochioli from Sonoma and Robert Mondavi, Etude Pinots from the Carneros region.

What I remember about California Pinots back then was this: they sparkled in the glass - they were red, ruby or garnet or light red - not opaque or purple but not totally transparent either. They had that heady Pinot perfume, a nose of strawberries or cherries - red fruits, mixed with a bit of earth or some hints of tobacco or cherry cola. When I did occasionally drink Burgundy, I liked those hints of rotting leaves, forest floor sometimes some barnyard smells.. Good Pinots give you a nose that changes a bit with every whiff, something that you can just keep on smelling. In the mouth, the California Pinots had that luscious, pleasing mouth feel, plenty of fruit and not much tannin but the best bottles did have plenty of refreshing acidity and mineral as well. These Pinots were full of character, but medium or even light-bodied. They weren't heavy or extracted.

As I learned later, drinking these pretty California Pinots did not prepare me for appreciating the great stuff from Burgundy. Even now I'm often surprised at how tannic some of the grand crus and premier crus can be. While some Burgundy can be soft and hedonistic like California Pinot Noir, you really have to learn to appreciate Burgundy. The great Burgundies - the premier and grand crus - are not easy-going wines. Especially when they are young, they may have a lot of tannin. Of course, the sharp tannins are what give



One California Pinot that I still remember very well!

the wines structure and elegance in which the fruit and perfume is in perfect balance with the structure.

But things are changing in the Pinot world - especially in California.

First of all, there's been the *Sideways* phenomenon. *Sideways* was a popular film, released in 2004 in which one character loved Pinot Noir. In fact, he discovered the meaning of his life in Pinot Noir. At one point, he said, "Only somebody who really takes the time to understand Pinot's potential can then coax it into its fullest expression. Then, I mean, oh its flavors, they're just the most haunting and brilliant and thrilling and subtle and... ancient on the planet. "



Tasting Pinot in *Sideways*

It's hard to believe, but this film led to a skyrocketing of Pinot consumption. In 1990, the total harvest of California Pinot Noir was 30,000 tons. But by 2009, it had jumped up to 157,000 tons. That's a five-fold increase. Certainly, Pinot Noir was growing more popular generally, but the movie put a fire in the demand.

Now with that kind of growth in demand, you would have to expect that something bad was going to happen. Something dark.

How could huge, insane demand like that NOT lead some producers to cut corners?

In one famous case from 2008, Gallo was discovered to have imported wine from the Languedoc in France that was labeled Pinot Noir but was actually Syrah. They went looking for a source of Pinot Noir they could import and use in a low-cost brand called "La Bicyclette." They claim they had no idea that the French merchants providing them with Pinot Noir were actually giving them Syrah.

One might ask why Gallo's own experts couldn't tell Syrah



Is it *really* Pinot?

from Pinot in what they were buying. I mean, a consumer might taste the wine and think, "now that's a rather heavy pinot... hmmm." and leave it at that. But trained tasters and buyers should be able to detect the difference. Or did they just ignore what was plainly obvious because of the pressure to get more Pinot Noir into the hands of consumers? Or were they partners in the crime? We don't know yet.

Interestingly, Syrah from the Rhone or Languedoc has a long history in Burgundy. In the bad old days of the sixties and seventies, many Burgundy producers doctored their wines with a bit of Syrah. And many people knew it. Why did they do that? In those decades, the vineyards may have been planted with some rather poor clones of Pinot Noir, clones that tended to produce lighter wines. Also the vintages might have been cooler than they are today. Chaptalization (adding sugar) is legal and had been (perhaps still is) widely practiced in Burgundy. So they may have asked, what's wrong with adding in a little Syrah to darken the wines along with adding the sugar to bring up the alcohol? Well... Syrah is totally prohibited by the rules of Burgundian appellations.

The Gallo case is about the need to satisfy the demand for low-cost Pinot Noir. The Burgundy case is about dealing with weak vintages. But strange new trends have been happening in the world of higher-end California Pinot Noir as well.

Over the past ten years or so, wine drinkers have noticed a change in California Pinot Noir. They've been getting darker and more opaque. They've been getting sweeter as well and much higher in alcohol. 12.5% to 13% alcohol used to be the norm. But these days a 13.5% alcohol Pinot may be considered low. Many are coming out at 13.5%, 14%, alcohol. 14.5% is not uncommon and I've even seen 15% percent alcohol.

This is a trend that's been happening with many wines - and not just Pinots. And it has a lot to do with how grapes ripen in the vineyard. Deciding when to pick grapes means a series of trade offs. When grapes ripen, sugars rise and acidity falls. Ripe grapes with higher sugar levels give you higher alcohol and possibly more sweetness, but at the cost of lower acidity. And lower acidity means flatter, less refreshing wines. In California winemakers used to measure sugar levels and Ph (the measure of acidity) to decide when to pick. They were looking for the balance of potential alcohol and acidity. In colder climates, winemakers still do. But recently they've discovered another kind of ripeness, phenolic ripeness. This is the ripeness of a wide array of flavor and aroma compounds. Good phenolic ripeness means stronger flavors and aromas. Unfortunately, the phenolic compounds ripen more slowly than the sugars - especially in hotter places. So by the time the

phenolic ripeness is at its maximum, the sugar could be so high the wine could have more alcohol than port.

What to do? In the old days, probably the better vineyards produced grapes that achieved the perfect balance of sugar, acidity and flavors naturally. But these days, winemakers can use technology to craft super flavorful wine from almost any grapes they work with. Winemakers can pick grapes with maximum phenolic ripeness and use technology to engineer the alcohol down so that it isn't too high; they can also preserve or increase acidity and filter out any other aromas they think consumers might not like.

At the low end, these developments are giving us cheap wines that don't taste thin and watery. Nothing wrong with that I guess. But at the higher end, you get more and more Pinot Noirs that are thick as cough syrup, extremely soft and bursting with fruit and aroma. These are the California fruit bombs. Supposedly consumers like these wines and consumer demand is driving this new style. Many are certain to get high scores from critics. But many consumers are beginning to say, "enough already." This isn't what I'm looking for in Pinot Noir... I don't want Pinot Noir that's as black, thick and fruity as Syrah. (Not that there's anything wrong with good Syrah, mind you.)

And now some folks are suggesting that in addition to using roto-fermenters and reverse osmosis filtering to make these hugely ripe Pinot Noirs, some wineries are indeed adding Syrah to make their Pinots even darker and heavier still.

Not too long ago a friend brought over a bottle of Pinot Noir from a fairly new producer. The cool label and very heavy glass told me it must have been "expensive..." As I said earlier, I always feel a thrill when I'm about to open a bottle of Pinot Noir. But then I noticed the alcohol at over 15%! Yikes. I didn't say anything. At dinner, the wine was pretty amazing. Dark and aromatic. Full of wild fruit flavor and a finish that lingered for minutes. Everybody ooohed and ahhhhhed. But it really didn't taste like Pinot. No matter, it was fun. But the next day, I suffered one of the worst headaches ever. My head pounded with a kind of migraine for over half the day. Perhaps I had had too much to drink. That's possible. But I also think that something they did to that wine, the engineering of the alcohol and acidity may have caused some chemical changes that made me sick.

So I began by saying that 25 years ago or so California Pinot Noir was unique. A bit more fruity and less elegant, structured or tannic than Burgundy. But Burgundy was the model for California producers. But is it still the model? I guess not.

California Pinot Noir has evolved through a kind of process of natural selection, with winemakers seeking to outdo the others with new vineyard and winery technologies, giving consumers ever fruitier and ever sweeter wines. And it's gotten to the point where the wines are no longer Burgundian in style at all. Can we turn back the clock? I wonder....