

VARIETAL FOCUS

Pinot Noir

Revisited

Winemakers explore the influence of French Burgundy production on West Coast Pinot Noir winemaking

Lance Cutler

Lance Cutler has been a working winemaker in Sonoma County for 35 years. He has been a contributing editor for *Wine Business Monthly* for more than 10 years. His unique perspective on winemaking has led to our Industry Roundtable series and our Varietal Focus series. Lance is also the author of four books, including *The Tequila Lover's Guide to Mexico*.

PHOTO COURTESY: HYDE DE VILLAIN

THE WINE WORLD IS made up of hundreds of different varieties, but few are as iconic, historic and revered as Pinot Noir. The famous saying, “The first duty of wine is to be red . . . the second is to be Burgundy,” is attributed to **Harry Waugh**, the celebrated English wine merchant, but it remains true.

Pinot Noir is a special variety that has challenged great winemakers for centuries. If Burgundy is the apex of the variety, then many other regions are approaching the summit. We made Pinot Noir the subject of our second ever Varietal Focus more than seven years ago. We felt it was time to revisit the variety from a different perspective.

For that previous article I wrote, “Pinot Noir is more than just another variety; it is seductive and ephemeral and attracts a fiercely independent, opinionated breed. Winemakers often refer to Pinot Noir in feminine terms, like voluptuous, alluring and ravishing. There is a love/hate relationship, and they are just as likely to curse it as to praise it.”

“God made Cabernet Sauvignon, whereas the devil made Pinot Noir,” was how the legendary **André Tchelistcheff** put it.

Wine Business Monthly hosted a seminar that looked at the influence of French Burgundy production on West Coast Pinot Noir winemaking. We invited illustrious wineries with a French pedigree and sensibility, like **Domaine Drouhin**, **Hyde de Villaine** and **Radio-Coteau**. We poured these wines alongside celebrated Central Coast producers **Calera**, **Brewer-Clifton** and **Wrath**.

The focus was to look at Pinot Noir to see how the French deal with it and how our winemakers have adapted those techniques to deal with our unique terroir, climate, clones and rootstocks. It made for a lively discussion, and we tasted some truly wonderful wines.

Domaine Drouhin

2012 Domaine Drouhin Pinot Noir Cuvée Laurène, 3,300 cases, \$70

It would be hard to be more French than **Maison Joseph Drouhin**, producing fine Burgundy in Beaune, France since 1880. In 1987 the Drouhin family decided to plant Pinot Noir in Oregon and begin **Domaine Drouhin Oregon** (DDO). They installed **Véronique Drouhin** as winemaker and became an integral pioneer in the burgeoning Pinot Noir industry of the Willamette Valley.



Winemaker Véronique Drouhin

According to Drouhin:

“We are a French family from Burgundy, so that informs who we are in Oregon. The Drouhins adapt to Oregon because the goal is to make excellent Oregon wine [not to recreate the climates of Burgundy]. We do find that it is relatively easy in Oregon to get color, fruit, tannin, etc., so we are eternally mindful to find and preserve the inherent elegance of the wine. The goal for Laurène is the same with all Drouhin wine [Burgundy or Oregon]: elegance, balance and above all...finesse.

“We selected our vineyard in the Dundee Hills because of its remarkable similarity in climate, latitude and aspect to the great vineyards of Burgundy. Our vineyard sits at an elevation of 350 to 750 feet. Everything planted at DDO is unique to the estate. We grow and plant rootstocks that we’ve learned are well suited to the specifics of our vineyard sites in terms of site elevation, soil depth and moisture-holding capability. Because we believe in diversity, we use a mix of mostly Dijon clones. We generally don’t irrigate once the vines are established [after three years]. The vineyard is organic and LIVE-certified.

“We use high density plantings, 3,100 plants per acre, and we are very active in the vineyard, managing cover crop, canopy and thinning. That said, 2012 was a gorgeous year, and the fruit that came in was clean, ripe and spectacular. We determine when to harvest ultimately on the flavor and complexity of the fruit. We’re aware of the numbers, but we spend a lot of time in the vineyards so we can assess each block’s readiness.

“We destem the grapes, sort and sometimes use a small amount of whole cluster. Then we cold soak for two to four days. During cold soak, we will punch-down or pump-over once a day. Fermentation is carried out by native yeast at temperatures between 80° F and 86° F, and we will pump-over or punch-down twice a day. Toward the end of fermentation we reduce that to once a day.

“Malolactic is carried out in barrels with no inoculation and generally takes six to 10 months to complete. We use 100 percent French oak barrels with 20 percent new oak. Wine is aged 14 months. We rack from barrel to barrel after malolactic, and then again from barrels to tank at blending. If needed, we will DE-filter the wine. The wine is bottle-aged for 18 months before release.”

Tasting comments:

On the nose, the wine is a vibrant mix of red and black berries, red and black cherries, fresh spice and wild herbs. There is a delicate touch of oak, which integrates nicely. It is beautifully balanced and the body holds up to the acidity. This could be the best Oregon Pinot Noir I have ever tasted. It demonstrates what Pinot Noir should be: composed and elegant with power and drive. It is beautifully crafted, but retains some angular acidity on the front and dryness on the finish. It needs more time to smooth out.





Winemaker Stéphane Vivier

Hyde de Villaine

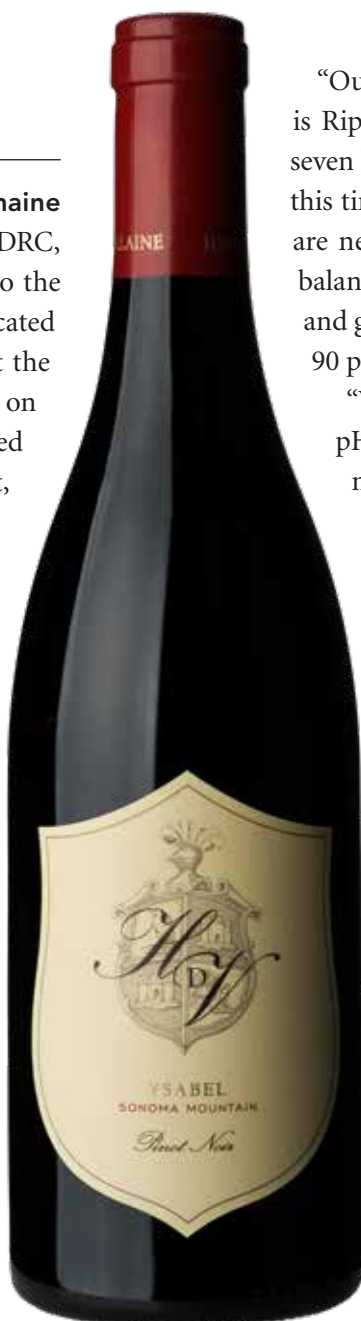
2014 "Ygnacia" Pinot Noir Hyde Vineyard, 200 cases, \$95

We doubt there is a more famous name in Burgundy than **Domaine Romanée-Conti** (DRC). As co-director of the famed DRC, **Aubert de Villaine** has impeccable credentials. Married into the Hyde family in Carneros, de Villaine and **Larry Hyde** dedicated themselves to producing fantastic wines that truly represent the place they are grown. Winemaker **Stéphane Vivier** has been on board since 2002. Born and raised in Burgundy, Vivier learned his craft in Pommard, Meursault and Chassagne-Montrachet, among other places.

According to Vivier:

"The Burgundian lesson teaches that 'Once the grapes arrive at the winery, it is too late.' The work has to be done in the vineyard. The wine should taste of where it is grown. The style comes from the vineyards. We look for complexity, finesse and length, combining fruit, floral and earthy/spicy character. We want a wine that shows energy, freshness, complexity and ageability.

"Good Burgundy should show great elegance and less fruit intensity than West Coast Pinot Noirs. Pinot Noir should have fruit character, floral and spice with herbs. On the West Coast these three dimensions tend to remain a bit separate with hard tones. With good Burgundy, the wine flows through all dimensions, which render it more complex but also cause it to take longer to evolve.



"Our vineyards are pretty flat, about 100 feet elevation. Our rootstock is Riparia Gloire, and we use various massales selections, including seven heirloom clones and some 828. Our vineyards are sustainable at this time, but we are moving toward organic certification. Herbicides are never used. The vines are irrigated. We use VSP with a straight balance canopy. No clusters touch each other. We do no leaf pulling and green-harvest only if necessary. We will drop unripe fruit at 80 to 90 percent veraison, ending up with 2.75 to 3.5 tons per acre.

"We determine when to pick primarily by taste, but watching Brix, pH, TA and malic acid. We do no crushing and only partial destemming. We employ a short cold soak, up to three days at 45° F. We add no acid or nutrients. Fermentation is carried out with either native yeast or Bourgogne rouge. We use both pump-overs and punch-downs in our fermentation regimen, anywhere from zero to twice a day. Fermentation temperatures go from 70° F to an occasional 94° F. Malolactic is carried out in barrel.

"We use 100 percent French oak with 18 percent new. We do not rack the wine until bottling, and we age in barrel for 18 months. The wine is bottled unfiltered and gets 12 to 14 months bottle age before release."

Tasting comments:

The wine presents floral aromatics, light touches of red fruit, violet, rose petal and rhubarb. It is intense and soft with a long acid finish but still elegant. There is nice complexity with spice layers. It is true to Carneros with dark cherry and cola flavors. It is warm, sexy, curvy, with ripe plum and good acidity that balances the fruit.



SEAN DESMOND
Winemaker Eric Sussman

Radio-Coteau

2013 Dierke Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, 300 cases, \$64

Eric Sussman was born and raised in New York. He went to **Cornell University** to study agriculture and became interested in viticulture. After graduation, he went to Yakima Valley where he shepherded a small 14 acre vineyard through organic certification. Soon he took over as winemaker and decided that would be his calling.

In 1995 he landed a job at **Baron Philippe de Rothschild** and the next year he moved to Burgundy to work at **Domaine Comte Armand** in Pommard and **Domaine Jacques Prieur** in Meursault. While there, he visited dozens of wineries and studied winemaking in Beaune. He loved that Burgundian winemakers related to the land and passed their winemaking techniques from one generation to the next focusing on natural and traditional methods. He returned to the United States working at **Bonny Doon** and **Dehlinger**, before starting his own **Radio-Coteau** and focusing once again on Burgundian varieties.

According to Sussman:

“While in France, I learned that sometimes the hardest thing to do is nothing at all. Radio-Coteau works closely with select cool-climate coastal vineyard sites in Western Sonoma County and Anderson Valley to produce wines with vibrant, balanced fruit and a distinct sense of place. The focus is on organic, detailed viticulture in conjunction with a natural non-interventionist approach in the cellar. We like to say that our wines have Old World sensibilities with New World expression. We harvest with the intention of preserving freshness and retaining natural acidity and vibrancy.”



“This 2013 Dierke from Sonoma Coast comes from a very good vintage. It has no whole cluster, but it is mostly whole berries. Other than a bit of SO₂ at harvest and post-ML, there are no additions: no acid, no nutrients, no yeast. This vineyard is dry-farmed and CCOF-certified. Located at an elevation of 300 to 400 feet, it is made up of clones 828 and Mt. Eden on 101-14 and 3309 rootstock. Vines are VSP trellis using spurless double guyot cane pruning. We perform a green drop with minimal leaf pulling to protect the fruit with filtered sunlight. Production runs 1.5 to 2.5 tons per acre.”

“We determine when to pick based on flavor, physiological maturity indicators, like skin and seed maturity, along with pH, Brix, TA and vine health. Grapes are destemmed but not crushed. We add 30 ppm SO₂ and then cold soak for three to five days at 55° F. We use hand punch downs along with a few

non-aerated pump-overs during cold soak. We add no acid and no nutrients. Both primary and secondary fermentations are carried out with native yeast. Fermentation maxes out at 86° F. Our native malolactic usually takes four to six months. Because malolactic is long and slow, the wine is not intensely fruit-driven and has more nuance.

“We use medium toast, tight-grained French oak to age the wine for 16 months with 35 percent new oak. We do not rack, fine or filter. The wine receives six months of bottle age before release.”

Tasting comments:

It has the red fruit of strawberry and raspberry first with some floral notes and herb on the finish with nice acidity. There is a lot of bright cherry, and the acidity is electric in the mouth, which is most appropriate to the non-interventionist winemaking technique and the North Coast region.

Calera Winery

2012 Jensen Pinot Noir, 1,580 cases, \$96

Josh Jensen began tasting great wines when he was 13 years old. **George Selleck**, a great wine collector and friend of Josh's father, would have him sniff and taste the wines they were drinking. By the time he was 21, Jensen had tasted all of the great Bordeaux, as well as wonderful red and white Burgundies.

After floating around Europe for five years, Jensen decided that his love of wine might lead to a career. He picked grapes at **Domaine de Romanée Conti** in 1970. The following year he met **Jacques Seyesses** of **Domaine Dujac**. His Burgundian mentors told him the key was limestone soil, so Jensen returned to California and searched for limestone. He searched for more than two years before settling on Mt. Harlan, which not only had limestone but retained ocean influences to keep things cool enough for Pinot Noir.

In August 2017, Jensen sold Calera to **Duckhorn Wine Company**.



Winemaker Mike Waller

According to Jensen:

“Our vineyards sit at 2,200 feet and are planted on St. George rootstock. There were a lot of bad Pinot clones around at that time. I wanted to make sure we had true Pinot Noir. The clones are the Calera selection, much of which derived from **Dick Graff** at **Chalone**. If the cuttings had come from Chambertin, I didn't think my wines would taste like Chambertin. If they came from Pommard, I didn't think our wine would taste like Pommard. All I wanted was to have a fair chance, by using the true, potentially high-quality Pinot Noir plant material.

“Our vineyard is organic and uses minimal irrigation. We shoot-thin in productive years, but production remains well below 2 tons per acre. We harvest by taste because each year our Brix, pH and TA vary dramatically. We crush cluster samples in the lab and taste the juice. There is a magical ripe point to the taste for us. That's when we pick.

“We use traditional Burgundian winemaking methods, by which I mean native yeast, whole cluster and punch-down only. Each day's picking becomes a separate fermentation lot and barrel-aging lot, which we blend at bottling when we might select out certain parts. We add 30 ppm SO₂ at the tank. We punch-down once daily before fermentation begins, then twice daily during peak fermentation, and finish with one punch-down and gas the last few days. Fermentation maxes out at 90° F.

“We combine press and free run wines automatically because trials we've run to keep them separate didn't impress us. So, we'll press into a tank, let the wine settle for 24 hours and rack into 100 percent French oak barrels, 30 percent of which are new. Malolactic occurs in barrels naturally. We have done this from day one, and it has never changed.

“We've gone to not racking the wines at all. That change in methodology is not Burgundian. They rack barrel-to-barrel. Currently, we put the wine in the barrel, and it stays there for 16 months if there is not a problem. We don't rack or filter the wine, and it gets a full year of bottle age before release.

“We've always used very traditional, non-conforming techniques to make our wine. We put the fruit in a tank, let it ferment, press it and age it in a barrel. No voodoo.”



Tasting comments:

The nose shows high-pitch fruit character with tannin and structure from mountain fruit and limestone soil. There is cranberry, wild strawberry, crushed flowers, forest floor and spice. It is full-bodied and layered with a rounded texture. Loads of fruit but still complex. It begins very ripe, almost prune, but then the aromatic lift from the whole berries and whole clusters kicks in as the saving grace. It takes the darker, riper bottom and lifts it back up. This is extreme sport winemaking and not for the faint at heart. It is extreme yet still integrated.

Brewer-Clifton

2014 Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir, 4,500 cases, \$48

Greg Brewer is an admitted Francophile, having lived in France and worked as a French instructor at **UC Santa Barbara**. To him French influence in winemaking is not about yeast or barrels: it is more a reflection of French confidence and provinciality.



JERMEY BALL
Winemaker Greg Brewer

According to Brewer:

“The French exude confidence and are provincial in a great way. They are prideful of where they come from. Their composed spirit and the confident hand that stewards the land are conveyed to the wines. I don’t think it really matters where you are; but once you own that you are here, then that is the French model. For me, it is the Sta. Rita Hills, and that allows me to make good wines that are restful and composed.”

“All of our wines come from our estate vineyards. Elevations run between 350 and 450 feet. Our rootstock is 101-14 and 1103. Clones are primarily 37 and 459, but we also have some Swan, Pommard, 667, 828 and Mt. Eden. The clones are important because most of our production is whole cluster. We do extensive leaf pulling on the sun side of the vines to open them up, and we run tall canopies. Plantings are spaced 7x3 feet and we get 4 to 5 tons per acre. We work to get a natural balance between the site, the vines, the aspect and the microclimates in each vineyard, using sustainable and/or organic farming methods wherever possible.

“One of the things about Sta. Rita Hills is that we have a long season. We can pick when we want and therefore often pick over a seven week period, which allows us a huge array of style possibilities. Some lots might come in at 23° Brix while others arrive at 26° Brix. We believe that the geographic, geologic and climatic uniqueness of this region provides an ideal place to grow Pinot Noir of intensity, complexity and specificity.

“Grapes come into the winery and are placed into 1.5 ton tanks using 80 to 100 percent whole cluster. We cold soak for five to six days in a room set to 28° F. If we add acid or nutrients, we will do that when fermentors are removed from the cold room. We inoculate with RC 212 yeast, punching down once or twice daily as needed. We don’t check temperature because our small volume tanks don’t require it. After fermentation, we use an extended maceration of two weeks, so from picking to pressing is usually 45 days.

“We ferment over 100 separate lots. This allows us to stretch what we can do. We can see what sand versus clay loam soil does to our grapes. We can learn what the different clones do with different tannins, and we use clonal affinity to meet with stem inclusion to build our structure.

“Malolactic begins in the fermenter and finishes in barrel. We press directly to barrel with no settling or SO₂. We use 100 percent neutral French oak barrels made by **Sirugue**, choosing to obtain our wine structure from the stems rather than oak. We barrel-age for 10 months, racking once in the spring and making a small SO₂ addition, and then again to bottle. The wine is unfiltered, and bottle age is determined by market demands.”



Tasting comments:

This has a rich, classically Pinot character, along with the textural benefits of the stems. The stems serve the structure beautifully without taking away from the fruit. Without the inclusion of stems this wine might be too curvy, too obvious. We want the curvature of the fruit, and we look at the stem inclusion as a sort of corset. It is a savory thing that renders the wine less sweet.

Wrath Wines

2014 San Saba Vineyard Pinot Noir, 340 cases, \$49

Sabrine Rodems was first exposed to the wine industry as a young child, when her parents would take the family on winery tours in the area. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in theater, film and television from **UCLA** and spent years working on set production before she decided to strike out making her own wines. She went on to earn her Masters of Science in viticulture and enology from **UC Davis**. She has been making wine at Wrath since 2004.



Winemaker Sabrine Rodems

According to Rodems:

“We make 11 different Pinot Noirs at Wrath. What we really like to do is experiment. We make dozens of lots of wine, some using whole cluster, others not. We’ll keep grapes from different elevations separate but make them with the same winemaking techniques to see what we get. We’ll age the wines in different oak barrels. We taste the individual barrels regularly and often, and then make our selections by blending individual barrels together.

“Our San Saba vineyard is SIP-certified, sitting at an elevation of 200 to 310 feet. Our rootstock is 101-14 with several different clones. This particular wine comes from primarily 828 and Swan with smaller amounts of P4, 115, 667 and 777. We use drip irrigation, pull leaves and keep one cluster per shoot. Production runs about 2 tons per acre.

“To decide when to pick, we macerate a sample and let it soak up in a bucket for one or two hours. Then we taste the juice and cross-reference the data. We are looking for that recognizable level of ripeness that still retains some acidity. You know it when you taste it. Once picked, we destem most wines and work with whole berries, but keep about 20 percent whole cluster and then have experimental wines at different stem levels. Typically, we’ll cold soak for three days at 55° F, doing one pump-over a day.

“We inoculate with RC 212, and we pump-over once a day until fermentation begins. Then we pump-over twice daily. Fermentation maxes at 88 to 89° F. After pressing, we will inoculate for malolactic and go to barrel. We use 100 percent French oak barrels with 25 to 30 percent new oak. This wine has a bit more new oak because it is our barrel select. It was aged in oak for 10 months but was not racked until bottling when it was sterile-filtered. The wine gets about 10 months of bottle age before release.”

Tasting comments:

The wine has a lot of density. There are red and black cherry aromas, with some plum skin, along with expansive aromas of spice box that join forest floor on the nose. It is nice, plush, ripe and almost has a lovely melon character to it. Structured, vibrant and savory with layers of pleasing earthiness and acidity. While there is definitely a strong oak component, the fruit stands up to it nicely.





FIRST OFF, THIS WAS a wonderful tasting. Each wine was well made, and every wine was different from all of the others. All of the winemakers agreed, even the French ones, that there was no way to make French Burgundy in America, so there was nothing to be gained by copying the winemaking techniques used in France. Instead, it was the way the French thought about winemaking that could contribute the most to our New World wines.

First and foremost, Burgundians know that Pinot Noir is all about the place it is grown. They have hundreds of years of experience to tell them what particular vines do on individual soils in different vintage conditions. All of the participating winemakers are focused on learning their vineyards and working within the presented parameters of each to make the most expressive wine they can.

Clearly, the way Pinot Noir is farmed has a lot to do with wine styles. Depending on soil, rootstock, clone, climate and yield, the varietal will physiologically ripen at different Brix levels. To a certain extent, this gives winemakers a direction to pursue for their styles. Either added to the must or included in whole cluster treatments, stems can play a major role in fine Pinot Noir, especially when it comes to structure. The trick seems to lie in the balance of tannin elements from the stems and tannins extracted from oak. More and more winemakers seem to be moving to lower percentages of new oak and relying on varied elements for structure.

Seven years ago, most participating wineries in the Pinot Noir Varietal Focus were making their wines from several different vineyards and appellations, looking to emphasize terroir differences. Now, it seems winemakers are also making multiple lots from each site, often using numerous picks of the fruit to create subtle differences with which they can blend and fine-tune finished wines.

If the real secret of French Burgundy is the way they think about the wine, then the New World is making great progress. Based on the wines these winemakers are producing, the potential for Pinot Noir is almost limitless. A wide range of styles, with unique aromas and flavors, is possible and will likely become more defined as winemakers learn more about their vineyards. Perhaps all we need to compete with great Burgundy is another virtue, which may be French or not: patience. **WBM**

“**T**he attention to detail and communication at Bin to Bottle has been a godsend for us. They are clean, well-equipped, large enough to handle anything, but organized enough to take care of our small lots. Most importantly, the staff all cares.”

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