

# IN WINE COUNTRY

## Picking on Pinot

by Von Hurson

I'm a happy lady! I had my little bit of heaven just last month at a tasting of wines from Burgundy. At various times throughout the year producers from around the world -- France, Italy, Spain, Portugal -- bring their wines to the U.S., and I run excitedly to these tastings to be reminded why I fell in love with wine in the first place. Most often, the winery owner and/or winemaker will be there to pour their wines -- yes, from half-way around the world -- and most speak charmingly accented English. They love telling you about their family, their wines, the latest harvest, and many invite you to visit them. There's a pride, but not an arrogance, that comes with each pour of wine and an "old world" graciousness that accompanies their enthusiasm.

In fact, one of the greatest pleasures is discovering that not everyone in the wine world has given in to worshipping the points monster

-- the one thing that has done more, in my less-than-humble opinion, to ruin the great diversity that once made up wine -- the thing that made wine truly exciting.

So what was it about these wines that gave me such a delight? Well, as you know, the wines of Burgundy -- Chardonnay for the whites and Pinot Noir for the reds -- are some of the most sought after and revered wines in the world, and tasting these amazing wines made me remember why I first fell in love with Pinot Noir. How can I explain the elegance, the finesse, the ever present "balance" between fruit, acid and tannin that are still found in these wines -- and the delightfully low alcohol levels of 13 percent, with only an occasional 13.5?

Let's see if I can describe those Pinot Noirs of Burgundy -- and what made them different from so many of ours here in the U.S. First, every one of them I tasted was a beautiful light cherry-red

color. But don't be fooled by the lightness of the color. The wines had body and flavors that were truly amazing! Here, in California, we often blend in a small percentage of Syrah or Petit Sirah and select customized "clones" to increase the depth of color. Do we really believe that a light colored wine is somehow less wonderful -- or even less powerful? Oh, misguided ones are we!

Probably the one thing that mattered the most was that these Pinot Noirs from Burgundy had what can only be described as "Pinot-ness" -- and boy is that hard to describe! You might say many of them have an aromatic earthy smell -- almost like walking through a misty forest (yes -- "forest floor" works here). There can be a smell of fresh red berries -- often cherries or strawberries -- sometimes a hint of rose petals or violets. And while Pinot is often a little more delicate and elegant than some of the other red varieties, it can have

*After 15 years in the wine industry, Von now writes a monthly wine column, has co-authored a recent book, hosts a weekly radio wine show on KSAV.org, and conducts a monthly Tasting Panel for website publication. She has made wine, taught numerous wine courses, and serves as a competition wine judge. Send questions or comments to: wynelady@sonic.net*



fabulous flavors.

French wines from Burgundy -- especially whites -- also tend to have something in their aromas that borders on the smell of rainwater on dry stones -- sort of like strolling down a cobblestone road after the first rain of the season -- nice! Oh how I dread to interject Wine-Speak, but this would be that "minerality" (a word coined by wine writers) you so often read or hear about. The French attribute it to their soil, though we can find it here as well. It carries through to the taste, too, and even though it's truly pleasant, minerality is an elusive characteristic to explain. After all, even if they smell good, who eats rocks?

But what about California wines? Can't we make some yummy wines here as well? Well, of course we can. Granted, our Pinots will never be exactly like those from Burgundy and there's nothing wrong with that. True, we have some very different soils and even winemaking techniques, but we can make

some of the same delightfully balanced wines -- made from grapes that look full and juicy instead of like raisins when they're picked -- and result in lower alcohol.

Ah, but we have a problem here. Yes, there are good Pinot Noirs, but there's a trend we should watch closely. Far too many of them are smelling and tasting more generic and alike. They're becoming less and less like the delectable, distinctive Pinots from Burgundy that I tasted last month. Face it. We've fallen under the spell of the points makers who generally award the "big ones" to over-ripe, super-fruity, high alcohol, un-balanced wines. Slowly, in the process, we're heading toward selling out our Pinot-loving souls.

So who's to blame? Uh-oh -- don't look now, but we are. We who are willing to blindly follow "fashion" in wine (like clothes). And just who dictates the fashion and tells us what's desirable -- and what we should like? Once again, the points makers. Like a friend of mine said, and I tend to agree, "We no longer buy wine for the sake of wine -- we buy trophies." Oooo -- brutal, but honest.

Winespeak of the month: Oh my!

"Pungent aromas of lemon, pink grapefruit, quinine, anise and white flowers. Juicy, dense and penetrating with lovely intensity. Very clean and suave; brisk but not at all hard. Best on the tactile, gripping back end, which shows sneaky, reverberating length."

The "Swirls of Wisdom" Wine Tasting Panel is on vacation and will return in two months with more exciting wine reviews!



The "Swirls of Wisdom" Wine Tasting Panel wishes to thank

## Pelican Art Gallery

For two plus years of graciously hosting our Tasting Panel. Co-owner, Linda became quite good at evaluating wine and contributed a lot to the panel. Donna, we're sorry we never got around to doing a beer-tasting for you.

*Cheers! And thanks to you both!*

