

Pinotgogy: Celebrating and contemplating the grape

The 50th anniversary of the first plantings of Pinot Noir in the Willamette Valley was marked at this year's International Pinot Noir Celebration. But as Neal Hulkower reports, there were many other relevant themes and a wide range of attractions, both intellectual and sensual

During the Grand Dinner at the 29th edition of the International Pinot Noir Celebration (IPNC), Lorna Kreuze—winemaker at Lincourt Vineyards in Solvang, California, a featured winery—allowed that while others might be more fun, this was the best event for actually learning about wine. I am now well past the age at which I need entertainment, especially of the type favored by younger folk, with my vino. These days, it is enough for me to sit at the feet of some of the most notable producers of Pinot Noir in the world and delve with them into the details of what it takes to make the most elegant, kaleidolfactic wines. (For more on this term, which I have defined as “exhibiting ever-changing aromas,” see <http://oregonwinepress.com/article?articleTitle=kaleidolfactic-1412120522-1933>.) So, it was a thrill to immerse myself in Pinot pedagogy. “Pinotgogy,” from July 24 to 26, 2015, at IPNC on the Linfield College campus in McMinnville, Oregon.

I hasten to point out, however, that not all of the pleasures at IPNC were cerebral. The 800 attendees feasted from morning to night on local foods prepared by some of the rising and established stars of Northwest cuisine. Pinot Noirs from 68 featured wineries in Australia, Canada, France, Italy, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United

States served as the vinous backbone of the event. To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the first plantings of Pinot Noir in the Willamette Valley, five Champagnes and three sparkling wines from Oregon and California were also highlighted. In between meals and tastings, vineyard tours and other activities provided plenty of less demanding diversion. But it is what I learned during three seminars that is having a lasting effect on the way I understand what I taste.

Clone cogitation

After breakfast and opening ceremonies on the first morning, half the attendees were loaded on to buses and taken to different wineries in the Willamette Valley, the identities of which were kept secret until we arrived. Winemaker and vineyard manager Stephen Goff greeted us as we disembarked at Colene Clemens Vineyard in the Chehalem Mountains AVA. He was joined on a panel by representatives of four featured wineries—two from California, Bien Nacido Estate in Santa Maria and Davis Bynum in Healdsburg, and two from Oregon, Coehlo Winery in Amity and WildAire in Gaston—to discuss and challenge us to figure out “Which Clone Is It Anyway?”

While no longer quite such a hot topic in Burgundy, clones—identical genetic copies of mother vines with particularly desirable characteristics—



Right: Some of the 800 attendees at the 29th edition of the IPNC held in McMinnville, Oregon, July 24-26.

have been an important focus of investigation in Oregon for four decades. When the first Pinot Noir vines were planted in the Willamette Valley in the mid-1960s, the most accessible clones were Pommard and Wädenswil. During a visit to Ponzi Vineyards a couple of days before the start of IPNC, Maria Ponzi told me that as early as 1975, exploration of Pinot Noir clones was under way on the 2-acre (0.8ha) Abetina Vineyard in the Chehalem Mountains AVA, where 22 were planted. While there are now 43 registered clones of Pinot Noir, only a few have proliferated. We sampled four of them blind.

To aid us novices in answering the question at hand, Goff shared his impressions of each clone. Dijon 115 is the most structured, with more abundant and evident tannins. Pommard is the best balanced but not as structured as 115. Dark red-fruited Dijon 777 is effusively aromatic and

fleshy. Wädenswil ripens more slowly, and is leaner, floral, and spicy. Each of us was given a sheet that listed the following clone characteristics: black cherry, strawberry, blackberry, mushroom, anise (licorice), black pepper, soft, and tannic. As we tasted through the four single-clone samples, we rated each against these eight characteristics on a scale from 0 (“do not perceive the characteristic”) to 5 (“strongly perceive the characteristic”). Next we attempted to identify each clone. The only one I got right was the Pommard. (I am continuing to do remedial work at the Dundee Hills winery where I pour, taking full advantage of a clone study under way for one of our wine clubs.)

I picked up other odd tidbits about Pinot Noir clones during the discussion. While Oregon favors Wädenswil 1A, Davis Bynum uses Wädenswil 2A. Archery Summit founder David Andrus is the source of so-called suitcase

clones—in this instance, cuttings from La Tâche that were directly imported without passing through quarantine. These continue to be propagated. I knew that clones vary in physical appearance, including the size of the berries and bunches, but I got a somewhat vague response—“Yes, but...”—when I asked if there were any such ampelographic differences among the clones we were exploring.

Bubbleology

The next morning, my group attended the Grand Seminar, titled “Tasting the Stars: Champagne & Sparkling Wine.” A panel comprising producers and representatives from France, California, and Oregon was moderated by wine writer Patrick Comiskey. The session—which exceeded the time allotted by almost one hour, but to very good effect—was without peer in my experience for its thoroughness in covering this subject.

IPNC celebrants selected one of eight courses offered by the University of Pinot. I opted for “Does Vine Age Matter?” I was certainly hoping for a positive response. Allen Meadows chaired the panel of winemakers from four venerable Oregon wineries who brought examples of 2014 Pinot Noirs from old and young vines

We were poured three flights of up to six samples as we heard from panelists on all aspects of making sparkling wine. The first flight included three base wines from Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier. Base wines are generally made from grapes picked at 18–20° Brix, whole-cluster pressed, and fermented in stainless steel, barrel, or concrete. They are low in alcohol and high in acidity. Rollin Soles, co-founder of Argyle Winery, the largest producer of sparkling wines in Oregon, emphasized that the challenge is to taste ripe flavors through the high acidity. For Chardonnay, he looks for Anjou pear. He aims for fruit flavors no riper than plum for the Pinot Noir, which he presses slowly and gently, and for a long finish. Soles looks for rose petals in the Pinot Meunier, which he calls “Hamburger Helper for Pinot Noir,” since it gives the impression of lower acidity and brings elegance to the final product. Indeed, the sample I tasted did display an exuberant floral component. For no-*dosage* sparkling wine, Soles recommends a large component of Pinot Meunier.

The remainder of the first flight explored *dosage* further. We tasted 2012 Argyle base wines with increasing amounts of sugar in the *dosage*. The one with 0 grams was chalky, lean, and lemony. The samples with 3 grams and 8 grams of sugar were fuller and richer

and had a longer finish. Thirteen grams resulted in a fat, somewhat flabby impression. Claude Giraud of Champagne Henri Giraud commented, slightly dismissively, that zero-*dosage* Champagne is now fashionable, but he suggested that *dosage* is like salt and pepper in food.

Having subjected our poor palates to the intermediate steps and excursions required to arrive at a sublime finished product, it was time to taste the stars. The second flight featured five examples. The 2007 Argyle Winery Blanc de Blancs, Knudsen Vineyard Julie Lee’s Block Brut was poured from magnum. In the sweet spot of 7–8 grams of sugar in its *dosage*, it displayed hints of lemon cream, with a rich mid-palate and long finish. The rich brioche nose of Champagne Henri Giraud Fût de Chêne Brut Multi-Vintage belied the surprisingly and pleasantly refreshing palate, which featured lemon pushing through yeast, medium length, and a silky texture. With 7 grams *dosage*, 80% Pinot Noir and 20% Chardonnay, NV Champagne Jean Baillette-Prudhomme Memoris Premier Cru entered elegantly with no obvious yeast. The medium-long finish was delicate, with a lighter texture. Offering a fuller, bready bouquet, the 2007 Champagne Ayala Blanc de Blancs Brut (6 grams *dosage*) was lithe on the palate, with a lemony, short finish. To complete the flight, 2004 Champagne Bollinger La Grande Année (7–8 grams *dosage*, 66% Pinot Noir, 34% Chardonnay) gave us sourdough aromas, a faint lemony palate, and a classy overall effect.

The third flight took us first to the Russian River Valley in California for a taste of NV J Vineyards & Winery Brut Rosé. It emanated a delicate strawberry aroma, sat pleasantly on the palate and had a light finish. Sparkling-wine maker Scott Anderson shared the numbers: mostly 2012 base wine, at least two years on lees, 11 grams *dosage*, 65% Pinot Noir and 35% Chardonnay. Although it seems counterintuitive, California’s challenge in making sparkling wine is that the grapes have higher acid than elsewhere, since they ripen more rapidly and do not have as much time to allow the acids to metabolize. As a result, the base wine does go through some malolactic fermentation to soften it.

Next, to Oregon, where Tony Soter has produced sparkling wine since 1997, making just a few hundred cases a year. We enjoyed the 2011 Soter Vineyards Mineral Springs Brut Rosé, which had a deeper pink hue, cushy texture, great balance, and lovely finish. I had first tasted the wine the day before and was particularly impressed with the strawberry nose, which I didn’t get the second time, as well as by the rich, long, savory palate.

The ever-popular Champagne Billecart-Salmon NV Brut Rosé, with 60% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Noir, and 10% Pinot Meunier, offered light yeast flavors on a clean, classy, elegant palate.

A Toast to 50 Years Surprise Sparkling Wine wrapped up the flight and the seminar. Jason Lett, son of David Lett—who planted the first Pinot Noir vines near Albany, Oregon in 1965 and then transplanted them to the Dundee Hills a year later to establish The Eyrie Vineyard—poured the first and only sparkling wine he produced. It is 100% Pinot Meunier from 1965 and 1979 plantings and a blend of the 2009 and 2011 vintages. There was no *dosage*. Initially funky vegetal aromas gave way to fruit. It sat delicately on the palate.

Vinous gerontology

IPNC celebrants selected one of eight courses offered by the University of Pinot. I opted for “Does Vine Age Matter?” Being of the older persuasion myself, I was certainly hoping for a positive response. Allen Meadows, aka Burghound, chaired the panel of winemakers from four venerable Oregon wineries who brought examples of 2014 Pinot Noirs from old and young vines. Meadows reminded us that there are no regulations anywhere governing the use of the term “old vines.” But in Burgundy, labeling your wine *vieilles vignes* before the vines are 45–50 years old leaves you open to derision, if not outright disdain. He also hastened to note that there is as yet no scientific proof that old-vine fruit makes better wine. One reason why that might be true is that thicker vines store more carbohydrates. While one concern is “progressive enfeeblement”—which can invite viruses and result in less vigorous growth and smaller bunches—on the positive side, the grapes from older vines have a higher ratio of solids



Left: Allen Meadows (far left) exploring the subject of vine age with a panel of four leading Oregon producers.



to liquids. This desirable outcome is one that cannot be achieved easily in the winery, where *saignée* would be the only way to improve that ratio en masse. In Burgundy, old vines are often plagued by viruses, necessitating replacement. The young vines can add brightness to old-vine fruit.

Mike Etzel of Beaux Frères shared a Cuvée 1959 from the Beaux Frères Vineyard planted in 1988 and another wine from vines planted in the same vineyard in 2010. The former showed less fruit and was more muted but classier. The younger vines produced bright, more fruit-forward aromas and flavors but was still tannic.

Cousins Ben and Mimi Casteel represented Bethel Heights Vineyard.

Above: The wines from older and younger vines that helped answer the question, "Does Vine Age Matter?"

Planted in 1979, the Flat Block vines yielded a much less effusive but seemingly wiser wine than the juicy, minty sample from the East Block planted in 2002. Mimi Casteel said that in the early stages of a vine's life, 20 percent of the photosynthesis goes into developing the root structures that produce chemicals to break down the soil. Meadows added that another reason older vines might yield better wine is that more energy goes into developing the vines' infrastructure.

Adam Campbell of Elk Cove Vineyards served samples from Mount Richmond Vineyard, one planted in 1996 and one from the East block planted in 2010. The older-vine wine was subdued, while the one from younger vines showed lots of toast and not much fruit. Campbell asserted that, for vines, the "first few years are an

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indicator of potential greatness." He also said that wines from younger vines do not age as well, but they excel when blended with wines from older vines. The latter are less susceptible to vintage variation because the roots go deeper. Meadows added that older vines have more interaction with the soil and can give more phenolic ripeness even in less perfect years.

Luisa Ponzi of Ponzi Vineyards chose a 1978 planting from the 22-clone Abetina Vineyard and a 2009 planting from the Avellana Vineyard. The wine from the old vines had greater depth and a floral note on the nose but not as much fruit as the bright product of the younger vines. Ponzi stated that even the first years of a vine may be "magical," depending on the soil.

I am pleased to report that the wines produced from the older vines were favored for their depth and complexity by an overwhelming majority of the attendees.

Pinotpatetics

Sitting in a classroom was not the only way to experience Pinotgogy. The alfresco tastings both afternoons were great for Pinot peripatetics, "Pinotpatetics." Each day, half of the featured wines were poured in an informal outdoor setting, usually by the winemaker or owner, who was generally eager to answer questions.

Desire more Pinotgogy with your wine festival? Visit www.ipnc.org for details about the 2016 celebration.