



Pinot Noir in Eastern North America



I am sorry to keep going back to Oregon as the example of a highly evolved wine industry, but even more than Washington, which has grown faster and bigger but had the advantage of Chateau Ste Michelle as its benevolent benefactor to drag everyone else along to fame and fortune, Oregon did it with nuts and bolts viticulture and wine making, and creative and inspired leadership. Oregon is, of course, all about Pinot Noir. When I moved here from Oregon in 1999, I perhaps naively thought that there could be an

Oregon-like Pinot Noir region or community in the East, and for a while, a gathering of like-minded individuals convened at the Eastern Pinot Noir Conference in an attempt to understand and tame this fickle grape. EPNC was modeled after the successful Steamboat meeting in Oregon that was certainly one of the significant contributors to the rapid rise in the quality of Pinot Noir produced there and many other PN wine areas, notably Germany, New Zealand, British Columbia, maybe even California. The method is blind technical tasting among devoted practitioners with a focus on problem wines, and the aim is to use collective viticulture and wine making knowledge and experience to improve the wines. This method can work with any grape variety, or anything. I have always felt that knowledge in a vacuum, like the space between 2 ears, is knowledge not worth having – it needs to be shared to have value. So that is what a group of passionate PN devotees attempted to do over two days at Glenora Wine Cellars on the west shore of Seneca Lake.

I was troubled by PN in the 2011 vintage. A winery in New Jersey with 10 acres of PN didn't pick any of it. Another winery in SE PA harvested only seven of an estimated 40 tons of PN and will make only rose. Okay. We have the occasional really, really.... really bad vintage in the Mid-Atlantic region, so get over it. In fact, this is the first meeting of wine makers where there was general agreement that the Eastern US is the most challenging fine wine region in the world, something I have grown to believe with our winter injury, hurricanes and low pressure systems. We simply are not in the group of Mediterranean-climate wine regions that have much less rain at critical times of the season (aka harvest). But bad weather cannot be an excuse for making poor wines. So what is a PN grower to do?? Bob Madill at Sheldrake Point Vineyards on Cayuga Lake shares my love of Pinot Noir and has doggedly pursued making fine PN at Sheldrake, with mixed results. After EPNC lapsed, we decided it was worthwhile to get a group



of producers together again and discuss the state of the grape. So with the help of Gene Pierce and Steve DiFrancesco at Glenora, about 25 producers and extension educators from 4 states and Ontario (photo left) gathered recently to taste and talk about regional Pinot Noir.

Fundamentally, one has to wonder if great Pinot is possible in any place that is not entirely focused on mastering it. There are only a few other grape varieties, like Nebbiolo and Sangiovese, that demand full

and undivided attention in order to excel, and even in the case of the two Italian varieties, it may not be possible to make a great wine outside of their home regions. But PN has demonstrated some adaptability to other areas, so maybe there is some hope. Currently, there are a few wineries in Ontario, and one in the Finger Lakes, that have planted the Pinot flag and, like Oregon, declared “Pinot Noir or Bust.” It might not be a surprise that they are making some of the best examples of the variety. Oregon was lucky - from the day David Lett arrived in Dundee, it was all about Pinot. When a lot of smart people put their hearts and minds to a singular task, and the terroir is the least bit accommodating, the possibilities are encouraging and the results are often thrilling. I think that if there is to be a viable Pinot community in the East, then some of this attitude and approach must be adopted. I’m pretty sure that you cannot make 25 wines and make great Pinot.

Depending on one’s view, we had the either the good or bad fortune to taste wines for two entirely different vintages, 2011 and then 2010. The results were both expected and revealing – and, in my memory, not unlike my experiences at Steamboat. To sum it up, wine quality was all over the map. As I continue to work in this region, I am convinced that proximity to the coast may be, over time, the key to success, i.e. the more exposed a vineyard is to the bad weather that comes off the Atlantic Ocean, the harder it is to make consistently fine wines, no matter how strong the terroir or determined the effort. In this tasting, the wines from Ontario and W NY appear to give some validity to this notion. By the way, as much talk as there is about the fine Pinots from the bench below the escarpment on the Niagara Peninsula, Bob Green brought surprisingly pleasing Pinots grown on top of the escarpment in Western NY from Freedom and Liberty vineyards, and this is an exciting new development in New York. Given these climatic conditions wine growers simply have to try harder in the vineyard and cellar. It means more rigorous viticulture in preparation for poor conditions after veraison because so much of what delivers quality in the end must be invested up front, early in the growing season – probably mostly in the areas of achieving vine balance, disease and insect management, and particularly fruit rot protection. There was agreement that 36” (1000mm) of rain, which is the amount that fell on parts of SE PA, NJ and MD during the harvest season is a game-ender for most grapes but especially Pinot, but the 10” or so that fell on the Finger Lakes, while it would scare the pants off of any California wine maker, is considered a manageable amount in the Finger Lakes. The wines we tasted (or didn’t taste because they did not exist) reflected these amounts and conditions, and the skill necessary to cope with them. Jean-Pierre Colas from 13th Street Winery

in Ontario said that his most important botrytis spray is applied shortly after bud break. In light of the early leaf removal work done by Bryan Hed (Penn State) and Stefano Poni (Italy), I am beginning to believe that earlier efforts may be the most effective ones. I'll remind you that Hed and Poni have found that the timing and severity of leaf removal can affect berry and cluster morphology and possibly reduce cluster compactness, increase soluble solids and skin to juice ratio, lower vine yields and maintain juice and wine acidity. Another example we discussed was the effects of grape berry moth on rot in PN in 2011, where a cool, wet and late spring transformed into a hot and dry mid-summer that led to a fourth flight of grape berry moth that, unfortunately, arrived after veraison just as the fruit was most vulnerable. If a grower did not address this threat at the proper time in the summer, then the fruit was in greater jeopardy at harvest. Wine growing still involves a lot of staring into a crystal ball. But no one knows what the weather will be, so the prudent are anticipating and preparing for, if not the worst, then at least challenging conditions after veraison, when the fruit is most vulnerable and the weather counts the most. These upfront investments can pay big dividends at harvest but many growers are hesitant to utilize them for obvious time and expense reasons. If you are trying to make great Pinot Noir, you really don't have a choice.

The Pinots gained in concentration and development moving from East to West, with those from the Niagara Peninsula being among the most highly scored wines from both vintages. I tried to figure out why: are they simply better wine makers, did less rain at harvest allow for more ripe fruit, is their tendency towards higher density vineyards the best design for high quality Pinot production? Or is the lilting French accent of Sebastien and Jean-Pierre the music to PN must and wine that makes them work harder to make fine wines? I think it is all of the above, and I conclude that making great PN, or any wine, is just a matter of finding a good terroir, and applying the standard design and development principles, and management practices to it. For the record, the highest scoring wine (by a significant margin) in the tasting came from Billsboro Winery on the west side of the north end of Seneca, with grapes coming from Sawmill Creek and Verrill vineyards, so the FLX are no slouch when it comes to fine Pinot. Personally, I really like the 2009 Blair Pinot Noir from the Lehigh Valley and considering the vintage conditions, this is a remarkable wine. We know that with PN fully mature grapes are necessary to have any hope of making fine wines, which means finding the environmental conditions to achieve this. Quality of soil and climate are essential ingredients and they exist in all of the regions represented at the meeting. The design element is also important, and it appears that vine density plays a large role in achieving ripeness – higher density offers lower yields per vine allowing fruit to both ripen more successfully and earlier. Perhaps more to the point, a balanced vineyard that achieves uniformity within clusters, vine and vineyard, have the best opportunity to yield pleasing wines. While I continue to believe that small vines achieve the finest red wines, the Pinots made by Morten Hallgren from Chris Verrill's vineyard, which is on a normal, mid-lake, east side of Seneca site, trained to Lyre but in fine balance, makes just the weight and elegance of wine that Morten is seeking. What must be the common denominator among all great vineyards is the attention to detail, the balance and uniformity it embraces. I stress uniformity because a number of wines that got dinged were from vineyards that lacked uniformity from problems such as winter injury. I think there is no great secret to growing fine Pinot. The climate may be the hardest part to get quite right. It really needs a cool place with an extended ripening season, and some consistency in weather behavior from year to year. The maddening thing for these growers is the dramatic variability from hot (2007, 2010) to cold (2009, 2011) as opposed to more gentle

amplitudes of change such as those in Burgundy and the Willamette Valley (2011 excepted). Site capacity and its impact on vineyard design is important, especially the effort to achieve vine balance, so determining vine size and assigning proper vine spacing and density is critical to achieving proper fruit maturity. Then the right rootstock and clones must be selected. The importance of these vine components cannot be overstated. For example, the Pommard clone that is favored in the Willamette Valley simply does not appear to offer the same juicy and ripe attributes in the Northeast. The Dijon clones seem to be the right choice here with some question about the use of selection massale. Once all of these development decisions have been made, a vineyard is planted and then the grower learns where all the changes need to be made. This is the difficult part. In an ideal world, after ten years the vineyard can be replanted correctly according to what is learned. Mostly, though, it is a matter of coping with imperfections and applying the necessary viticulture to make the vineyard work.

If you are a wine maker purchasing grapes from independent vineyards one of the more experienced wine makers in the group said it takes about ten years to develop a comfortable working relationship with a grower, and sufficient knowledge of the vineyard and grapes, before a high level of trust can be achieved. One example of an acreage contract for Pinot was \$6300 per acre which worked out to be almost \$3000 per ton. This is Pinot economics. Naturally, bottle price and production levels drive these cost realities.

The learning was palpable at this meeting and the power of collective consideration was on frequent display. One 2011 wine we tasted looked thin and diluted in the glass but upon tasting revealed layers of fruit and delightful Pinot character. The wine maker, who hadn't tasted the wine in a few weeks, and had assigned it to being blended away, listened carefully to the comments and suggestions and the group, and with some clever cellar work may be able to achieve a wine that the winery can bottle and sell as a Pinot Noir. This is not an uncommon occurrence for PN or any (mostly red) grape in our region, they just don't quite make it to the finish line. A lengthy discussion ensued about the relative merits of blending PN with other grape varieties, there being purists and blenders (Lemberger seems to be a popular partner for PN) in the group. We talked about the lack of quality designations such as the grand cru, premier cru and village wines of Burgundy. Our consumers expect a fine PN no matter what the vintage conditions or price of the wine. Anthony Road has created a proprietary wine called PN2 that is bottled in 1.5 liter bottles and sold for \$18, a completely charming wine that has no pretension or expectation to knock the wine drinker's socks off, but is expected to sell and pay for itself. That is one way out of a 2011 corner.

2010 is another matter. We tasted wines that were hot and thin, and just, well, didn't hear the kitchen timer ding and stayed in the oven too long. I learned in Oregon that Pinot Noir producers can hardly restrain themselves when it comes to hanging fruit when the sun finally shines - think they are genetically programmed to do this. Pinot Noir, more than most other reds, requires a certain elegance and refinement to achieve the best expression of the grape, although some sunnier places may not agree. If warmth does occur, then picking earlier appears to be a necessity to retain the charm and balance in the wine. I think that was the key lesson in tasting through the 2010 wines. As is always the conundrum, the warmer areas to the south have an advantage in cool years and a challenge in the warmer ones, and the reverse is true in cooler

regions further north. And since normal or average seems not to exist anymore, wine growers and makers must cope with more extreme conditions.

Bob had us scoring each wine from 0-3, zero being flawed and 3 being exceptional. Overall there were not many flawed wines among the 38 that were tasted. This speaks well of the quality of the grapes and wines being made under sometimes difficult, if not disastrous conditions, nor were the local wines blown away by the benchmarks sprinkled in the tasting and at meals. We h The group agreed that this tasting and discussion exercise was valuable. Bob and I had the odd discussion that the Burgundy benchmarks needed to be tasted with food to show well, that in past technical tastings they often taste blah. Then we got to thinking why should the Burgundians be given any advantage? It's a Burgundy thing. Pinotphiles want so much for Burgundy wines to live up to their reputation, and having invested ungodly sums of money to acquire them, we tend to cheat to give them every chance to meet our hopes and expectations.

It's difficult over such a large area for a group like this to meet very often. I suggested that smaller, local Pinot Noir producers get together more often to taste wines, but also at veraison to tour fine Pinot Noir vineyards to see, taste and understand how excellent PN is being grown. Then the larger group can meet in the spring to taste the vintage from barrel or tank. The madness to this method is to get collective brain power to together to prevent and solve problems. This method is not only more effective, but a lot more fun than sitting alone in one's lab staring at a glass or beaker sample of a sub-standard wine and wondering what to do about it.

My experience in Oregon informs me that the minimum investment necessary to create a widely recognized Pinot Noir region or brand is excellent wine. The rest must come with from a devoted and creative leadership that has significant funding to create the "buzz" that attracts attention to the wines. With Pinot it's not that hard, since true devotees to the grape are always looking for the next great wine. In the case of Oregon, it takes a million dollar plus budget with excellent marketing, research and education programs to raise quality and promote the wines. Needless to say, if it's even possible in a region as diverse as Eastern North America, recognition, much less an identity or brand will be difficult to achieve.

Ever since the days of EPNC and the flowering of the Finger Lakes Pinot Noir Alliance I have been convinced that the lakes can grow world-class PN, maybe even better than Oregon, which is not as cool in the summer as the lakes. I have tasted many exciting Pinots for Ontario. Even the Lehigh Valley can flash brilliance. But it takes a particular devotion to make consistently fine Pinot and that's what put Oregon on the wine map. If that human element is allowed to flourish here, then I am pretty certain the terroir will permit the fine wines to be made.

Glenora was the perfect place for this meeting – it was hard to focus on the wines with such a beautiful view across the lake from our window. I would like to thank Gene Pierce, Chrystie Payne and her wonderful staff, and Glenora's wine maker Steve DiFrancesco for their efforts and hospitality. It's never easy to host a wine group because of all the glasses, spit cups, dump buckets, etc. and fussy food requests. Thanks, too, to the wine growers who took the time from their busy schedules to participate in this educational exercise. Bob Madill continues to be an inspiration to Pinot Noir producers and consumers across the region and ocean. His tireless

effort to promote the wonders of this grape will, in the end, put it on the fine wine map for passionate Pinot palates to appreciate.

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