

The Upwardly Expanding World of Anderson Valley Pinot Noir

by Drew Stofflet, Time Out Wine Columnist

Friday, May 23, 2014

I had the good fortune of attending the 17th annual Anderson Valley Pinot Noir Festival, put on the by Anderson Valley Winegrowers Association. The festival is an effort to reach out beyond the forested, hilly confines of this secret valley and showcase their secret stash to the rest of the world.

The secret is out of the bag, and that is not news. It was on the very eve of this festival last year that Wine Spectator magazine portrayed this growing phenomenon with a cover shot and several in-depth stories of the Anderson Valley (and beyond) to the hot, Mediterranean inland hills and climes of greater Mendocino County.



Handley Cellars winemakers Milla Handley and Randy Schock

In that short year since, the scene continues to expand, evidenced by big-name newcomers like Sonoma's Ferrari-Carano (new owners of the historic Lazy Creek) showing up to the fête. They joined other out-of-towners like the reliable Saintsbury of Carneros, who source fruit from the Anderson Valley's famed Cerise Vineyard. Napa's Cakebread Cellars joined the party some years ago, and Kendall Jackson's new Anderson Valley outpost, Champ de Reves, are on the scene too.

This upper-echelon, big-named theme is part of the new new here. The secret is out, and everyone is clambering for a tiny piece of this scrumptious, tiny pie.

Of course the venerable old hands like Husch and Navarro make a strong showing. Arnaud Weyrich of Roederer Estate (Cristal) can be seen pouring not sparkly, but his still red pinot noir. Pioneering Milla Handley stands next to her entrusted winemaker Randy Shock to pour Handley Cellars' magnificent high-altitude, low-yielding RSM Vineyard pinot noir. One of the valley's best and most unique, for sure. The vineyard was carved out of a redwood patch high on a sunny south-facing hillside, catching all of those sun rays sitting above the fog line. RSM, the man, Rex Scott McClellan, toiled for 10 years watching these vines struggle through their nursery period, as little water is retained in this draining soil. As the vines emerged from their struggle, the giant McClellan struggled with — ironically and tragically — Lyme's Disease, the result of a tiny little tick. He did not live to see the first release.

Along side these keepers-of-the-story are the tried and true that make up the current and future generation. Toby Hill of Phillips Hill poured his wild-fermented, unfiltered pinots from serious vineyards like the Cerise, or the warm-climate, own-rooted Oppenlander Vineyard high up in Comptche (where the Grateful Dead used to hide out). Stylish Black

Kite is here with their big, point-gathering wines. Breggo, owned by Cliff Lede of Napa/Stag's Leap cabernet fame, puts out wine that sits very near the top of my list. But word has it that he is moving his operation to Sonoma in the next year. Their 2010 Donnelly Creek pinot noir and their 2011 Savoy Vineyard are standouts with precipitous gravity, mucho Mediterranean white spice, and the luster of fruit that is set to undergo a long period of polishing.

Kristy Charles and Joe Webb poured their Foursight pinots, an ode to the multi-generational Charles Vineyard effort they guide. They even snuck in a sauvignon blanc.

More on the newcomers. Jennifer Waits and Brian Mast make their Waits-Mast pinot noir in a winery tucked into the Dogpatch district of San Francisco, south of downtown in a gritty little zone. They source two single vineyards and make a valley-wide blend. In their second appearance in the big tent, they proudly poured their 2012 Nash Mill Vineyard, a wine that I was able to get a sneak peak at last year as a barrel sample. The results are clear: They came to play. And I gave my little award for Best Of Show to that wine. Full of well-worn dusty spice, and the fruit is, like the Breggo, also ready for a long, beautiful maturation. Ruby dark cherries and foresty earthiness evoke the power and mystery of the redwoods. Which is great when you are huddled practically beneath them sipping this tonic. And Waits-Mast's label — with its black-and-white photo of a cloud torrent — evokes the dazzling power of the weather sky-scape of this magic land. Seek them out if you are ever in SF with time on your hands.

And newcomer Kelly Boss manned the table next to Toby Hill to pour his inaugural showing for Panthea Wines. Kelly purchased the old Raye's Hill vines, perched above Handley, about four years ago. With 2010 and '11 in bottle, and a very solid '12/'13 in the barrel room, look for good things to keep coming. Sun-drenched south facing slopes of estate vines, combined with some of the last fruit purchases from the then-current Londer Vineyard gives this flagship release some real ground to stand and plant that flag in. Janis McDonald, executive director of the Anderson Valley Winegrowers Association, noted that Boss adds a whole new level of cool to the valley's wine scene. Panthea's 2010 Londer ranked in my top five, along with, again, Phillips Hill's 2012

Cerise, Breggo's 2011 Savoy, Handley's 2010 RSM and the Waits-Mast 2012 Nash Mill.

Now, the real secret to this festival is the Sunday after: No formal gatherings, no big tents, no technical conference. Rather, every tasting room (40 or more) opens big for an open house. Each spot is a little culinary journey. So you start early and move quickly; a sip and a bite here and there. But not so fast. Phillips Hill for slow-roasted lamb printanier with gewurtztraminer (oh the peas and carrots!) and Oppenlander pinot. Brutocao had Hawaiian pulled pork with their pinots (and Mediterranean varietals) as well as heavenly chocolate brownies with strawberries and a port pairing. Next, Englishman Phil Baxter (and very near the top of the list, I must add) had single vineyard pinot mastery and lamb sliders. Lula Cellars, across the busy HWY 128 in Philo, had lamb kabobs with pesto potatoes. Seriously.

A stop at Breggo to buy some wine and see my chef/friend Christina Jones of Boonville's Aquarelle and to gorge on her rosemary shortbread cookies with strawberry laychee spread. The laychee, by the way, is a goat-sheep ricotta put out by Pennyroyal Farms. They are a beacon here, with a grand new creamery, small winery and goat farm, showcased with a dazzling new tasting room. The proprietress is the daughter of the founder of Navarro Vineyards, and has roots sunk deeply here. The new generation.

The day is not complete, for Balo Vineyards is the go-to end-of-the-day destination, as the wood-fired pizzas and lamb lollipops never seem to let up. You can eat so many more when they just keep walking up with fresh trays of chops resting on an aromatic bed of rosemary. Balo's white pinot and "Suitcase" clone pinot noir wash these down very well while people take in the rays, play bocce, or listen to the live jazz band in yet another stunning nook of this valley with yet another stunning vista.

And this is yet another take on why this pinot noir is so special. Cheers! Remember, wine reveals truth.

Drew Stofflet lives in Carbondale. Correspond with him at drew.stofflet@gmail.com