



ROBERT SINSKEY VINEYARDS

2001 VANDAL VINEYARD

PINOT NOIR

LOS CARNEROS - NAPA VALLEY

- The Inner Truth of Pinot Noir -



A lifetime ago, or so it seems, Winemaker Jeff Virnig and I made a pilgrimage to Burgundy in search of Pinot Noir's inner truth. Our search directed us into the caves and cellars of such legendary winemakers as Pascale Marchand who was then at the helm of Comte Armand, Christophe Roumier, Jean Meo of Meo Camuzet, Anne Gros, and Francois Millet of Comte du Vogüe, to name a few.

At our first stop, Anne Gros met us at her cellar door. We were dressed as for the first day of school, pencils sharp and notebooks at the ready. The young Anne Gros gave us the once over twice. Her steady gaze suggested suspicion, if not outright contempt. "What do you want to know?" she asked. We wanted to know it all of course, the vineyards, the cellar, the winemaking, everything! Her demeanor softened a bit. Maybe she expected a couple of know-it-all Americans. Instead she found herself in the company of a pair of humble knowledge seekers.

Out to the vineyards we went. Her pace was rapid and her footing was sure. We valiantly tried to keep up without losing our new French loafers, or our pride, in the winter mud. When we finally looked up, we had reached the Mecca of Pinot Noir. We found ourselves standing in the middle of Anne's Richebourg vineyard! The three of us crouched down as if in prayer, silently watching as Anne fondled a spindly dormant vine. It was there, in that vulnerable position, that she established the pecking order.

"What is the clone and rootstock?" we asked. She hesitated and disdain once again darkened her face. "You ask questions like an American!" she hissed. We then closed our notebooks and decided to experience the visit instead of dissecting it. With notebooks closed and minds opened, we listened to Anne espouse her philosophy of being attuned to the unique personality of the vineyard and the grapes born of it. She lectured on her delicate approach to winemaking versus her brother's masculine approach and how her straightforward cellar technique enhanced the fruit without masking its inherent character.

We tasted wine from barrel and experienced some examples of perfection. We tasted interesting wines and we tasted wines with technical flaws. All of the wines, whether they were masterworks for the gods or just wine for mere mortals, exhibited characteristics of the feminine side of the grape, each a distinctive family member born of the same parents. We left that first visit exhilarated, yet wanting more.

We happily ate and drank our way through Burgundy over the better part of the next week. Before we knew it, our last day was upon us. Our final appointment was with Francois Millet at Comte du Vogüe. We had seen enough vines at that point, and were anxious to get in out of the cold. After an exchange of initial pleasantries, we descended into the cellar to taste some wine. The first was elegant. Francois became animated as he described it, "Zees wine... zees wine... she is the matriarch, she knows all!" and then the next, "Zees wine, she is the daughter, she is all dressed up but she has nothing to say!" and then finally, "Zees wine, zees is the bad uncle, no one understands him, but he has a good heart!" There was no technical jargon, no literal tasting descriptions. It was all about the place and the personality of the wine produced from that place. We could go home now. We had found the inner truth of Pinot Noir.



- Vandal Vineyard -

Nature or Nurture? Our answer is a little of both... but if you aren't sensitive to the nature of the beast, you can nurture it to death!

The Nature: In the northern reaches of the Carneros, lies the thin green line we call the Vandal Vineyard. It is a hillside vineyard with a northeast exposure and a mix of red volcanic soil and clay loam. It is in a slightly warmer location than our other Carneros vineyard sites.

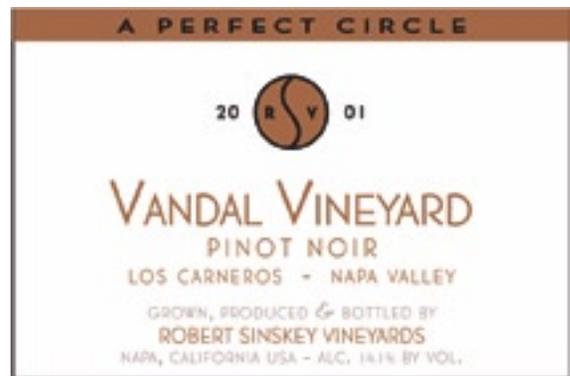
The Nurture: We selected the Pommard clone and some heirloom selections of Pinot Noir for this site. The Pommard lends the wine a tart black plum component while the heirloom selections lean more toward berry-like brightness. The vineyard is certified organic and we are practicing biodynamics. Year round cover crop is employed with sheep acting as lawnmowers in the winter and spring. The grapes are picked at that perfect intersection of physiological and sugar ripeness. The fruit from each small block of vineyard was harvested, fermented and aged independently in French oak barrels, of mixed age, for about eleven months. We used no heavy-handed winemaking technique, so as not to obscure the nature of the fruit and vineyard. The finished wine was built by layering the best lots the Vandal Vineyard produced in 2001. Our goal was to capture the spirit and personality of the vineyard. As evidenced below, it's not easy to catch a vandal, but in tasting and smelling the wine as I write this, it's apparent we have.

What's in a name?

Vandal Vineyard, near the city limits of Napa, attracted the unwanted attention of some wayward youths several years back. These two lost souls got bored with their beer and decided to take a ride on one of our tractors. After running the tractor in circles, they leapt off and let the tractor plow through the vines until about a quarter acre lay on their side and the tractor lay in a heap at the bottom of the hill. Being thrifty folks, we decided to pick the grapes from those sideways vines, and since they were not ripe enough for a red wine, we made a pink we dubbed our "Vandal Rosé." Well, the name stuck and though we never caught the delinquents, the vineyard is named for their exploits.

What is a Perfect Circle?

A Perfect Circle is our way of giving back. All of our wines with this designation will have a percentage of their proceeds donated to non-profit organizations that either educate youth about organic agriculture, preserve heirloom agricultural products, or develop sustainable farm energy programs, like vegetable based fuels for use in tractors. A Perfect Circle is part of the Robert Sinskey Foundation.



Tasting Notes:

The Vandal Vineyard has a little bad boy in it. Maybe that's why the name stuck. Much of it is planted to the Pommard clone of Pinot Noir, known for its wild nature. But like the best of street art, created by vandals, its wildness is balanced by beauty and elegance.

This wine is cloaked in a robe of dark purple velvet with a beautiful, gem-like translucence. Aromas of ripe macerated cherries, Assam tea, coriander and fresh earth waft from the glass. A sip suggests a fragrant pie made with a mix of bright red and black cherries, a little orange essence to balance the sweet fruit and hints of cinnamon and clove for depth.



A NOTE FROM MARIA HELM SINSKEY

These chestnuts are hot off the press from the 2005 harvest. We had to delay this wine club shipment by two weeks while customs approved their entry into the U.S. But now they've arrived and we're happy to send them along with our luscious Vandal Vineyard Pinot Noir.

You'll soon find out that chestnuts buddy up to everything that goes great with Pinot, whether it's with vegetables to form a simple soup, smoky wild rice for a savory side or a starring role alongside Pinot loving duck! While testing these recipes, I became addicted to their slightly sweet, nutty flavor and pleasantly starchy texture. I ate so many out of hand I almost didn't have enough to finish the dishes, so beware.

Enjoy your time in the kitchen with these wonderfully tasty nuggets.

Until the next wine...

Maria

CHESTNUT SOUP



Serves 4
 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
 1 large carrot, peeled, trimmed and sliced
 1 medium celery stalk, trimmed and sliced
 1/2 medium yellow onion, peeled, trimmed and diced
 1 1/2 cups peeled roasted chestnuts
 Salt
 Freshly ground black pepper
 1 teaspoon honey
 1/2 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme leaves
 1 medium sage leaf, chopped
 5 cups chicken stock or water
 1/4 cup crème fraiche, optional

1. Heat a medium saucepan over medium heat and add the butter. When the butter begins to brown, add the carrot, celery and onion and sauté until they are tender and are starting to caramelize, season with salt and pepper.

2. Add the chestnuts and honey to the vegetables and sauté them until the honey is sizzling. Add the thyme leaves and liquid to the pan. Bring the pan to a boil, reduce the heat and simmer for 20 minutes.

3. Cool soup for 30 minutes before pureeing in a blender. Remove the center hole from the lid of the blender to allow steam to escape while blending, otherwise the lid will explode off the top of the blender from built-up steam pressure. Cover the hole with a thick towel and lift the towel slightly to allow hot air to escape.

4. Strain the soup through a medium strainer back into a clean pan. Return the soup to a boil. If the soup is too thick, thin with chicken stock or water. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Garnish with 1 tablespoon of crème fraiche per serving to swirl in.

WILD RICE WITH CHESTNUTS

Wild rice, *Zizania aquatica*, a distant relative to ordinary rice, is a grass that grows wild along estuaries and lakes. It has not adapted well to cultivation, as it is too expensive to farm, hence the name "wild." Its nutty, smoky quality, compliments pinot noir as well as a variety of poultry, meat and game dishes. It also makes a great side dish for Thanksgiving. Chestnuts accentuate the nuttiness of the rice and give a nice sweetness to the dish. The rice and vegetables can be prepared and mixed one day in advance. Re-warm in a 350 degree F oven in a covered heatproof dish for 20 minutes.

Serves 4 to 6

1 cup wild rice
 Salt
 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
 1/2 medium yellow onion, peeled and trimmed
 2 carrots, peeled and trimmed
 1 celery stalk, trimmed
 Freshly ground black pepper
 1 cup peeled roasted chestnuts, coarsely crushed
 1 teaspoon honey
 1 teaspoon chopped sage
 1 teaspoon chopped thyme

1. Rinse the rice with cold water and drain. Place in a 3 quart sauce pan with 4 cups of water and 1 teaspoon of salt. Bring to a boil, cover and simmer on low for 45 minutes until the rice is tender and splitting. Drain and keep warm.

2. While the rice is cooking, dice the onion, carrot and celery into pieces the size of your pinky nail. Heat a medium sauté pan over medium heat and add the butter. When the butter begins to brown, add the diced vegetables and sauté until they are very tender, about 4 to 5 minutes. Reduce the heat if the pan gets too hot. Add a few drops of water if the vegetables start to brown too much and adhere to the pan.

3. Add the chestnuts and the honey and stir well. Add the sage and thyme to the vegetables and sauté until everything is heated through. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

4. Fold the vegetable mixture into the warm rice and mix well. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

DUCK BREAST WITH CHESTNUTS



Whole duck breasts are usually sold as two half breasts attached by the skin in between the meat. This recipe calls for 2 whole breasts separated into 4 half breasts. The rendered fat from the skin can be used to fry potatoes. It adds wonderful richness and flavor.

Serves 4
 4 6-ounce duck breasts
 Salt
 Freshly ground black pepper
 1/2 medium onion, peeled, trimmed and diced
 1 cup roasted and peeled crumbled chestnuts
 1/2 teaspoon honey
 1/2 teaspoon thyme leaves
 1 cup pinot noir
 1/2 cup chicken stock

1. Season the duck breast on both sides with salt and pepper. Heat a large sauté pan over medium heat. Add the duck breasts skin/fat side down and slowly render the fat from the skin until the skin is golden and crisp, about 10 to 15 minutes. Drain and reserve the fat from the pan in a heatproof container as it renders out. Adjust the heat if the pan gets too hot and starts to smoke.

2. When the skin is crisp, turn the breasts over and cook them for 5 minutes on the backside. Transfer the cooked breasts to a plate and let them rest for 10 minutes.

3. Drain all but 1 tablespoon of duck fat from the pan. Add the onion and sauté until golden. Add the chestnuts, honey and thyme leaves and cook until the honey sizzles. Add the pinot noir and reduce it until it is thick and bubbly. Add the chicken stock and reduce by half, season with salt and pepper to taste.

4. Cut each duck breast in half on the diagonal. Sauce with the chestnuts and serve.