



ROBERT SINSEY VINEYARDS

Pinot Gris Late, Los Carneros, 2011



SO BAD IT'S GOOD...

Sweet, Rot!

by Rob Sinskey

Some things are so bad they're good - think blue cheese. Imagine the first desperate person who actually put the blue/green moldy cheese in their mouth... and the smile when it didn't kill 'em. Hey Mikey, he likes it!

There are many things in the culinary world we just enjoy... and we prefer to do so without thinking about origins! When I was a kid, it took years before I had the courage to try caviar. To this day, even though I now enjoy those little fish eggs, I still have to ignore where they come from. But cured fish eggs, extracted from the ugly sturgeon, is relatively tame... it is the moldy, rotten things that truly amaze me.

Dry aged beef becomes tender under a crust of mold that, in combination with the natural enzymes in the meat, removes moisture, concentrates flavor, and tenderizes. Soy bean paste and soy sauce exist because of the Kōji mold. The Italian antipasta course of salami and prosciutto come to us by way of *Penicillium nalgiovense*... and the list goes on. Today, we look at these moldy foodstuffs as artisanal crafts, but at one time these items were created by happy accident. Though the first refrigerated coil was invented in the 11th century, it wasn't until after WWII that the refrigerator was mass produced. I can only imagine that most of these moldy foodstuffs were created by mistake... and perfected through trial and error as the lack of refrigeration had people socking away their agrarian excess in cellars and caves with surprising results. If the food didn't kill them, then it became part of their preservation repertoire. But what would accidental cheese be without an accidental wine to go with it?





As I continue to play this fantasy game of “imagine the first to try something disgusting,” I can only assume someone, somewhere found some lost, unkempt vines with clusters of raisiny grapes, grey with rot... and, in their desperation to make some “jesus juice” for the long, dark winter months fast approaching, they picked the nasty looking grapes, pressed out the meager liquid and let nature take its course. Then, once the fermentation stopped, they probably were gobsmacked that the wine from those nasty looking grapes had taken on an amber patina with an aroma of honeysuckle and a taste reminiscent of the finest honey. It truly was the nectar of the gods, but then came the dilemma of recreating the happy accident.

The Noble Rot, *Botrytis cinerea*, does not happen every year or, if it does, it doesn't always happen when you want it. Many times it shows up in the spring when it's about as welcome as a locust swarm in a corn field. When it comes too early, it will just destroy the fruit... but when it comes late, it's a whole different story. The weather patterns have to be just so... a little moisture early on during bloom, a warm, but not too hot summer and a relatively dry fall, become the ideal incubator for spores to take hold in ripe clusters of grapes. The mold feeds off the moisture inside the grapes, slowly using it up, shrinking the grapes while leaving the sugar behind. When the grapes look really rotten and ugly, it's time to pick.

I have to say, watching your grapes rot on the vine will either strike fear in your heart or elicit euphoria... maybe a little of both. You just need to know when to let the good rot roll.



Wine Growing Notes

You can hope all you want but it will only happen when nature allows it. This year, we got the rot... the “noble rot” that is! 2011 was a relatively cool vintage with early outbreaks of botrytis that, at the time, needed to be controlled. However, as the sparsely clustered vines became ripe, late in the growing season, the magic spores returned... finally the “noble rot” appeared when we wanted it... to slowly suck moisture from the grapes, concentrating the sugar and flavor to make an elegant wine for your fruit and nut based dessert... or cheese course... or starter with foie... or even fresh crab...

Tasting Notes

A delicately-sweet, late-harvest wine with aromas and flavors of ripe pear and wild flower honey. Pure and vibrant with a crisp edge, this wine is best with fruit and nut based desserts or even a cheese course. True French Muenster comes to mind as well as Bellwether Farms Carmody or fresh chevre. This wine is beautiful now and will only gain complexity as it ages.

ETHEREAL VS. STICKY

An ethereal, delicately sweet wine encourages creative pairing whereas a “sticky” sweet wine can be a dessert unto itself. Seldom do wines of this category do well with all but the simplest of dessert. In fact, many sweet “dessert” wines shine in the company of cheese rather than cakes, puffs or caramel because overly sweet desserts can send your palate over the falls. The Pinot Gris Late does no such thing. It is a subtle wine with ethereal sweetness, a beautiful companion to cheese or a cake such as a Caramelized Pear Skillet Spice Cake. The pears boost the seductive pear-spice scent while the whisper-sweet cake lightly supports the delicate sweetness of the wine. This is a partnership I love and crave with every new vintage.

Until the next wine...

Maria



Caramelized Pear Skillet Spice Cake

The flavors of this moist caramelized pear cake get better with each passing day as they have time to settle into one another. Serve this cake with ice cream and caramel sauce, a spoonful of soft nutmeg scented whipped cream or a wedge by itself with a cup of coffee. It will fittingly rise to the occasion whenever and however served.

Serves 10 to 12

Caramelized Pears:

1/2 cup sugar
3 large Bosc pears or similar
4 tablespoons unsalted butter
1/2 cup dry white wine or water

Cake batter:

1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
2 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
1/8 teaspoon ground cloves
1/8 teaspoon ground cardamom
2 large eggs
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter
at room temperature
1 cup granulated sugar
1 cup buttermilk

1. To prepare the pears, peel, halve and core. Reserve.
2. Heat the butter until golden in a 10 inch skillet over medium high heat. Add the pears and sauté them until they are golden. Sprinkle with sugar and cook until all the sugar is melted and caramelized. Carefully add liquid to the pan to loosen the caramel. Reduce the water to a thick syrup and remove the pan from the heat.
3. Position the pears in a circle in the skillet cut side down. The wide part of the pear should be at the edge and the narrow part at the center of the pan.
4. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F.
5. In a medium bowl, mix together the baking powder, baking soda, flour, salt and spices. Reserve.
6. In a small bowl, beat together the eggs and vanilla. Reserve.
7. In a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment or with a hand mixer, beat the butter and sugar together until fluffy.
8. Add the egg mixture to the butter mixture in two parts, beating well after each addition.
9. Add the dry ingredients to egg/butter mixture, half at a time, alternating with the buttermilk.
10. Spoon the batter over the pears and smooth with a spatula. Bake in the preheated oven for 40 minutes until a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean. Let cool for 20 minutes.
11. Run a knife around the edge of the pan and then turn it upside down onto a serving plate. Remove the pan and cut into wedges. Serve with vanilla ice cream or on its own.

Pinot Gris Late
Los Carneros, 2011

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FINE WINES FROM ORGANIC VINES

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