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JUST CALIFORNIAN?
JUST ITALIAN?
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COMBINATION?

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Winemaker Series –
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Artisan red–Winemaker red –
\$46/month

ITALIAN WINES

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\$32/month, a red and a white
Winemaker Series –
\$62/month, 2 reserve reds
Collector Series –
\$112/month, 2 collectable reds
Artisan red–Winemaker red –
\$48/month
Winemaker red–Collector red –
\$87/month

CALIFORNIA–ITALIAN COMBINATIONS

CA Artisan red–IT Artisan red –
\$33/month
CA Artisan white–IT Artisan white–
\$29.50/month
CA Winemaker–IT Winemaker –
\$62/month
Alternate CA & IT Artisan Series –
\$29.50/\$32/month
Alternate CA & IT Winemaker Series–
\$59.50/\$62/month

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You can also receive more than two bottles per month. California sales tax is included. Shipping is extra.

wouldn't have a problem with that.”

Driving the market

But at the same time that different characteristics are developing in all of these Pinot Noir growing regions, Francis says that wine writers can drive the market and influence winemakers who then try to imitate a particular model that's currently popular. “If Robert Parker likes big, dense wines, he kind of drives what goes on. And he gives his points accordingly. And the Spectator gives its points according to how big and rich a wine is, so wineries themselves seek out vineyards and locations where they can get that sort of profile. So you end up with that drive in the industry.... In Burgundy, it used to be that you could pick out the difference in flavors from different appellations. But today it's tough, because young winemakers in France get ratings from Parker, so they're bringing out the oak and letting the fruit sit on the vine. Their grandfather is probably shaking his head in the corner. But that's the way it is.”

Plenty of diversity

With 167 acres, plenty of diversity exists in his own vineyards, and Francis has three labels that point to those differences. The original Carneros Creek label includes Chardonnay and Pinot Noir; the Fleur de Carneros and Fleur de California features value varietal wines, emphasizing bright, fresh, and affordable wines; and finally the new Mahoney Vineyards label will include vineyard designated Pinot Noir but also varieties that are new in

Carneros, such as Vermentino and Sangiovese. “If the fruit comes from the Mahoney Vineyard, which is across the street on the hills, it's denser and more jammy. And if it comes from our Las Brisas Vineyard, it's usually very bright but can still have a nice big, rich, long aftertaste. But it's more of a brighter, redder, fruit flavor than we're going to get in the northeast corner, where the winery is located.”

Looking for adventure

After devoting all of his energy to Pinot Noir for decades, Francis Mahoney is now looking for a little adventure. His new enthusiasm is Vermentino and Sangiovese, which he discovered during a visit to his wife's family in Liguria, the region in northwestern Italy between Piedmont and Tuscany. “Vermentino is gorgeous, and it really fits with a style of wine that I love, bright and fresh with crispness.... The Sangiovese worked out beautifully too. It's an adventure to carve out some knowledge that you can do more than Pinot Noir in Carneros. And the theory behind this is that if you like bright fresh grapes and wines, they usually come from a cool climate like we have here. Vermentino in Italy is grown in the south too, and it gets more floral and fatter and becomes a little bit clunky. And that's not what I want to do. If you do olives in Carneros, even the olive oil comes up bright and clean versus something made in the Central Valley.

So after establishing legendary Pinot Noir in Carneros, we'll see what Francis Mahoney manages to do with Italian wine grape varieties. ■



California

Winery of the Month



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August 2004

Just 35 years ago in California, Pinot Noir was a mystery, a moving target, a holy grail. Winemakers weren't quite sure which clones to plant where or how to even make the wine to achieve the excellence that the great wines of Burgundy, France had established. Francis Mahoney was one of Pinot Noir's most important pioneers. Just out of college in the late 1960s and working for Connoisseur Wine Imports, he fell in love with Pinot Noir, which his company was importing from Burgundy. He longed to unravel the Pinot Noir mysteries for California, which at that point didn't know what to do with this noble grape. After a fortuitous conversation with Andre Tchelistcheff, the founding father of the modern California wine industry and for 35 years the winemaker at Beau-lieu vineyard, Francis was convinced as was Tchelistcheff that the Carneros appellation, which is almost evenly divided across the border between Napa and Sonoma, was the place where it would flourish. He was right. ➤

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Francis Mahoney purchased his estate in 1973 and planted ten acres of Pinot Noir. He engaged the help of the department of viticulture and enology at the University of California at Davis and began a 10-year experimental program, which eventually established the formula for everyone else. Today Pinot Noir is also grown successfully in the Russian River appellation of Sonoma County, in Monterey, in San Luis Obispo, and near the coast in Santa Barbara County, not to mention the state of Oregon, where it is the principal red grape. Today, Carneros Pinot Noir has competition.

The best of times

Francis says that this is the best time ever for Pinot Noir fans, because as little as ten years ago, few vineyards were planted with the varietal at the same time that consumers were clamoring for more. "If you got a

Pinot Noir at \$8, chances were that it was mixed with gosh knows what in order to stretch it. It was grown in some vineyard some place, but the guy had to get five to six tons an acre. In order to get some color, they threw some Syrah in it or some Merlot or Zinfandel just to make it darker and more appealing. But the varietal wasn't bright and fresh. I think today, there's good competition, and the public is really enjoying this new age of Pinot. It will never be like Chardonnay or Merlot, because the capability of having somebody in the Central Valley grow eight tons per acre and ship the grapes over to somebody who bottles them doesn't exist. It's always going to be a coastally influenced grape and consequently, you're not going to see big tonnage, so you're not going to ever see pure Pinot at \$6 a bottle. It's probably at best going to be \$9.99, maybe \$8.99 if somebody is trying to jump the market a little bit at Thanksgiving and work on a little less margin. Generally it's going to be at least a \$10, \$12, or \$14 bottle of wine and up."

We've just gotten better

Pinot Noir fruit was also unable to keep pace with demand as the Millennium year approached, because sparkling wine enjoyed a renaissance at that time. Both Pinot Noir and Chardonnay provide the principal grapes for champagne so that a certain amount of Pinot Noir was diverted from still wine to sparkling, and the added demand spiked more plantings. "People watched



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—Francis Mahoney

the prices of Pinot Noir grapes go up and consequently said, 'Ah, I need to grow some of that.' So what we have to pick from today is a lot better in terms of fruit and the location of vineyards. We've just gotten better, and there's more available to us. And that's a really good thing."

A little twist in the economy

Not only has Pinot Noir improved, but prices have come off their year-2000 high. "We've come off the peak years of 1999 and 2000 when the economy passed through its little twist, and I think what you're going to see now is the high prices that were thought to be endless in terms of going up are now going to be probably a bit of history. You're going to be getting wonderful bottles of Pinot Noir, not inexpensively if you think inexpensive is \$5, but you're going to be able to look at something really nice in the \$10 to \$14 range. And you're going to get some really good Pinots in the \$18 range. And what was formally a \$45 Pinot is probably going to be about \$25 or \$27. That's the reality check. A Napa Valley Cabernet at \$100 is not moving off the wine list anymore. Company managers are not giving their people the ability to pull our credit

cards for that."

Underneath your feet

Now that Pinot Noir is grown in various appellations, Francis feels that growers and winemakers should concentrate on making wines that reflect their particular growing conditions rather than trying to imitate a particular model for the wine. "What we really need to do is make sure that we put into a bottle wines that represent the appellation and not try to chase whatever an Oregon winery is getting credit for today. We can't be that, nor can we be Burgundy, nor can we be San Luis Obispo. I have to be the best in Carneros and quit worrying that Oregon has the wine of the week in somebody's publication. Just go out and talk about what you've got underneath your feet and about its merits and move on."

Oregon's got a big problem

Even though Francis uses Oregon in his example, he insists that Oregon Pinot Noir is not serious competition for California winemakers because the weather is inconsistent and forces winemakers to charge higher prices during good years so that they can ride out the bad ones. "Oregon's got a big problem with weather. One vintage is absolutely wonderful, and they're making the essence of Pinot Noir. The next vintage they're making Cool Aid, because they've been rained on for ten or twelve days in a row. So they

need big prices. They make good wines when they get the opportunity from nature, but I don't see them as competition. I just see them expanding the world of Pinot Noir."

It's a win

Regarding Pinot Noir from Russian River in Sonoma County, he says, "It's a win. It makes a different style than Carneros, not as jammy and rich as

we can make it, but it's got a wonderful texture." About the San Luis Obispo vineyards, he says, "their issue is that almost every mile of twists and turns of the river coming in from the ocean is a different micro climate, so you have to carefully pick where you're going to grow. But when they hit on it, they have some of the best around." And about Monterey, "They have certainly gotten rid of the veggie flavors that used to permeate their Pinot Noir, and I think they know where to plant it now and how to take care of their vineyards so that the wine doesn't end up smelling like asparagus and those sorts of elements. But when you think about

it, these are not large areas, whereas in Carneros, we have about 10,000 planted acres, and I think 42% of that is Pinot Noir, roughly about 4,200 acres. That's a lot. I think the Russian river appellation is even larger, but I would think it's more diverse because of the east-west run of the appellation. In the east, they get really different wines

I would love to see a challenge someday at a wine tasting among ourselves, Saintsbury, Acacia, myself or anybody who is a serious player with still wines, and we could have the best of Caneros.

—Francis Mahoney

than they get at the other end. Carneros does do that too, but I think to a lesser degree."

The best of Carneros

Francis would like to see different styles of Pinot Noir emerge even within his own Carneros appellation, although winemakers within a given appellation tend not to compete with one another in that way. "I would love to see a challenge someday at a wine tasting among ourselves, Saintsbury, Acacia, myself or anybody who is a serious player with still wines, and we could have the best of Caneros. I don't know that I'd ever get anybody in the room with me, but I

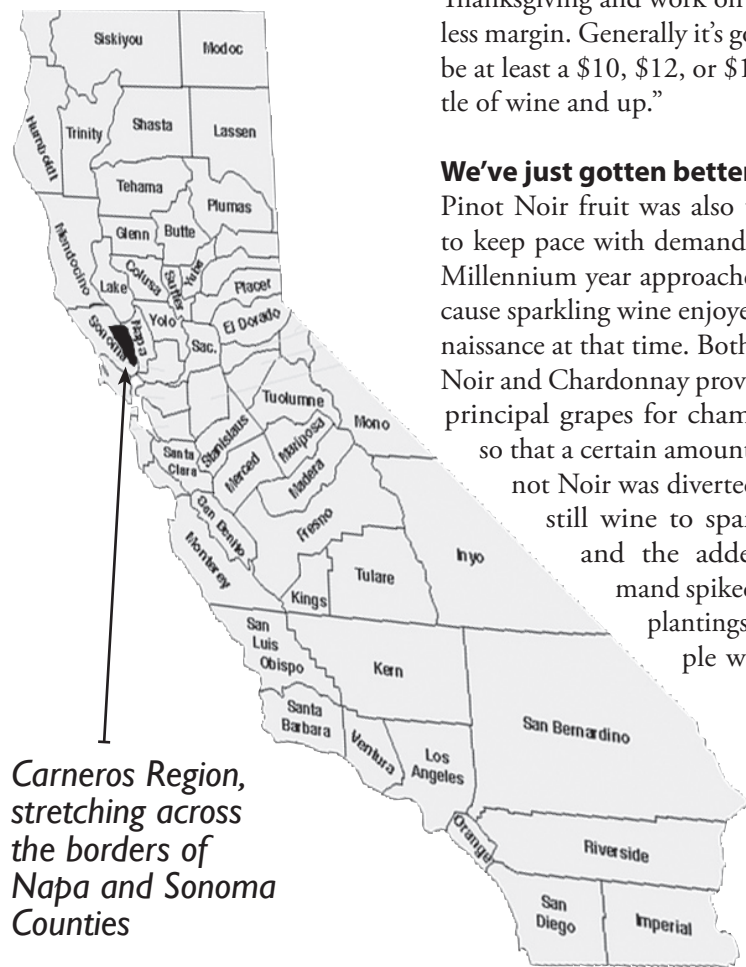
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