

Stressing the Vine

A blog on Central New York wine, food, art & culture

Thursday, May 20, 2010

Vinodome Competition No. 2: Red Tail Ridge vs. Johnson Family Pinot Noir

Posted on March 4, 2010

Things have been quiet of late across this great frozen wasteland, as beleaguered residents hunker down through the long shadows and cold nights, and decide which red wine to pair with Boeuf Bourguignon, or perhaps with a roasted free-range chicken and organic root vegetables. It's a bitter struggle to survive winter's ravages in style, but we look forward expectantly to the arrival of spring, which augurs warmer days of Finger Lakes wine and roses. In the meanwhile, we await the vernal equinox, give thanks to Bacchus for getting us through the winter, and keep our eyes fixed on the horizon, or the shelves of our local wine shop, for signs of a drinkable under-\$20.00 Pinot Noir.



Nor has our vigil been in vain. Out of the western expanse comes a young contender, the 2008 Johnson Family Pinot Noir (\$18.99 at Northside Wine in Ithaca), a strapping red wine in the full vigor of youth, already proclaimed a champion – and an excellent wine value – by clamoring critics. Hailing from the Russian River Valley in Sonoma, California, this wine-who-would-be-king nevertheless comes shrouded in mystery, as there is no Johnson Family winery in Sonoma County (the wine is produced by Hunter Wine Cellars of Sebastopol, CA for John Bowler Wines, a New York City importer and distributor). Whatever its pedigree, this wine's reputation precedes it, and it seems determined to dethrone local pretensions that the Finger Lakes can produce world class, competitively priced Pinot Noir.

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We are not without our own local champion, however, the 2007 Red Tail Ridge Pinot Noir, (\$19.99 at Northside Wine in Ithaca), a brawny first-born hailing from the western shore of Seneca Lake, which has already been proclaimed by *Vineyard and Winery Management Magazine* “perhaps the most exciting pinot noir yet made in the Finger Lakes.”

So, we gather once again in the Vinodome, as did our fathers and mothers, and their’s before them, to bear witness to a timeless ritual of vino-a-vino combat, in which two wines do battle until one bottle is drained to its dregs. And the ancient cry goes up, “two wines enter, one wine leaves; Two Wines Enter, One Wine Leaves; TWO WINES ENTER, ONE WINE LEAVES!!!”



Don't let their sweet dispositions fool you, these two will kill for a decent bottle of \$20.00 Pinot Noir

<>

Judging today’s competition are three experienced veterans of the Vindome: myself, a wizened misanthrope who vents his rage on unwary winemakers; Stephany “You *wish* I was Nurse Ratched” Hess, who strikes terror into the hearts of ill-mannered or incompetent resident MDs; and her husband, Tim “Slow Cooker” Hess, whose magical touch with a Crockpot masks the roiling emotions within. We three have been there, wherever “there” is, and done that, whatever “that” is (and whatever the definition of “is” is), and it takes a damn fine wine to excite our tired, jaded palates.

So then, let the battle begin.

The 2007 Red Tail Ridge Pinot Noir opened with a bright garnet color, with a bit of pink/orange towards the rim. The nose was initially a bit volatile, but quickly settled down to reveal oaky, toasty notes and some smokiness, which the judges variously described as “earthy,” “tar” and “leather coat.” Overall, the aromas were interesting and complex but lacked a distinct fruitiness on the nose. In contrast, the 2008 Johnson Family Pinot Noir was noticeably darker in the glass, a dark ruby that could only come from a warm, sunny California climate. The aromas, however, were surprisingly unexciting, with some attractive cherry and plum aromas but nothing that leaped out of the glass. Even with time and swirling the aromas never matched the bravado of the wine’s deep ruby color.

In the glass, the two wine’s couldn’t have been more different, and really brought home the distinct differences that cool and warm climates have on Pinot Noir. The Red Tail Ridge was rich and ripe, with sweet plummy flavors, a nice full mouthfeel, and an unusual spiciness. At the time I knew I recognized the spices, but couldn’t put a name on them. It was only later, after the tasting that I realized I had tasted graphite – what some reviewers refer to as “pencil lead” – and sandalwood, which gave the wine a complex, interesting flavor profile.

In comparison, the Johnson Family was all West Coast machismo, with a

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fuller weight and mouthfeel, and rich, very ripe cherry and black plum flavors, but with noticeably less spice or complexity. Although both wines were clearly New World in style, in that neither wine offered up the mushroomy, barnyardy aromas or flavors associated with Burgundy, the cooler climate of the Finger Lakes produced a wine that was lighter colored, more aromatic and classically structured, and with higher acidity and more pronounced minerality, while the warmer Russian River Valley climate, as expected, produced a deeper, more fruit-driven wine.

The Johnson Family Pinot Noir, however, really fell apart in rounds 4 and 5, where we judged the mid palate and finish. While the Red Tail Ridge was persistent through the mid palate into the finish, with no drop off in the quality or weight of the fruit, the Johnson Family wine dropped off precipitously, with the fruit declining in the mid palate and finishing quickly. Overall, the judges agreed that the Red Tail Ridge showed better structure and balance, with more persistent flavors and a longer, more compelling finish, while the Johnson Family showed its best up front, with a big, fruit-forward mouthful of ripe Pinot fruit.



In the end, the judges were unanimous that the Red Tail Ridge was the better wine, and clearly bested the Johnson Family Pinot Noir. We also agreed that, at \$19.99, it represented an outstanding value that easily rivaled or surpassed wines from Oregon in the \$30.00 to \$35.00 price range. The tasting also dramatically reinforced our appreciation that Pinot Noir produces more aromatic wines and better overall balance and structure in a cool climate like the Finger Lakes, than in California, despite the fact that California can produce some fabulous, if expensive Pinot Noirs. We were very impressed with the 2007 Red Tail Ridge Pinot Noir, and were surprised to learn that the grapes, which were estate grown, were harvested from vines that were only planted in 2005. That is very young for any wine, but extraordinarily young for a wine of this quality and complexity.

The biggest issue, however, is what one gets for their money. In California, \$20.00 buys you an entry-level Pinot Noir, typically sourced from grapes grown in several locations within one or more large AVAs, which yield a somewhat generic fruit-driven wine that lacks complexity or a sense of terroir. Hunter Wine Cellars produces a half dozen single-vineyard Pinot Noirs under its Chasseur label that regularly earn scores in the low-to-mid 90 point range from the *Wine Advocate*. They also cost between \$40.00 and \$60.00 a bottle.

It's not difficult to do the math. For the same \$20.00, one gets in the Finger

Lakes a wine made from the best grapes grown in a winery's own vineyards. I'm really excited about what the Red Tail Ridge vineyards will yield in 8-10 years, when the vines reach the level of maturity that winemaker's say can produce truly noteworthy wines. Of course, by that time they may also be charging \$40.00 to \$60.00 for a bottle of wine. In the mean time, however, I and my fellow judges are already planning a trip out to Red Tail Ridge Winery to pick up more of their 2007 Pinot Noir while it is still available, and still priced under \$20.00 a bottle.

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2 Responses to "Vinodome Competition No. 2: Red Tail Ridge vs. Johnson Family Pinot Noir"



Tim Lacy says:

[March 6, 2010 at 6:59 PM](#)

Neil,

You tasted graphite? Wow. And it was a positive mineral-esque addition? Wow X 2.

Question: Do you think the extra year of aging affected the outcome in favor of the Red Tail Ridge selection? ...Not that I'm going to grudge an outcome that goes against a somewhat anonymous CA product.

- Tim

[Reply](#)



Neil Miller says:

[March 7, 2010 at 12:48 AM](#)

Tim: I've tasted what I call graphite and what other reviewers call "pencil lead" in a number of red wines, and think it is a pretty accurate description for a certain type of minerality that, when balanced by good fruit and other flavors, adds complexity to the wine. But admittedly this is a bit metaphorical.

The extra year could have made a difference, giving the 2007 Red Tail Ridge a bit more time to integrate all of its components than the 2008 Johnson Family Pinot. But I suspect that the vintage had more to do with it than the extra year. A lot of Finger Lakes winemakers feel that 2007 was the best year for red wines in the past 10 years. I've read that the 2008 vintage in California was hit-or-miss, especially for Pinot Noir, but to be honest to date I've tasted very few 2008 CA Pinots.

Let me know if you ever find any Finger Lakes wines at your local Chicago wine shop, and if so which wineries you come across.

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