

April 27, 1992–UCD Enology Class

On Pinot

Speech by David Lett

Good afternoon. What a pleasure to be back at my alma mater, and what an honor to be talking to the enology class here. It was 30 years ago in 1962 that I began my studies in viticulture and enology at UCD. A lot has changed here (I wonder if my key still fits the cellar--I brought it just in case!). When I attended Davis in the early '60's the student body was about 3000 people. It was a 'cow college' and the common theme of the male students here was that the way you could tell the co-eds from the pigs was that the pigs didn't have acne. (Of course those males were in the forefront of the male chauvinist pig movement.).

Where Larry Blakes now stands (or stood?) was a rather dilapidated but charming old Victorian, one apartment in which was my "digs" until one day in entomology lab. I walked in to the lab and immediately my attention was caught by a 5 gal. mayonnaise jar, containing some rather frantic insects. It was gauze-covered with a note on the top saying, "Note the distinctive smell of cockroaches." You all, I'm sure, are aware of the memory interpreted by the brain through the olfactory mechanism. In my case it didn't take much memory, it was the distinctive smell of the apartment I'd just left! That night I took a flashlight to bed and after the lights were out for a time I turned it on in the kitchen, then bathroom, then bedroom. The place was under siege by cockroaches! I moved out.

This was only one of the many practical applications of my education here. In growing grapes and making wine in Oregon for the past quarter of a century, I have frequently leaned on the theoretical pillow of my education here. Both grape and wine production in our cool climate has required a reassessment of our what I learned here, and a lot of seat of the pants innovation especially in terms of viticultural techniques. But the matrix in which to fit my innovations in Oregon has always been my training here. More of that later, but first a bit of my own background.

I was born in Chicago, but raised from a six-year-old until Davis (at 22 years old) on a farm south of Salt Lake City. We grew apples in the places where the boulders weren't. I bought my first tractor at 12 years old and cleared driveways of snow (including our own 1 1/2 mile long one) in the winter and did landscape grading in the summers. I often cut school on snowy days and could make upwards to \$100.00 a day. (Some of that money eventually helped buy my initial 20 acres in Oregon.)

Well, growing up in Utah did not exactly present an opportunity to fine tune my palate to the virtues of wine. Actually, as I recall, Thunderbird was the preferred, all-around, aperitif, dinner and dessert wine there.

My education prior to Davis was from the University of Utah where I studied pre-medicine and took a degree in philosophy. In 1961 I applied to 12 of the best medical schools in the US and was summarily rejected by all 12. So what do you do with a degree in philosophy and pre-med? The only logical path was to go skiing for four months and then apply to dental school. I did, and was accepted to all three I applied to. Then fate, determinism, or whatever, interceded. I was in San Francisco having an interview at a dental school in January of 1961. Donner Pass (then a two lane road) was closed because of snow and I couldn't get back to Utah. For some reason, I decided to drive up to the Napa Valley.

Now the Napa Valley in 1961 was quite different than today. There were only three wineries which today would be called "super-premium"--Mayacamas, Stoney Hill and the old Soverain run by Lee Stewart (it's now Burgess Cellars). In fact there were only about a dozen wineries producing decent "table wine" in the Valley. In fact there weren't very many wineries there at all, except some long-deserted and semi-derelict structures. Most of these have been resurrected during the past two decades with large infusions of cash.

Actually, the premium wine industry in the US (California included) dates back only 24 years to 1968. It was in that year that for the first time sales of table wine in the US actually exceeded that of dessert wine; namely California Port, Sherry, Angelica and so on. The early 70's showed a slow growth of new premium wineries; this became a frenzy by the late 70's and early 80's. Most of the growth of the premium wine industry in terms of sheer numbers of new plantings

and wineries was in California, but almost every state in the union has developed wineries since 1970. (Before 1970 = 153; 1970-75 = 109; 1975-79 = 217; 1980-85 = 505; 1986-91 = 323).

That said, let me fill in a bit of my background and that of Oregon viticulture.

The history of Oregon winegrowing has its origins in Douglas County in 1962 when Richard Somer founded Hillcrest Vineyard near Roseburg in southern Oregon. Since that time interest in winegrowing has spread considerably in Oregon and its focus has been in the northern Willamette Valley which now has most of the total bearing acreage planted in the State. In 1965 I and another graduate of the U of California-Davis' viticulture and enology school came to the Willamette Valley believing its climate to be more suitable than California for the varieties we wanted to grow. (Both of us were unaware of the S. Oregon plantings but had already rejected S. Oregon in theory as too warm).

I had, while a viticulture student at Davis, researched the climate of W. Oregon. I had undertaken this research primarily because of my love for the Pinot noir variety, and my great disappointment with all of the many California variations of this variety which I tasted at Davis. A statement made by one of my enology professors, Harold Berg, there confirmed what I had been tasting..."There are few if any climates in California cool enough for the Pinot noir variety to produce its best wines." I took this remark seriously and after graduation in January of 1964 I left for Europe to spend nine months of my own research as to why certain varieties were planted in certain regions..particularly in France where the archetypes of most vinifera wines are grown. Over the many months of vineyard trudging and cellar tastings the question I always asked was "why do you make wine from this variety in this region?" The usual answer was either a Gallic shrug or "c'est la tradition monsieur". Very frustrating...until I stepped back and looked at the varieties and the regions. Pinot noir and Chardonnay were planted in Burgundy where they barely make it to maturity each year---if the vigneron is lucky with the weather. These varieties could have been planted in Bordeaux where in its warmer climate, maturity would be assured each year. The same is true for Bordeaux where Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon blanc and other varieties just barely made it to maturity each year. Why weren't they planted in Provence where maturity would be a certainty? The answer became increasingly apparent--for a vine to yield its best fruit (and consequently the best wines possible) it must mature its fruit in precise harmony with the end of the summer growing season. When this match of ripening time of a particular variety corresponds with the end of the growing season FLAVOR is the result. Early maturing varieties grown in warmer climates tend to have the more subtle flavors literally boiled out of them before they ripen.

This newly discovered knowledge I gained in Europe refocused my thoughts on periodicity of grapevines which I had read in French ampelographies in the library at UCD. Almost all of these ampelographies were based on a classification scheme devised by V. Puilliat in the 1800's. Basically, the system works like this: The grape variety Chasselas doré is used as the "Period I" indicator vine. All grape varieties which ripen at the same time as Chasselas have been classified as "Period I" varieties. Those which ripen 5-6 days earlier are called "Period I early". Those that ripen 5-6 days later than Chasselas are called "Period I late". Period II varieties ripen from 7-14 days later than Chasselas, with 5-6 days on either side indicated as "Period II early or late". And so on for Period III and IV. Puilliat in the introduction to a book published in the late 19th Century is emphatic in stressing what Dr. Guyot had previously stated--namely that before planting a particular variety, quoting from Puilliat, "the great problem to be resolved is the characteristics of a given climate and soils in which to plant a variety. There are a lot who fail to cultivate the variety of vines suitable to the climate in which they have to grow in order to produce the best quality from that particular variety."

It was upon this idea and the empirical knowledge gained from Europeans in 1964 that I carefully selected only Period I varieties to plant in the cool climate of Oregon's Willamette Valley. (The Willamette Valley, by the way, has the coolest growing season of any major agricultural area in America). These are varieties which "fit" our climate with maturity usually coming at the very end of the growing season, often when the leaves are beginning to yellow.

The varieties I selected for the Willamette Valley were the Pinot noir and Chardonnay of Burgundy (which displays amazing parallels in growing seasons to the Willamette Valley) and the Pinot gris, and the Muscat Ottonel and Gewurztraminer of Alsace and, for good measure (in case bubbles ever came to my head) the Pinot Meunier of the

Champagne region. All of these European regions are very cool and all make superior wines from these Period I varieties because they have cool growing seasons and the varieties are adapted to them.

The idea of grape variety adaptation to a particular growing season was given credence by Amerine and Winkler's degree day idea still prevalent in California. It's a good theory for a climate that can be described as having an overall umbrella of heat so that almost any variety can "ripen" almost anywhere. The Amerine and Winkler formula did much to direct California thinking finally towards planting the proper varieties in the proper climatic regime...much to the benefit of the current California premium wine industry. It is when dealing with marginal climates such as the Willamette Valley the degree day hypothesis begins to run into trouble. Without going into this at great scientific length (which I could not even hope to do), the fact I have learned in my 27 years of grape growing in the Willamette Valley is that when dealing with a climate as marginal as ours for the ripening of grapes, the degree day is only one of the myriad factors that must be addressed. (As an aside, California Region I areas are generally too warm for Period I varieties.)

But now on to Pinot varieties in particular. With the exception perhaps of Pinot Meunier, the other Three Sisters (Pinot noir, Pinot blanc and Pinot gris) are essentially color sports or mutations, with Pinot noir the likely forerunner to the other two sister varieties. The propensity for mutation in Pinot is fairly well known to grape geneticists. It became visually vivid to me when walking through one of our Pinot gris plantings a few years ago. On a few Pinot gris vines I noticed that half of one berry would be white (Pinot blanc) and the other half a russet red (Pinot gris) or purple (Pinot noir). On the same Pinot gris vines would be whole clusters white, russet or purple. Quite an amazing sight! I wonder if this display of genetic variation would be found in warmer areas. I don't think so, because I'm convinced that for Pinot varieties to show their true but amazingly variable quality as wine or as vine they must be grown in a very cool climate. I am aware that California has always thought of itself as being all things to all people. It is rich with diversity of people, religions, politics, "sects", and climates. The latter is the rub--Pinot doesn't belong in California's climates except perhaps at very high elevations which tend to be cooler or in a few cool and individual microclimates. By making this statement I am not knocking California viticulture at all. No one can dispute that California produces a lot of wonderful wine, it is my contention that the best of these wines "fit" the growing season, i.e. come to maturity toward the very end of the season. In discussing Pinot gris in warm years (in the usually cool growing regions of Alsace and Germany) Jancis Robinson says only in years that are too hot does the Pinot gris' naturally low acid tip them over the threshold into clumsiness. (I might also point out that it is the warm years in these regions where the delicacy and spiciness of aroma are also lost). This would appear to be the scenario in most of California in most years for most Pinots.

Given the usual abundance of heat available in California's grape growing areas, it is exciting to see the efforts being made by viticulturally-oriented producers such as Randall Grahm, Nick Martin and others who have said, "Hey, we have an essentially Mediterranean climate in California--let's plant Mediterranean varieties!" (Randall originally went to the higher elevations of the Santa Cruz Mountains to grow Pinot noir. But even in this relatively cool California climate he soon decided (Randall is anything but a slow learner) that it was too warm for Pinot noir and began buying his Pinot from Oregon. He pulled out his Pinot noir and, I believe, just last year his Chardonnay. He is one of at least two viticulturalists on the West Coast who believes that Chardonnay doesn't belong in California at all!). Rhone varieties like Viognier (Period II), Marsanne and true Syrah (II) (as opposed to K. Syrah), Mourvedre (III) and others, are all grown now, not to mention Italian varieties. [Actually, the first wine I ever made was in 1963. It was Barbera (Period III). It came from Dinty Webb's backyard vineyard here in Davis. It had so much acidity even in this warm climate that (had the corks been better) I'm sure it would be alive today!] The new rage for Italian varieties such as Nebbiolo (Period II), Sangiovese (Period II or III?), Trebbiano (late III) and so on is really just getting back to the basics which the early Italian immigrants to California instinctively knew--this place "felt" like home, so "let's plant some of our native Italian varieties here." The difference is that now, with modern enological techniques and better clones, the wine made from these varieties is much better. And...these varieties are adapted to a lot of climates in California--much better than Pinot.

So, you say, how about the Pinot grigios of Italy--that's an Italian variety which has had good commercial success in the U.S. It works in Italy, why not in California's Mediterranean climate? My answer is that if you look at where most Pinot grigio grows in Italy, it is in the North. And if you look at where the best of these Italian Pinot grigios are made, it's generally at the cooler/higher elevations of the north. There might be places like that in California and, yes, California can grow Pinot gris almost anywhere. As Jancis Robinson says, "it is planted all over Central Europe and has an almost chameleon-like ability to adapt to each different environment." That, of course, is "Pinot" in general. As opposed to Cabernet Sauvignon which has a singular flavor profile whether it is grown in Australia, Napa or Lubbock, Pinots tend to have a myriad of subtle flavors which are present or lost in the wine depending on where it grows and, to a lesser extent, who makes it. In Europe the best examples of Pinot invariably come from the more northerly and marginal locations found in Burgundy, Alsace and Germany--such parallels exist on the west coast of the U.S.

In conclusion, I think it is high time that viticulture and grape variety adaptation become the focus of premium winemaking on the West Coast...not the enological wizardry necessary to try to make something decent to drink out of grapes which are poorly adapted to the region or site in which they are grown which is often the case in all three western states.

There are a number of wonderful varieties which are adapted to California's varied climates. Pinot's are, in my opinion, not amongst them.

Since I have tried to say nothing controversial in this address, there are probably no questions. But if there are, I'll try to answer them now.

