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THE EMERGENCE OF PINOT GRIS

Speech by David Lett

Good morning and what a gawd-awful early hour it is. I generally don't deal with anything heavier than a cup of tea at 8:45 in the morning.

But...this was the hour assigned me for dealing with the subject of "The Emergence of Pinot gris".

Originally I was to have shared this time with two other Oregon producers of Pinot gris in order to fill the hour, so you will be relieved to know that my comments will not go for the full hour this morning. Actually, Pinot gris is still in its "emergence" stage both in terms of the number of acres planted and marketability, but I will attempt to fill in as many details of as many aspects of Pinot gris that I know of from having grown it for 27 years.

For starters let me give you a bit of history of the Pinot gris vine in Europe and the U.S.

The origins of Pinot gris are apparently to be found in the Burgundy region of France where it is known as Pinot Beurot. It used to be widely interplanted among Pinot noir and was used in the Pinot noir to soften its sometimes rough edges. There are at least two producers of Pinot gris (or Beurot) that I know of in Burgundy today. One is Phillipe Senard who I believe labels it simply as Savigny-les-Beaune Blanc. Pinot gris was also grown in the Champagne region. From Burgundy the variety found its way to Switzerland probably in the Middle Ages. In 1375 Emperor Charles IV took Pinot gris cuttings to Hungary where it was planted by Cistercians on the slopes of Badacsony near Lake Balaton. It is known there even today as Szurkebarat (or grey monk). In the mid-1500's the vine found its way to Alsace and then a short distance across the Rhine to Baden. For some historically muddled reason the grape became known in Alsace as Tokay as early as 1750. In Germany's Palatinate it is theorized that Johann Ruland discovered the vine growing wild (probably amongst Blauburgunder or Pinot noir--but more about that later). Today in Germany the variety is known as Rulander and covers 3.5 percent of German vineyard land. The variety is widely planted in other areas of Europe...it is the familiar Pinot grigio of northern Italy, Malvoise de Valais in French Switzerland and the more accurate Pinot gris or Rulander in German Switzerland. It is Rulandac Sivi in Yugoslavia and is also found in Austria, Romania and in the Soviet Union (or whatever it is called at this date).

The history of Pinot gris in the United States probably began with an experimental planting by Konstantin Frank in the Finger Lakes Region of New York State. I'm not sure Dr. Frank ever made wine from it but, if so, in such small quantities that it was never commercially available.

The origins of the commercial history of Pinot gris go back to the origins of The Eyrie Vineyards in 1965. Since there were no commercial plantings on the West Coast at that time, I asked my former viticulture professor at UCD, Lloyd Lider, if I could prune the four vines of Pinot gris in the variety collection there and gather cutting wood from them. He agreed. (How could he refuse? He taught me how to prune grapevines!) So I collected about 160 cuttings from these vines and took them to Oregon for my grand experiment in this untried viticultural region. Pinot gris and others fit my theory of grape variety adaptation for Oregon's Willamette Valley. Expansion in the early days at The Eyrie Vineyards was impossible because I was selling college textbooks fulltime in order to keep my family fed and support our initial 7 acres of vineyard. Pinot gris production thus remained at about 25 cases/year from 1971 to 1981--most of it traded to salmon fishermen (it's perfect with salmon!). In 1979 I budded over our Riesling vines to Pinot gris and in 1980 planted another 9 1/2 acres at our Stonehedge Vineyard. In 1981 the grafted vines produced their first partial crop of 100 cases. It took a year to sell it! In 1982 we made 600 cases and it again took a year to sell it. In 1983 we made another 600 cases and it took 6 months to sell it. In 1984 the Stonehedge vines produced their first crop and what a crop! I made 3,000 cases that year and, based on sales of the '83 vintage I figured I had a 5 year supply. Much to my amazement it was gone in a year! The wine (not without some marketing effort on my part) had "caught on" particularly in the Northwest (which still accounts for about 85% of my sales of Pinot gris). In other markets, I faced the dreary syndrome from shops and restaurants and distributors that "if it's white and it ain't Chardonnay I can't deal

with it". That syndrome still exists but it's beginning to be broken down a bit in selected markets. But marketing Pinot gris is still an uphill fight especially in light of the sea of California Chardonnay available, often at bargain prices and the American consumer mentality that white premium wine is Chardonnay. Suffice it to say that in an increasingly difficult wine market in general selling something "different" is formidable.

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 the Willamette Valley of 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.)

So what does all this have to do with the "Emergence of Pinot gris" --a lot, because I go back to Harold Berg's statement mentioned earlier "that there are few, if any, climates in Calif. cool enough for Pinot noir."

Pinot gris is essentially (like true Pinot Blanc) a color sport (mutation) of Pinot noir. This is why Johann Ruland probably found it among his blauburgunder. The propensity for mutation in Pinot noir 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 gris doesn't belong in California's climates except perhaps at very high elevations which tend to be cooler. 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. I'm sure everyone here is a little bored, however, with the Cabernet-Chardonnay Syndrome--that's probably why you're here inquiring into Pinot gris...a strange, new and different variety which appears to be selling and tastes good. But the reason I've been rambling on about grape variety adaptation is that from a viticultural point of view I again don't think Pinot gris should be grown anywhere I can think of in California. In describing 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). I'm afraid this would be the scenario in most of California in most years.

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!" 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 in Davis. It had so much acidity even in that 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 are much better. And...these varieties are adapted to a lot of climates in California--much better than Pinot gris.

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 gris is, in my opinion, not one of 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.

