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Thoughts on Pinot gris

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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 Daphne 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 Daphne 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.