

La Rochelle Winery wrapped up a challenging 2011 crush in late October. La Rochelle is in a unique position to comment on conditions of the just completed California "Burgundian" varietals' harvest, as they source small Chardonnay and Pinot Noir lots from twelve different vineyards throughout five, separate, cool-climate appellations. Owner Steven Mirassou and winemaker Tom Stutz are a formidable team, focusing on quality not quantity – looking to craft limited releases that speak directly to the character and 'terroir' of the individual vineyard.

The notes that follow are directly from winemaker Tom Stutz' harvest journal...

La Rochelle 2011 Pinot Noir Growing Season Overview

Spring OK. Could have skipped May/June rains and cold. Resultant set, crop load, and botrytis issues, depending on region and site.

Summer wonderfully cool with excellent insolation (sun light intensity) which gave us above average pigment intensity and apparently advanced skin maturities. Also gave lagging sugar accumulation / concentration effects. Seed maturity appeared intermediate to above ripening parameters. Acid drop greatly delayed, giving higher than usual malic levels. Our pHs were variable across board. Cool weather / late rains diminished onset / impact of Leaf Roll infections across all vineyards affected.

Early fall heat events more moderate and shorter than last two seasons. Better water management with generally lower heat induced damage seen this year. Mid-fall's second, warmer rain caused havoc on vineyards without excellent spray programs and vigilant growers. Note that so many growers were caught out in 2010, that many opted to pick early this year instead of hoping for a post rain recovery – an excellent choice in hindsight.

Ripening consists of a series of curves – we just use Brix as our normal compromise measurement of maturity – simple because it's easy to measure and it's usually pretty accurate. Less "normal" seasons as we've seen these past three years allow the various ripening parameters to decouple from sugar accumulation. As always, picking decisions must be made on the most important character – flavor.

Yields were generally lighter than "normal." L.R. brought in about 80% of planned-on tonnage. Overall, the Pinot Noir arriving at the winery showed excellent color, fruit intensity, and flavor development at lower sugar levels than we normally see. The young wines are very promising at this stage.

2011 Pinot Noir and Chardonnay Climate Specifics

The 2011 vintage is the third growing season in a row characterized by a late, wet spring and a cool summer ending with heat events. In 2009, summer was followed by a warm fall with everything getting reasonably ripe. In 2010, we had reasonable weather up until rains

starting in the second half of October and staying pretty wet into November. It was a most difficult season where much of the later ripening varieties and the high-ripeness Chardonnay crop suffered considerable damage; Pinot Noir picked earlier was of high-quality, depending on location.

The 2011 season also started out on the cool side – but had good flower initiation by early May. Unfortunately shortly after flowering began, we hit cold wet weather and bloom was interrupted. Earlier varieties basically either completed set largely before the rain or were caught in the rains. In the first case, reasonably full clusters of seeded berries resulted, although cell division and ultimate berry size were compromised by the following cold / wet period and lighter final cluster weights were the norm. If, on the other hand, bloom occurred during the cold/wet weather pattern, then loose, shattered clusters with many seedless berries resulted. Their cell division period may well have hit the later warmer period but seedless berries never size up the same as their seeded brethren. The North Coast Chardonnay and Pinot Noir districts were hit pretty hard by these adverse conditions. The more southerly regions like Santa Lucia Highlands escaped much of the frost and rain damage. The final early summer issue was the weather favoring spring botrytis infection of the flowers and berries. This form will often lay dormant until the fall when the grapes come into the 22°+ brix range. So the stage was set for a challenging harvest.

We really had few heat events this year. And the season started pretty much the same as in 2010 – in fact our earliest fruit, our Blanc de Noir & Rosé stock came off the McIntyre property in the Santa Lucia Highlands a day later than in 2010. And the season ended with fruit from Russian River on exactly the same calendar date as last year.

This year, the fall rains were earlier. Early rain was predicted and many of the people burned by the 2010 crop losses decided that it would be better to bring in a crop than to lose it to the rains like the previous year. This turned out to be a good choice, though certainly one with stylistic repercussions. The first storm front came Oct 4th from the north and was the sort of storm you want if you have to have one: cold rain followed by drying wind. So far, so good – but not for long. The second storm system came out of the south a couple days later. It was wet and it was warm, with little saving wind. The Santa Lucia Highlands received ¼”+ of precipitation; 1½” in Napa and Sonoma; and 3” or more in Anderson Valley. It stayed muggy for several days and over that period the incipient botrytis bloom wiped out many a block of tight clustered, thin skinned Chardonnay. Certainly a year to test one's spray programs.

I was struck by the high degree of similarity between all the regions from late June into September: early skin maturity, gradual flavor development, and slow Brix accumulation. Working with highly regarded, conscientious growers does give us an advantage; given the very challenging growing conditions, the overall quality of the fruit arriving at the winery was very good, indeed.

2011 La Rochelle Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, by Appellation and Vineyard.

Anderson Valley AVA

Three vineyard sources:

Ferrington Vineyard. Chardonnay, Robert Young / 17 clone. Ferrington is situated just west of Boonville, at the foot of the south facing ridge. Good soil, good exposure, warm but not hot and better soil moisture than our other sources. Chardonnay never reached 22°B this year. Very promising flavors were developing when an explosion of spring-infected cluster botrytis did the grapes in over a four day period. No fruit received.

Deer Meadow Vineyard. Pinot Noir, Swan, Calera, Dijon 667 clones. Richard Savoy's beautiful site on rolling clay soils at about 1600'; the weather here is often different than the Anderson Valley floor – cooler yet less fog influenced. However, this year that combination delayed ripening noticeably. Despite Rich's best efforts to adjust crop level to push maturity and to cut out any mold affected fruit, the fall rains in the valley became a deluge on the ridge and he opted not to send us any fruit because "it's not going to make vineyard-designate quality wine." We're encouraged working with such growers who "buy-in" on our mutual quality-driven goal.

Londer Estate Vineyard. Pinot Noir, Dijon 115, 777 clones. Down valley in the Deep End, a steep, southern facing block. Although having notable fog influence (a positive in my book), it is a classic "warm spot in a cool region." This sort of site often is the most reliable of all. The fruit came in at full tonnage on September 29th. Sugar levels at 23.4° & 24.2° Brix. Relatively high pH's for their TA's and very high malic acid levels. The new wine has good color, racy fruit and full rich mouth feel – a good start.

Russian River AVA

Two vineyard sources:

Morelli Lane Vineyard. Chardonnay, Hyde clone. Fruit arrived September 26th. Early for a site so close (6 miles) to the coast, but hastened by a very light crop (60% of "normal") and the Goldridge sandy loam soils on which the vineyard is sited. Excellent drainage, ridge top exposure and plenty of sun brought the fruit to us in excellent condition at 24.7°Brix. Again, very high malic levels. The new wine has finished alcoholic fermentation in barrel and is starting up malo-lactic. Very promising so far.

Freestone Hill Vineyard. Pinot Noir, Dijon 115 clone. The Freestone Hill (Cleary) vineyard is even closer to the coast than Morelli Lane; we have the block towards the foot of the hill. Dark soil and the warmest site on property is my guess – another classic warm spot in a cool site. This was our last fruit to arrive – on October 18th. The skins had considerable maturity over the weeks leading up to harvest, the seeds hardened nicely, and the Brix was 22 degrees. Tastes very nice – an eventual below 14% wine for the true "Burgundy" believers.

Carneros AVA

One vineyard source:

Donum Estate Vineyard. Pinot Noir, Donum clone. A post-rain, post-humidity pick, this fruit shows the ability of our grape growing partner. The 23.3°Brix level may seem a bit shy, but again we had all the necessary skin, seed, and flavor development. Currently, we have wonderful color, strong fruit intensity, and richness.

Santa Cruz Mountains AVA

One vineyard source:

Deer Park Vineyard. Pinot Noir, Mt. Eden FPS 37, Mariafeld FPS 23, Wadensville FPS 2A clones. Located in the Pleasant Valley portion of the SCM appellation; owned by the Lester family. Normally, the three different clones will come in over a period of a week or so. But this year, the humidity called the tune and we took everything on October 14, post-rain, post-humidity. Again, wonderful flavors and discouraging numbers. Low brix, high acid, relatively high pH, and really high malic levels. The ferment is going really well with excellent flavors and richness coming along nicely. I believe this well-tended vineyard will again give us an excellent result despite a difficult season.

Santa Lucia Highlands AVA

Five vineyard sources:

McIntyre Vineyard. Pinot Noir, Martini clone. We started the harvest here with our Méthode Champenoise sparkling wine & Rosé stock on September 9. A harbinger of the soon to be common advanced skin maturity was seen in this older Martini clone fruit. We had color on our first press cycle despite the low Brix. Both the Rosé and sparkling have slightly more color than usual, intense Pinot fruit, and bracing acidity. Very promising so far.

Soberanes Vineyard. Pinot Noir, Pisoni clone. Property is sandwiched between Tondre and Garys' in the middle of the SLH bench. Fruit arrived September 28th. This is a young block (third harvest, second for us) and as is usual with young blocks, we see earlier ripening. Probably the highest Brix level of the season at 26.8°, we're seeing great intensity and a notable commonality with Garys' Pinots of the past. Very nice.

Rosella's Vineyard. Chardonnay, Dijon 76 clone. Came in on October 8th. Gary Franscioni did a great job delivering clean fruit, post-rain and at excellent maturity. The typical high acidity of the clone is with us again and we're presently finishing alcoholic fermentation. So far, so good with typical flavors and development.

Tondre Grapefield. Pinot Noir, Dijon 943, 115 clones. Incredible Dijon 943 Pinot – the smallest, darkest, and loose-clustered fruit you've ever seen. Just one bin of Dijon 115 included to help reveal the juiciness of the D943. Incredible dark color, striking richness and flavors from a 24° and change season – looks to be another winner from Joe Alarid, Tondre's talented grower. Delivered October 12th.

Paraiso Vineyard. Pinot Noir, Martini Clone. One of the SLH's original Pinot plantings, the old Block 5 (West Terrace) came in on October 13. After sitting at the same sample numbers of 22.3 to 22.7°B and with the same pH and minor TA drops for three weeks, grower Jason Smith and I decided to pick – and I'm glad we did. Perhaps the old clone / block liked the cool year – a respectable Brix and very nice acid/pH balance – this ferment is promising excellent results.