

Pinot Noir: One Clone, Two Clones, Three Clones, Four



By Julianna Hayes
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(October 15, 2006) -- Since the movie *Sideways*, wine enthusiasts have come down with a serious case of Pinot envy.

The film puffed up the Pinot Noir grape while casting aspersions on the previously much-loved Merlot. Miles, the lovable, yet disagreeable, central character and a self-professed Pinot junkie, heaped lofty praise on this noble variety by describing its flavours as “the most haunting and brilliant and thrilling and subtle and ancient on the planet.”

Not surprisingly, the film triggered a stir in the marketplace, as card-carrying members of the now fading Merlot-mania scurried to taste what they'd been missing.

In the year that followed, sales of Pinot Noir reportedly spiked 45 per cent across North America. Vintners began rethinking their planting programs and orders flooded Pinot clone suppliers.

One might think that wineries that focused on Pinot Noir long before it was fashionable would be reaping financial rewards. But if there is anything that fits the definition of “labour of love” – it is making of Pinot.

Most producers will concur that Miles nailed it when he said: “It's a hard grape to grow...it's thin-skinned, temperamental, ripens early. It's not a survivor like Cabernet, which can just grow anywhere and uh, thrive even when it's neglected. No, Pinot needs constant care and attention. In fact it can only grow in these really specific, little, tucked away corners of the world. And, and only the most patient and nurturing of growers can do it, really. Only somebody who really takes the time to understand Pinot's potential can then coax it into its fullest expression.”

One of those “specific, little, tucked away corners of the world,” happens to be British Columbia where several wineries make it, but only a handful manage to “coax it to its fullest expression” in the way Miles described. One of those producers is Quails' Gate, which has devoted 41 acres to the grape and 20 per cent of its overall production to the making of Pinot Noir.

While single clone, single vineyard seems to be the trend in New World varietal winemaking, Quails' Gate believes in mixing it up by growing a broad selection of clones – seven to be exact – and blending them to create what they consider to be superior, signature wines.

What gives? A Pinot is a Pinot is a Pinot, right? Wrong.

During a trade seminar at the winery last month, head winemaker Grant Stanley explained the clones all have unique characteristics. And it isn't just a matter of picking the best one and focusing on it. Stanley explained that there is seasonal variation with the clones, some do better in certain soils and vineyard blocks than others. But most importantly, when blended together they bring dimension to a wine.

"I like to layer the wine. It adds complexity," said Stanley. "All the clones have a different personality."

Stanley follows no formula each year – the final blending of the 2006 crop could very well be departure from the previous vintage depending on the growing conditions, harvest dates, brix, total acidity and pH levels, not to mention the "je ne sais quoi" component that always crops up in winemaking.

These subtleties would be lost on most consumers, including even the savviest of enthusiasts. I certainly could not raise a glass of Quails' Gate Family Reserve Pinot Noir and conclude that it was 40 per cent clone 91R, 20 per cent B667, 20 per cent 777, 18 per cent 828, with a splash of 667.

However, Stanley drove the message home for us by assembling barrel samples of clones "in the raw" – before final blending – for us to taste.

These were unfinished and unrefined and thus were a little rough for the average palate, but by trying them individually we learned what each clone brings to the table, so to speak. Tweaking the combinations allows Stanley each year to come up with a classy, multi-dimensional wine unique to the winery.

The seven clones are planted in various vineyard block, mostly on Quails' Gate's Boucherie Road operation on Kelowna's Westside. However, the winery also contracts a grower on the Naramata Bench. The characteristics can vary based not only on the clone, but on its location. Soil, drainage, sun/rain exposure, temperature will all be contributing factors in the end – two samples of the same clone can exhibit unique qualities because it was grown in a different block. Age of the vine is also a factor.

For example, we tasted two examples of a German clone called 91 Ritter Selection. Both were 20 year old vines, but were rooted in different areas of the Boucherie vineyard. The first was harvested on September 29, while the second was picked October 3. They both were quite floral, but the first was much spicier than the second, which had more earthy, tar notes.

We tried two samples of a Burgundy clone from France called Dijon B667, one planted on the Quails' Gate vineyard, the other on the Naramata Bench, both 11-year-old vines. The Boucherie clone was very spicy with bright cherry fruit and moderate tannins. The Naramata sample exhibited a lot of toasted dried herb notes, dill, plus sweet and sour fruit. It was quite a difference.

Another Burgundy clone – Dijon B115 – was picked from three-year-old vines, the youngest in our tasting. It is clearly revered for its dark colour, black cherry, plum, cassis and bruised violet character that will give Quails' Gate Pinot the depth and weight to compete with the big red guns favoured by consumers. It also features

some wet stone, slate notes.

Also on the table was a blend of two clones – Dijon B115 and B777 – which features nice sweet plum and berry fruit and cocoa but unfortunately contained a slightly green edge, keeping it out of its higher end Pinot for 2005.

Quails' Gate produces two tiers of Pinot Noir – the Limited Release which retails at \$25 and the Family Reserve, its flagship line, which sells for \$40. Stanley presented us with barrel samples of the 2005, yet unreleased.

The LR was floral with dark fruit aromas, savoury notes and hints of black pepper. The FR, which saw far more new oak contact, was much more robust with black cherry, smoke and earthy character. It was quite sweet on the entry but finished spicy and slightly hot. Incidentally, its clone breakdown was 55 per cent 91R, 12 per cent B115 and 33 per cent B667.

But you probably already knew that.

Wine Notes

Quails' Gate Limited Release Pinot Noir 2004 (0) *1/2**

Good fruit concentration of black cherry, plum and violet notes, slightly floral. Good mid-palate weight, nice finish with good length. \$25

Quality: Excellent

Value: Very Good

Cellaring Potential: Drinking nicely now, cellar up to four years

Quails' Gate Family Reserve Pinot Noir 2004 (0) **1/2**

A weighty Pinot with loads of dark berry fruit such as cassis, black cherry, plus smoky, toasty, chocolate notes. Ripe dark fruit on the palate and a peppery finish. \$40

Quality: Excellent

Value: Excellent

Cellaring Potential: Has the guts to last another 5-7 years

Hayes is the wine writer for the Okanagan Newspaper Group, who's weekly column Grape Expectations appears Sundays. She is also wine commentator on CBC Radio's Daybreak program, facilitator of the Wine Education Series of Tastings (WEST) for the BC Wine Museum, editor of the Official British Columbia Wine Tour Handbook and a regular contributor to various publications across Canada and the U.S.