

Society of Medical Friends of Wine

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

A Non Profit 501 C 3 Corporation

AUGUST 2018 NEWSLETTER

VINTAGE TOUR 2018



Mahoney Ranch Vineyards

Photo by Dr. Robert Blumberg

On Saturday, July 21, forty members and guests of the Society travelled to the Napa Valley under clear and sunny skies for a unique and outstanding visit to what many consider California's premier wine growing region.

History and evolutions in wine making were the themes of the day as we started in the Carneros region of southern Napa with a visit to the meticulously groomed vineyards of Francis Mahoney. In the early 1970's Francis and his co-owner Balfour Gibson founded Carneros Creek, the first modern era winery in the Carneros region and were instrumental in obtaining

recognition of Carneros as a premier grape growing area and ultimate recognition of the region as a grape growing appellation.

Francis' love for Burgundy led to the planting of Pinot Noir, and his scholarly nature led to collaboration with U.C. Davis for evaluations of a multitude of Pinot Noir clones, many of which we were able to observe growing and to enjoy their resulting wines. For an hour Francis regaled us with the early history of Carneros and described the intense research involved in selecting and evaluating different clones.



Francis Mahoney talking to our group

Photo by Dr. Jim Gallagher

While Francis sold the Carneros Creek winery in 2002, thirty years after its founding, any thoughts of retirement were short lived, and today he oversees the Mahoney Estate vineyard that we visited and the nearby Las Brisas Vineyard in the Sonoma portion of Carneros. The many clones of Pinot Noir have been joined by a number of Italian and Spanish varietals, and the one Francis seems most pleased with is the Vermentino. The first wine of the morning we tasted was a delightfully fresh example. Vermentino is gaining recognition and popularity in California and is a varietal to be watched, for those looking for a white other than Chardonnay.



A lineup of wines tasted

Photo by Dr. Jack McElroy

While the style of Francis's Pinot Noir has evolved over the years, with higher alcohol, deeper colors, and richer flavors than counterparts of the '70's and '80's, they are certainly lower in alcohol and less extracted than many cult Pinots these days. The goal of this label is balance and drinkability rather than points. What a delight to start our morning with a visit to a true pioneer with great knowledge and great modesty. Truly his name is on the label out of pride and not pomposity.



Ken Foster, winemaker for Mahoney Ranch takes us through a Pinot Noir tasting Photo by Dr. Jim Gallagher

After enjoying a filling box lunch amidst the vineyards, accompanied by a surprise glass of 1977 Carneros Creek Cabernet Sauvignon, produced from grapes of Tony Truchard's nearby vineyard, to show that Carneros is not just about Pinot Noir, we again boarded our bus and cars and headed north to Rutherford to visit more Napa Valley history at Beaulieu Vineyard.

When I first started exploring California wines in the late 1960's and early 1970's, there were only a handful of established properties selling quality Cabernet Sauvignon. For vintage bottles from the '50's and '60's, only Beaulieu, Charles Krug, Inglenook, and Louis Martini come to mind. When I first started teaching wine classes at U.C. San Francisco and then at U.C. Extension, it was not uncommon for students to ask me "what was my favorite California wine". I soon learned that my overly complicated response of "it depends on the food, the mood, the location" was not what they were looking for. I then started answering "Beaulieu Vineyard Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon", for during that period this particular wine had probably given me more drinking pleasure than any other.

Just a week before our tour, Marion and I had the pleasure of dining with Jim Gallagher and the opportunity to savor some wonderful wines, one of which was the 1970 Beaulieu Private Reserve. The fill in the bottle was excellent, the color was mature but still vibrant, and the bouquet of tar and ripe Cabernet brought back many tasting memories of the wine. Most impressively, the palate was still smooth and silky with enough fruit to be very much alive and enough complexity and length of finish to show that 48 years in the bottle had been well spent. A very special wine. No wonder I was anxious to see what is happening at Beaulieu these days.

My memories are of those wines from the era when Beaulieu was family owned and the winemakers were the legendary Andre Tchelistcheff and his immediate successor Richard Peterson. Starting in the early '70's, Beaulieu has undergone a series of corporate owners. I continued to follow and buy their Private Reserves through the 1980's, but some disappointments and lots of competition meant they had fallen off my radar screen.



Photo by Dr. Marion Koerper Blumberg

We were led through the George Latour Reserve tasting room, through an adjacent wine aging facility, and into a private tasting area adorned with historic photos and a most impressive collection of Private Reserve bottles dating back to the 1930's. A very pleasant host shared with us stories of the history, updated us on modern events, and poured for our tasting a selection of reserve Cabernets.



Decades of Beaulieu Private Reserve Bottles
by Dr. Robert Blumberg

Photo

The first was the 2014 Tapestry, a wine of deep color and a prune and ripe fruit Cabernet nose. Medium full in body, with moderate acidity and medium full tannins are the technicalities. The taste was that of a fairly big, robust, and mouth filling wine with good fruit and moderate alcohol. Not overly distinctive in today's world of Cabernets, but also moderately priced in today's world at \$65.

We had learned about Pinot Noir clones from Francis Mahoney, and now at Beaulieu we learned something of Cabernet clones. Available only at the winery, we received tastes of clone 6 and clone 4, each having been field selected and then propagated based on some outstanding character. Clone 6 had a nose of black olives, and was rich, fruity, and well balanced on the palate, with a polished finish. I liked it a lot. Clone 4 was big, rich, and ripe, very much a modern style of Cabernet. Both sell for \$165 the bottle.

Beaulieu continues to make a Private Reserve Cabernet in surprisingly limited quantities for what has grown to become a rather large winery. We sampled the 2014 vintage, and it is definitely in the modern style of Cabernet, a contrast to the lower alcohol and elegantly balanced wines of my memory. The nose is filled with enticing ripe black cherries, if you are a fan of the style; and perhaps with Cheracol cough syrup if you are not. There is almost a port like intensity to the nose and palate, with full body and moderate acidity. I think it can very much hold its own with many celebrated modern Cabernets, although at this youthful stage I personally would find it hard to pair with food or to enjoy more than a glass. The price at the winery is \$145 the bottle, a significant sum but admittedly competitive with many cult bottlings and less dear than many.

The price tag on the bottle of 1970 Private Reserve we recently drank was \$6, and thus today's price represents a 27-fold increase since the mid 1970's. Seems like a lot, especially since physician salaries have not increased anywhere near that much in that span of times. On the other hand, our San Francisco homes have increased even more so, so it is what it is. And I was grateful for the opportunity to taste the wines and get updated on an important and historic California wine property.



The tasting room at Amuse Bouche

Photo by Dr. Jack McElroy

Back south to the city of Napa we next ventured, to visit the ultramodern tasting room of Amuse Bouche, a joint venture of famed winemaker Heidi Barrett and John Schwartz. In an environment of beautiful artwork and labels, we were treated to an address by Heidi's dad and our honorary member, Dr. Richard Peterson. Dr. Peterson is no stranger to our Society, having addressed us at several quarterly dinner meetings, and I have previously recommended his excellent book, *The Winemaker*, for a grand historical and personal perspective on the evolving California wine industry.

A fitting sequela to our just completed visit to the corporate Beaulieu, Dr. Peterson shared with us his memories of joining Beaulieu as a young winemaker and sharing the role with the legendary Andre Tchelistcheff. He also tied us to our initial stop in Carneros by discussing the development of a Pinot Noir vineyard in the area by Mr. Tchelistcheff and his memories of a 1968 Beaulieu Pinot Noir that elevated the standard of California Pinot Noir in its day and remains a wonderful wine today. Equally important from my perspective was the fact Dick was the winemaker for the 1970 Beaulieu Private Reserve I described earlier.

At our request, given last years' devastating wine country fires, Dr. Peterson spoke to us about the potential deleterious effects of smoke on wine quality. He educated us about how the organic compounds in smoke can adhere to the waxy bloom on grapes and introduce into the finished wine a smell and taste of an ashtray that is impossible to remove. The only potential commercial use for such a wine is to blend no more than 5% into a non-affected wine, so the compounds do not exceed a smell and taste threshold. Some very large California wineries may be willing to purchase some of the affected wine for their varietal content to blend into millions of gallons of their other wines. Since such a commercial market is limited and the economic value of the wine so reduced, this can have a major impact on any small producer whose grapes were still on the vine when the fires hit. Fortunately, the vast majority of north coast grapes had already been harvested, and wine in fermenters, barrels, and tanks should be safe from smoke taint.

All of this seems even more of concern given the current spate of fires in Mendocino and Lake Counties, and the threat of additional blazes given California's dry conditions. This time of year, grapes are very much still on the vine and will soon be reaching maturity and their waxy bloom state, so the risk of smoke damage to California wines seems ever persistent. How sad and ironic it would be if the future reputation of a California vintage depends less on rain and temperatures and more on the number of fires in a given year.

Moving on to happier stories, and to help introduce the wines we would taste, Dr. Peterson then educated us about a bit of vinous mystery in which he has played a large role. In the village of Wrotham in Kent in Southeast England, a large vine of uncertain origin had been growing for a presumed two hundred years when a visitor to the area noted it and had his curiosity piqued.

White hairs growing on the surface of the leaves left it with a “dusty” appearance. Indeed, the leaves were like no known vine, but the clusters of fruit resembled Pinot Noir. English viticulture scholars thought it likely that the vine was a descendant of Roman importation some 2000 years ago.

Local vintners propagated vine cuttings and given the cool climate similarities with France’s Champagne region, they produced sparkling wines. When Dr. Peterson sampled these wines, he became intrigued and arranged for cuttings from the vineyard to be imported to California.

After the requisite quarantine time, he planted two acres near Yountville and produced small quantities of a Brut Rose sparkling wine. The vines were genetically analyzed at U.C. Davis by Professor Carol Meredith, and the Wrotham vine was indeed found to be genetically Pinot Noir.

The Brut Roses we tasted had a lovely light-pink color and an aroma that exuded fresh red cherries. Lively and refreshing on the palate, this is a fruit forward style of sparkling wine in the California style. It would be fun to pair one with one of the excellent English bottles of sparkler that occasionally make it to our shores these days to see how they compare.

Not one to stay still for long, Dr. Peterson’s next venture involved planting more cuttings of his Wrotham Pinot in an area he thinks is now producing some of California’s finest Pinot Noir table wines, the Santa Lucia Highlands. He is now producing a Pinot Noir that is a blend of fruit from the Wrotham vines and from Pinot Noir vines already established in this vineyard. We had the privilege of sampling his 2015 and 2016 vintages.

These wines show medium red color and have an intriguing aroma of spice, cardamom, and cloves. The taste on the palate is very fruity, with ripe Pinot qualities coming together in well balanced medium body and refreshing acidity. The finish is redolent of that tart, red cherry quality also seen in the sparkling wine. The whole experience at Amuse Bouche, from educational talk to wine tasting, was a delight and sent us all off to dinner in a splendid mood. We thank you Dr. Peterson!



Dr. Richard Peterson answers questions

Photo by Dr. Jack McElroy

One interesting property of the Wrotham Pinot Noir is that it is resistant to mildew, an evolutionary advantage that probably allowed it to survive two thousand years of wet English weather. Who knows, if temperatures continue to increase, perhaps the next frontier for this vine will be San Francisco and its foggy nights and mornings. Can Clos San Francisco compete with Clos Vougeot? The way things are going, a few rows of mildew resistant vines in our San Francisco back yards might just increase the home value another couple of million.

Fortunately, dinner was a just a short walk away in Napa to Allegria Restaurant, where our outdoor patio table awaited us and allowed us to enjoy the last hours of the warm Napa weather. Dinner consisted of Italian-inspired first courses and desserts and California-inspired main courses. And, of course for our resilient, well-traveled, and experienced group, more glasses of wine.

As we settled into our bus we were more knowledgeable and certainly content with the day's tastings and experiences. What a luxury to be able to sit back and relax and enjoy the

waning light of the day as our bus headed south through Carneros and towards our destinations in Marin, San Francisco, and beyond! A great big thank you to our member Dr. Jim Gallagher, whose contacts were instrumental in arranging the day's visits, and to our Executive Secretary Susan Guerguy for her assistance with the venues and agenda and for fine-tuning all the details necessary for a smoothly run event.

Please visit our web site (www.medicalfriendsofwine.org) or our Facebook page (Facebook/SMFOW) for many more photos of our 2018 Vintage Tour of Napa.

Bob Blumberg
Editor and Cellar Master
Society of Medical Friends of Wine