

The Society of Medical Friends of Wine

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

www.medicalfriendsofwine.org

NEWSLETTER

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In Pursuit of Great Pinot Noir

Wine aficionados have probably spent more time and money in pursuit of the finest Pinot Noir than of the wine from any other grape varietal. Of course, there are other great wines in the world—it just seems, whether they be Cabernet- or Chardonnay- or Riesling-based, they are easier to find than a truly memorable Pinot Noir. Notoriously hard to grow and to optimally vinify, in many ways the Pinot Noir is the holy grail of grapes. If you believe in it, you are willing to go to tremendous cost and effort to pursue and find that perfect bottle.

To go to the source of great Pinot, one option is to buy a ticket to France and travel to Burgundy, home for centuries to what are revered to be the finest examples of red wines made from this grape. Sure, Pinot Noir is grown elsewhere in Europe, in Champagne, Germany, Alsace, and northern Italy—but nowhere other than in Burgundy is the grape deified.

Another, more economical option, to find the source of great Pinot Noir, is to take a trip to the Russian River Valley area of northern California, and this is exactly what your Society did for our annual tour to the wine country.

Fifty years ago, precious little Pinot Noir was grown in California, and only a few bottles of what was produced were memorable. J.D. Zellerbach brought cuttings from France and established Hanzell Winery in Sonoma, one of California's first post Prohibition boutique ventures. Martin Ray, a great eccentric wine maker, planted Pinot Noir vines on his property on Mount Eden in the Santa Cruz Mountains, and produced some outstanding Pinot Noir wine, but did so inconsistently, perhaps reflecting the vine's finicky behavior. Andre Tchelistcheff, legendary wine maker for years at Beaulieu Vineyards, also managed a few celebrated vintages of Pinot Noir from vineyards in the southern end of Napa Valley, but the wines were certainly less consistent and less renown than his Cabernet Sauvignons.

In those days much was unknown about best combinations of land and climate for the grape, and clonal variation in vines was still a mystery. A wine being sold as Gamay Beaujolais in California was found to actually be a Pinot Noir clone, but one that produced a very light-bodied wine. Indeed, much of Pinot Noir then was anemic in color and light in body and taste. Lords and Elwood winery did produce a richer and darker version that was aged in old port barrels, and indeed we wondered if there might not have been a little port left over in the barrel before the Pinot Noir was added. Most California Pinot Noirs then seemed like they needed a boost.

The first reliably consistent producer of what I thought was excellent California Pinot Noir was Joseph Swan. Joe planted and nourished a few vines on his property in Forestville, in the southern part of the Russian River area. To my palate the wines showed complexity and class, fine aromas, and in warmer vintages, a richness and robustness unique in California. I think he was certainly one of, if not the, harbinger of greatness in California Pinot Noir from the Russian River Valley.

As the popularity of Pinot Noir increased, be it for simple drinking pleasure or that holy grail aspect of greatness, plantings in California increased and a number of regions have become notable for their results. The Carneros region of southern Sonoma and Napa was one of the first to rise, although in more recent years it has passed the crown to south coast regions like Santa Lucia Highlands and north coast areas such as the Anderson Valley.

But perhaps the most celebrated region today for Pinot Noir in California is the Russian River Valley. Winery names like Williams Selyem, Rochioli, and Kosta Browne roll off the tongues of California Pinot aficionados, much as Comte de Vogue, Domaine Dujac, and Domaine Leroy might roll off the tongues of Burgundy fanciers.

Has this region achieved world class status for Pinot Noir? Let's travel along with our member Jim Gallagher, PhD., to read his account of our recent Russian River region tour.

Society of Medical Friends of Wine
Summer Wine Tour- 2019

Text and Pictures by
Jim Gallagher Ph.D.

Our first stop in this Summer's Wine Tour was to the **Gary Farrell Winery** located in the Russian River Appellation of Sonoma County. Farrell produced his first vintage wine in 1982 from Pinot Noir grapes harvested at both the Allen and Rochioli River Block vineyards. Gary began learning his craft while working at the Davis Bynum Winery in the 1970s, and continued building his skill, later working with such luminaries as Joe Rochioli, Tom Dehlinger and Robert Stemmler.

Having achieved much success in the wine business, first as a winemaker and later with



his consulting work, Farrell was able to obtain sufficient financial backing to construct a winery on a ridge overlooking the Russian River Valley. After four years of producing excellent wine and building a solid business, he sold his winery and business to **Ascentia Wine Group**. Ascentia, an Australian based entity found that its business

model proved less successful during the great recession period of 2008-2010, and sold two of its prized properties in 2011, one was the Gary Farrell Winery. **Vincraft** became its new owner and maintains the property at present. Gary Farrell remains associated with the winery's strategy.

Vincraft may not be a familiar name to many as its history as a wine business is just over



a decade, having been formed in 2008. However, the three principals, Bill Price, Walter Klenz, and Pete Scott, have together around ninety years of executive experience in the wine business. Klenz was the President of **Beringer Winery** in St. Helena until he retired, and Pete Scott also was an executive (CFO) at Beringer. Price's background is high finance, and he was a co-founder of the **Texas Pacific Group** hedge fund, bringing his experience as an investment banker to his wine enterprises. Vincraft's initial winery purchase was in 2009 when they acquired **Kosta Browne Winery** in a transaction that

shocked many. What Vincraft offers most is their corporate management and the infusion of money to facilitate development or improvement of facilities, acquisition of vineyards and fiduciary management

When we arrived at the Gary Farrell Winery, we were greeted at the doorway with a glass of 2014 Gary Farrell Chardonnay, produced from grapes harvested at Olivet Lane Vineyard. The

Chardonnay showed a classic youthful Chardonnay hue of medium straw and a captivating bouquet of anise and citrus, a medium light body, excellent structure (good acid balance) and a lovely finish. Many of the group took the opportunity to slip out to an open aired veranda overlooking the Russian River Valley. While there, I enjoyed sipping the wine while drinking in the captivating view and was already realizing what a great day I was enjoying.



After a brief introduction to the history and current philosophy of Gary Farrell Winery, we were ushered back into the tasting room where pairs of wines had been poured and paired with four cheeses for each member of our group.

The first flight of a concurrent comparative tasting was designed both to allow the guest to distinguish the differences in terroir and vintage, as well as the wine's compatibility with the cheeses.



Indeed, an excellent study setting.

The first two wines to be compared were:
2014 Rochioli-Allen Vineyard Chardonnay and the **2015 Westside Farms Vineyard Chardonnay**. Both wines proved to be delightful. The

Rochioli-Allen showed an apple-pear bouquet, medium-light body, good balance, and a lovely finish. The Westside Farms exhibited in its bouquet a greater array of citrus notes with a moderate peach and toast background. The vintage differences were not robust.



The second two wines were: **2015 Bien Nacido Vineyard Pinot Noir** and **2015 Hallberg Pinot Noir**. This pair showed much greater differences. The Bien Nacido was lighter in color, it had a more fragrant bouquet, with a cherry-strawberry fruit profile with hints of earth and mushrooms, The Hallberg was clearly a more robust style, richer in cherry/raspberry fruit flavors, likely to have greater development in the bottle.



A third Pinot Noir was poured, a **2015 Bacigalupi**. This wine was headed toward my sweet spot; it has a medium-dark red color, rich strawberry-raspberry aroma, light toast bouquet; medium body, excellent fruit, showing a good acid-tannin balance; and a fine finish with a rich, long, lush



aftertaste. Another Gary Farrell Pinot Noir to watch for is the **2015 Toboni Vineyard**. Joan Boothe enticed her table host to open a bottle of this wine and we were very impressed at its completeness and flavor complexities.

Emeritus Winery

Our second stop was **Emeritus Winery**. Grapes have replaced apples in

much of this region, and this is the case for Emeritus, as the winery sits on the 115-acre former Hallberg Apple Orchard that has now been converted to a 110-acre Pinot Noir Vineyard. The founding principal is Brice Jones, founder and former CEO of **Sonoma Cutrer**. Brice sold Sonoma Cutrer in 1999, the same year he purchased the Hallberg Orchard. Brice has as key members of the Emeritus team several former members of his very successful Sonoma Cutrer team, namely Ted Elliot, his current CFO, and Vineyard Manager, Kirk Lokka. Coming from Sonoma Cutrer where he demonstrated one of California's most successful production and marketing of California Chardonnay, Brice focused Emeritus on a new challenge—Pinot Noir.

His daughter, Mari, is the current President of Emeritus and greeted us as we arrived. She also led us on a brief vineyard tour in which she described the philosophy of their vineyard management, which is marked by the transition from a drip irrigation system that was originally installed at the time of the vineyard planting to a “dryfarming” operation.



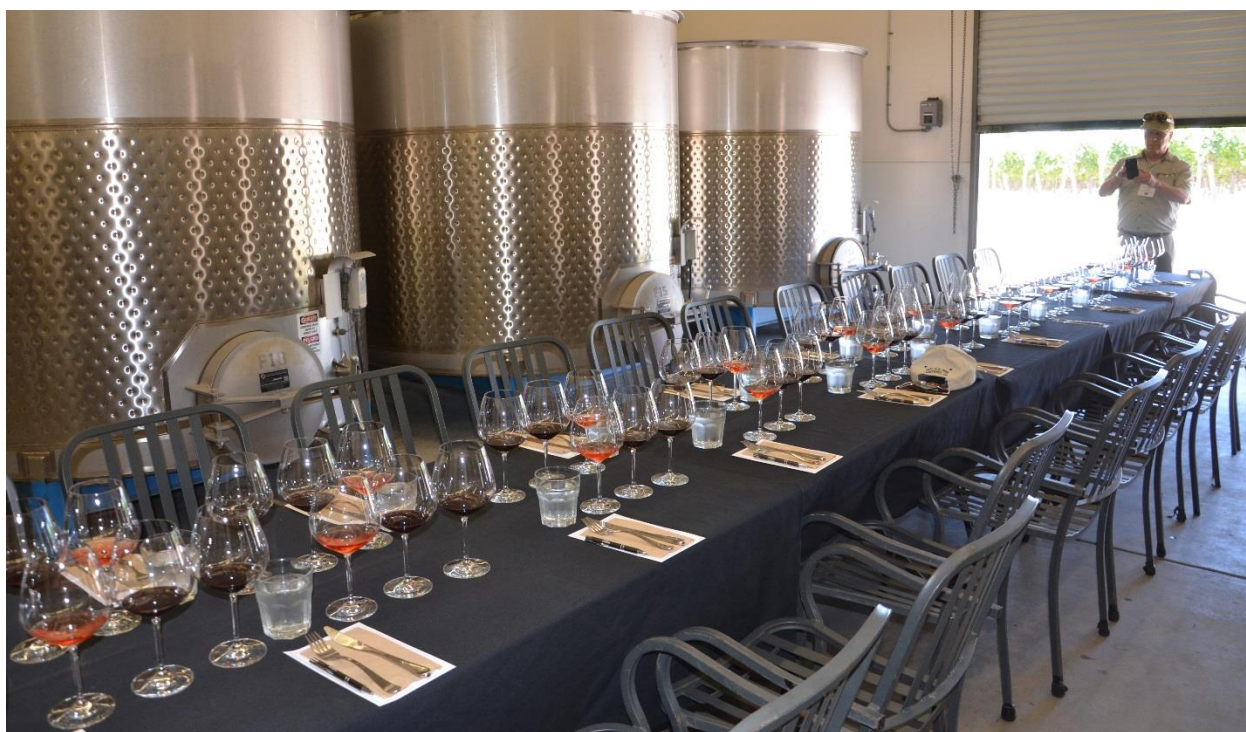
A delicate and interesting process by which the vines were weaned from their exogenous hydration support to a greater reliance on the vines' root development to seek out a more natural water source. In other words, the roots were encouraged to grow deeper to find water.



After the vineyard tour, Mari took us back to the winery where she described the Emeritus vinification methods. In addition to our tour of the vineyard we were provided a hearty lunch at Emeritus and wine to accompany our lunch.



Sandwiches, salads and breads were presented ad lib and each guest had three glasses of wine for tasting or enjoying with their lunch. The first was a **2016 Ruby Saignee**. A wine of



light pinkish colored derived from free run juice blended with a small percentage from a more typical crush process. The latter served to provide additional body to the wine.

The second wine was the **2016 Hallberg Ranch Pinot Noir**. This wine offered a delightful cherry-strawberry bouquet with lovely balance, forward flavors and flawless finish. The winemaker David Latten had finished the wine for maximal enjoyment upon release. The third wine, **Wesley's Reserve** named in memory of Brice's father, was clearly a more robust styled wine with dense fruit showing strawberry, earth and truffle character and a sturdy structure with lots of tannic acid, not overbearing, but needing some additional bottle age.

Benovia Winery

Our last winery was Benovia and as the bus passed through the gate, we viewed the surrounding vineyards and the close distance of the vine plantings was immediately striking. We later learned, that indeed this was a planned close planting and the vineyard management team obtained its tractors from a single manufacture specializing in the 4 x 4 foot spacing.

The winery's location is a former Deloach property and in addition they farm well-known highly regarded vineyards, Cohn Estate and Martaella Estate. Other sources include Four Brothers, located on Sonoma Mountain and farmed by winemaker Mike Sullivan's family

Below, the Society of Medical Friends of Wine's president, Jack McElroy is conversing with James, the grandson of the founders of the winery, Mary Dewane and Joe Anderson. James works with many hats, but on this occasion, he teamed with David Hewitt, the Hospitality Manager, to host us. Together they poured eight wines while describing their origin, and the vineyard's history.



We were seated at several tables with stem glasses readied for our tasting. David and James poured generous samples while conversing about the Benovia and addressing a multitude of questions our members and guests offered.

We started the tasting with two **2017 Chardonnay's**, the first a Russian River Valley appellation of grapes harvested at the **Martaella Estate and Zio Tony Ranch vineyards**. The second from the **Three Sisters Vineyard** from the Fort Ross-Seaview Appellation. The Russian River Chardonnay showed classic apple-pear fruit, good acid base and medium finish; quite attractive, yet less complex than the Three Sisters wine which was far more giving with a baked honey-apple bouquet, robust fruit base, all balanced with a grand viscous finish.

Four Pinot Noir's followed, all well-crafted to display their particular terroir. A rose of Pinot Noir had copper color and was barely off dry with fine fruit and flavors. Among the traditional red Pinots I found the **2016 Cohn** to have a lovely layered complexity of fruit flavors—dark cherry, strawberry with hints of mocha, excellent balance, and much promise for continued bottle development. Another delicious Pinot was the **2016 La Pommeraie**, with forward fruit, true varietal flavors, and crisp acidity that should also benefit its bottle life.

We left our last winery of the day feeling like we had been royally received by all properties and with much greater appreciation of the wonderful wines of this region.

John Ash Restaurant

Dinner at John Ash was probably anticlimactic, in that the early part of the day reached a peaked level of satisfaction that may have exceeded our (at least my) expectations. The dinner gathering did offer us the opportunity to fortify for the trip home and to discuss the day's events with our comrades. I mostly remember the wonderful conversation with Roger Ecker during dinner and my day long exchanges with bus seat mate, Dan Bikle.

Several of our tour members gathered together outside the restaurant after dinner for a group photo. I'm sorry that others missed this moment.



Article Review: Are the Cardiac Effects of Alcohol Good, Bad, or Neither?

Darryl P. Leong, MBBS, MPH, PhD
European Heart Journal 2019; 40 (9): 712-714

Reviewed by Robert Blumberg, M.D.

I suppose some of our readers might be wondering why we are juxtaposing a potentially sobering scientific article with a review of a day of pleasant wine tasting and dining. This just happens to be one of the unique missions of our Society, namely educating people about the joy and pleasures of wine as well as informing our members and followers of articles that objectively review the subject of wine, alcohol, and health.

This article is a concise review of what has previously been published and discussed and does not offer insight on new research. It does put a lot of material in an easy to read format and raises important questions about the design and validity of prior studies.

There have been multiple and consistent reports that the association between alcohol use and adverse cardiac outcomes as a whole is U shaped. Low to moderate alcohol use (about 4 ounces of wine per day in women or 8 ounces in men) is associated with a reduced risk of cardiovascular events and mortality when compared with abstinence from alcohol or heavy alcohol use.

The article correctly points to certain aspects of this generalized statement that merit further review. What type of alcohol, socio-educational status of consumers, and dietary patterns might have an effect on conclusions, but to what extent is really not yet known. The large numbers of participants in published studies argues for their validity, but a further breakdown into who might most benefit or most be harmed is elusive.

Alcohol is also known to contribute to adverse cardiac events even if it has a protective effect for coronary atherosclerotic events. Certain arrhythmias, heart failure, and intracranial hemorrhage are associated with alcohol use. Also, the protective effect of alcohol seems to wane if alcohol consumption is done in a binge fashion as opposed to daily. So, saving up your week's allocation to drink up on Saturday night is not a good idea.

In addition to cardiac effects, individual counselling must take into account factors such as cancer risk, liver disease, and family history of alcohol abuse.

So how to sum up. The author states "faced with the reality that we may never be able to answer the question posed in the title, a prudent approach would be to accept a low-moderate level of alcohol use in those without significant cardiomyopathy (weakness of the heart muscle) or cirrhosis. To that I would add a history of significant cardiac arrhythmia or uncontrolled high blood pressure.

Some Closing Thoughts

Scientific research and publications are of course very important. Since the majority of our members are in the healing professions, it is important for us to stay up to date with medical literature. But I cannot escape the concern that scientific research and publication cannot measure the pleasure factor associated with an activity. I think we can all relate to the fact that happiness and pleasurable pursuits add to the quality of our lives, even if it might be difficult to always prove they add to the quantity of our lives.

Events like our recent wine country tour are a fine example. It is hard, if not impossible, to quantify the positive results of a pleasant day exploring wine in a beautiful countryside. But there clearly are positive benefits to such an activity. I would like to share with you a recent personal event as example of another.

To celebrate several family birthdays Marion and I and her sister and her husband recently went to the Navio Restaurant at the Half Moon Bay Ritz Carlton for dinner. Their wine list is extensive, but not cheap, and I was faced with the task of finding a bottle that would accompany several courses and different dishes. This would keep us within our “recommended” daily intake of wine and not break the bank.

I chose a white Bordeaux, the **2016 vintage of Chateau Carbonnieux**. A blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon, it was a dry, flinty, fruity wine that evolved in the glass, changing with time and food to bring considerable drinking pleasure throughout the evening. It was not a blast of horns or a burst of timpani; rather it was a string ensemble filling the background with pleasing sensations. It accommodated oysters, white asparagus, spot prawns, scallops, halibut, and duck, adding something different to each diner’s choice.

A visit to the Ritz is not cheap. But the service, the view, the warm welcome, and food, and the celebration itself all made it worthwhile. Will we live a couple of seconds longer because of the glass or two of wine consumed that evening? Who knows? But the several hours of pleasure enhanced by the wine is easier to quantify.

So, I invite you to participate in a grand, non-controlled, scientific experiment. Every once in a while, treat yourself to something special. If you can afford it, worry less about the cost than the pleasure you might enjoy. Choose wisely and choose well. But do choose to participate. I cannot promise you the published results will prove increased longevity. But I can promise you the experiment will be enjoyable.

Looking ahead to more enjoyable events, make a note that our annual visit to the **French Club** is coming up Friday September 20. More details will be forthcoming, but you do not want to miss this one for an evening of fantastic food, wine, and camaraderie.

I still have in mind the article on why the wine currently for sale is always the best wine ever, and I would also like to share some thoughts and examples from recent experiences about the aging properties of some white wines. Those will need to wait for the next issue.

Happy Summer to you all.

Bob Blumberg, M.D.
Editor and Cellar Master
Society of Medical Friends of Wine