

Vin, Vino, Wine

BOTTLE SHOP & TASTING BAR

Meeting Fred Scherrer

This is an article I wrote this spring for a Stanford creative non-fiction writing course. I signed up on a whim – I saw an ad one evening, signed up on-line the next morning, and had the first class that evening. I realized very quickly that I was in way over my head, when the instructor asked each of us to introduce ourselves by telling the class what writing we were currently “working on.” I meekly said that I wrote a monthly wine newsletter. The instructor commented, “at least you have an audience.”

The main course project, writing a fifteen to twenty-five page article, was particularly daunting. Anyway, I survived, and greatly enjoyed the experience. I wrote about meeting Fred Scherrer in Sebastopol last September. We are featuring his superb 2005 “Russian River” Pinot Noir this month and those of you interested in learning more about Fred and his winemaking approach may find it interesting.

- Victor Pugliese

Meeting Fred Scherrer

Victor Pugliese

I finally met Fred Scherrer last September. I drove up to his winery outside Sebastopol to pick up the last twenty-five cases of our private label Pinot Noir. We left Palo Alto around 10. Danny, my thirteen year old, came along.

It was Sunday morning, bright, sunny, and a little cool, a good day to be on the road. It didn't feel like work – there was nothing to accomplish, no pressure. Just drive up to Sonoma, meet Fred and quickly see his place, load up the cases, and drive home. There would be none of the oppositional dynamic that occurs in a professional visit. I was not going to evaluate Fred or his wines. There were no buying decisions to be made. He would not be in sales mode. It was harvest, he would be busy, and we would be in and out.

Though I hadn't met him, I knew quite a bit about Fred. We sold his wines in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when he was a winemaker for Tom Dehlinger at Dehlinger Winery, also in the Russian River area. We sold a lot of Dehlinger Chardonnay then, and some Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc as well. For several years our best selling white wine was a declassified Dehlinger Chardonnay bottling labeled “White Table Wine.” It was a combination of barrels that did not have the richness that Tom and Fred wanted for the Dehlinger Chardonnay. That was its only flaw, and to me it wasn't a flaw at all. The wine was delicate, persistent, delicious, and well-priced, not unlike the Pinot Noir I was going to pick up.

Fred left Dehlinger in the mid-1990s to start his own winery. I occasionally heard from clients about the quality of his Pinot Noirs, but his venture was very small and he worked under the radar, no publicity, no buzz.

Now this private label had us working together. After 20 years, this was the first time my shop had offered a wine under its own label. It was a runaway success. In the week and a half since its release, the first twenty-five cases were nearly gone. Our clients loved the style – charming, subtle, moderate alcohol, low oak – and they loved the price. We were not going to make any money on the project. The cost of developing and printing a label for just 600 bottles offset all the profit. But it was more important that the wine be a critical success. This was our label, we stood behind the wine, it had to represent our values and our taste in Pinot Noir. And it did.

The catalyst for the project was J.J. Clifton, a young guy who had worked for me for a little more than a year, and had left earlier in September, just as the wine was being released, to move to Portland. Before he came to work for me, he worked the 2005 harvest for Fred. At that time, he was also managing the wine list for a restaurant in Marin. Our batch of Pinot Noir had been created to use as a private label wine-by-the-glass for the restaurant. When J.J. quit the restaurant, and came to work for me, we inherited the project.

It was two barrels, fifty cases. One barrel came from a batch of wine that didn't make the cut for Fred's Sonoma County Pinot Noir. It didn't have the intensity he wanted for that wine, but otherwise it was sound, even excellent. This declassification was analogous to that of the Dehlinger "White Table Wine" of years before.

The second barrel was a concoction Fred and J.J. created. One part came from a flavorful but formless batch that Fred had culled out early on. The other part came from a batch of press wine that also had been selected out.

Press wine is created after a red wine fermentation is finished. The fermentation tank holds not only the newly made wine, but also all the grape skins, seeds, and, at the winemaker's discretion, stems. Most of the color and structure in a red wine is extracted during fermentation from the skins and seeds. These also make important contributions to the flavors and character. When the winemaker feels the extraction is to the level he wants, he drains the wine from the tank through a fine screen. This is the free run. The cake of skins, seeds, and stems left in the tank still holds quite a bit of wine. The cake is put in a press, and the remaining liquid is pressed out. The press wine is much heartier than the free run. It is darker, denser, and more astringent, with a higher level of tannin. Some winemakers do not use their press wine, preferring the softer, brighter character of the free run. Others keep it separate, and may later blend some in to beef up the free run, if that meets their objective.

The way J.J. explained it, Fred has a much more sophisticated approach to press wine than any I was aware of. He presses slowly, and segregates the press wine into sequential batches. Common wisdom holds that the earliest press wine is the most desirable, and that later portions are increasingly harsh and astringent. According to J.J. Fred's empirical findings are different. He often finds the middle portions of the press to be the most useful.

I find this inspiring. Here is a winemaker who is fully engaged, who applies the scientific method to further his artistic aims. He understands things about his wine no one

taught him in winemaking school, that no one teaches at all, things he has discovered because he knows his wines so intimately. He rejects common wisdom because of what he sees for himself. Instead of looking at press wine as something for the junkpile, to be filtered and stripped and bulked out, Fred found a way to use it to broaden his palette, to extend his artistic range. This is why I want to meet him.

Fred and J.J. had blended two orphan batches, ones that filled each other's holes, and created a barrel that was promising. Combined with the barrel culled from his Sonoma County Pinot Noir, the assemblage came to life, yielding the little beauty our clients were snapping up. Fred was able to price the wine reasonably. To help him keep his costs down, we agreed to pick up the wine at his place, to save him delivery costs. With J.J. gone, it fell to me to make this final pickup. So here I was on my way to meet Fred.

We get through San Francisco with very little traffic. Danny is not talkative, and I am mostly left to my own thoughts. Crossing the Golden Gate Bridge brings back memories of my first wine job, at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars in Napa. I lived in the Richmond district and commuted daily across the bridge. I had been an avid wine collector for a few years, and was already determined to open a shop. To be successful, I felt I needed to know a lot more about the nitty-gritty of winemaking. I could not have winemakers and importers taking advantage of me. I had to know what they knew, the tricks of the trade. I got a job as a cellar rat for the 1982 harvest. It was a thrill to go to work and be a part of the process. Warren Winiarski was one of California's luminaries at the time, a half-

dozen years after his Cabernet was the upset winner at the Bicentennial tasting in Paris. He did not have much time for an unskilled underling, but there was more than enough to learn by watching. I arrived as early as the crack of dawn and sometimes left after midnight.

I did learn many dirty little secrets. The most disgusting was the salvaging of the lees wine. The lees are the sediments that settle to the bottom of a tank after fermentation. After the wine is racked out, there can be a foot or more of sludge on the bottom. Money was tight, and there was “wine” in that sludge, wine that could be salvaged and sold. First we dumped in a compound called diatomaceous earth and mixed it with the sludge. Then we pounded this muddy mess through a filter. Huge cakes of dried mud built up in the filter, and clear white wine pulsed out the end. It was attenuated, beat up stuff, not attractive and certainly not interesting. It went into a label destined for the grocery store market. Since it was priced low enough, it sold anyway. This was one of my early lessons. Beware of low priced wine. Find out where it came from and how it was made.

This lesson dovetailed with my inherent streak of skepticism. It has kept me vigilant about manipulation in winemaking. The most disturbing example of manipulation that I’ve heard of is the story about the original batch of Two Buck Chuck, formally known as Charles Shaw. I met the actual Charles Shaw once in the mid-1980s when he was trying to create a California version of French Beaujolais. He seemed like a fine guy. He acquired the best clones of Gamay, and planted them where he thought growing conditions were similar to those in Beaujolais. But his wines never rivaled Beaujolais in quality, they were pricier, and there is not that big of a fan base for

Beaujolais in America anyway. Eventually he gave up, sold his venture, and now lives on the East Coast, no longer involved in the business.

But his name lives on. Brands are bought and sold between the beverage industry conglomerates. The Charles Shaw brand, long divorced from the vineyards and winery it once represented, was acquired by a Central Valley wine producer, one of those whose wineries look like oil refineries. This producer had a disposal problem: a multi-million gallon batch of wine that was flawed to the extent it was unsaleable. It was not only putrid, but apparently had volatile acidity (which smells like nail polish remover and is illegal above a certain concentration) problems as well. Millions of gallons of wine cannot be poured down the drain. Alcohol is a toxic waste. It has to be disposed of properly. Disposal has its costs, so a process was developed to salvage it and sell it. First the wine was put into huge industrial centrifuges, and spun down to its solids. Then these solids were treated like bouillon cubes. Alcohol, water, acidity, and flavoring components were added. Wine, of a sort, was reconstituted. Since the cost of creating this stuff was less than the cost of disposal, they could sell it for a loss, and still come out ahead. This is the only way to get a wine on a retail shelf for two dollars. It is a disposal operation, with a self-selected element of the wine buying public as willing partners. It is troubling that a product like this, one with only a tangential relation to grapes, is passed off as wine. Even more troubling to me is the mindset of manipulation rampant in the California winemaking community. Little did I know that in less than an hour I would walk in on Fred Scherrer and his centrifuge.

We continue to breeze up 101, enter Sonoma County, and see our first vineyards. I often feel chagrin driving into California wine country, and I do today. For someone in the business, I rarely visit. Over the past decade, I have visited ten times as many winemakers in Europe as I have in California. I am not much of a patriot when it comes to wine.

When I started my shop in the 1980s, the established local shops offered comprehensive selections of California wines. Developing sources for some of the most interesting but locally unrepresented European wines gave me the opening I needed to get started. But this is hardly the heart of the matter. I am a fan of Old World wines, and a critic of New World wines. I take no pleasure in this; it is where my taste lies. Ninety percent of what I drink is European wine.

The stylistic direction of contemporary California wine troubles a significant proportion of the avid collectors and passionate consumers that I know. The style in vogue today features high alcohol. The most highly-touted bottlings are rich and bold to the point that they are caricatures of wine, monumental beverages that are impressive to taste, but not pleasurable to drink. The formula is repeated throughout California: ultra-ripe, mouthfilling fruit flavors, high alcohol, soft, textural tannins, and prominent oak influence. Shock and awe in your mouth.

Fifteen years ago most California wines had about 13 percent alcohol. Today 15 percent is common, and 16 percent is not unusual. At this level wine is one dimensional, like unbearably loud music. High alcohol wine fatigues the taste buds, leaving little room for nuance and intricacy.

No California winemaker will cop to high alcohol as a goal. Every one who produces high alcohol wines will tell you it is regrettable, the unfortunate by-product of the more important priority of letting the grapes attain “physiological ripeness.” This term was not in use twenty years ago. Then the condition was considered overripe. Now physiological ripeness is the holy grail, the gateway to the monumental flavors and ripe, supple tannins that are so in style. There is an often repeated belief that if your flavors are bold and deep enough, and tannins ripe enough, that the wave of these sensations on your palate will bury the effects of high alcohol.

In California, extreme ripeness has come to be the primary lever of tannin management. Pick before physiological ripeness and you risk hard, green tannins that, it is believed, will remain harsh and astringent throughout the life of the wine. But extend the hangtime until the stems get brown and you will achieve the caressing tannins that yield the seductive, irresistible mouthfeel that is the essence of the style. If along the way your sugar goes through the roof, your flavors become jammy and prune, and your acidity is shot and lifeless, you can deal with it. Add some acidity, mask the flavors with oak, water back or use reverse osmosis to moderate the alcohol. It is bizarre that an approach to tannin management that has such destructive effects on other aspects of the wine has gained such currency.

For me, wine has to be authentic to be interesting. It has to be honest. The Europeans have a concept called *terroir* that embodies this: that wine is at its highest level when it is representative of the vineyard it comes from. *Terroir* encompasses the totality of the vineyard site: the composition of each of the strata of soil the roots encounter as they penetrate ten, fifteen, twenty feet, the drainage characteristics, the

microorganisms native to the site, the exposure to the sun and the wind, all the idiosyncrasies of the local microclimate. A vintage tells the story of that particular year, about the pattern of rain and drought, heat and cold, wind, hail, frost and fog, sun and overcast, about the age and health of the vines, and about the hand of the winemaker, how he pruned, how he farmed, when he picked, and how he handled what nature gave him in the winery. The concept of *terroir* gives this story the highest priority.

It is an ethic that has its roots in the Middle Ages, when the Church owned virtually all of the vineyards in Burgundy. The monasteries were centers of winemaking. The monks, making wines from the same plots year after year in exactly the same way, noticed and then chronicled the effect each vineyard site had on wine quality. They noticed that certain sites consistently yielded better wines, with more character, complexity, depth and persistence, while other sites were invariably less distinguished. Over decades and centuries, they classified vineyards into a hierarchy of quality. *Terroir* was born. This centuries old notion, that the nature of the vineyard determines the ultimate quality and character of the wine, and that this is how it should be, is still prevalent in Europe. The creation of wine is an elaborate collaboration between man and nature. The preservation of *terroir* requires that the contribution of man be kept in check, that the contribution of nature be given priority and protected. Then wine becomes meaningful, even spiritual.

We are past Sebastopol now, driving through orchards and vineyards. I have Danny get out the handwritten directions to Fred's place, and read them to me. We reach our turnoff.

Half a mile later we turn right at the railroad tracks. It is refreshing that rural Sonoma is not yet gentrified. Left at the T-intersection onto a dirt road. Left through a row of trees when this dead-ends. We pull alongside a bare industrial building, sheet metal sides, sheet metal roof. The roof extends as an awning along the side of the building, covering a concrete pad where several pieces of winery equipment are sheltered. There is a small sign made out of the end of a barrel – Scherrer Winery. There is no tasting room evident, no other traffic.

We park next to a truck and get out. It is very quiet. On the way in I show Danny the bladder press on the pad under the awning. I explain to him how the cake of skins and seeds is shoveled in through the hinged door on the top, how the black rubber bladder in the center of the cylinder is filled up like a balloon with compressed air, pressing the cake against the sides of the cylinder, forcing the wine out. There is a slow drip, drip, drip as bright crimson liquid oozes slowly from the perforations in the cylinder's sides and bottom. The collection pan is about half full. From the color it looks like Pinot Noir, not Cabernet or Zinfandel, the other reds Fred makes.

No one is outside, so we find a door and head in, through a short hallway into a dimly lit barrel room. It is bare bones and functional, not fancy. Still no sign of anyone.

“Hello.”

No answer.

“Hello!”

“I'm in here.”

The voice came from an open door behind us, near the hallway we had come through. We follow the voice into a small room, what looks to be an office and a lab,

again not fancy, and not that tidy. At first I don't see anyone, then I see a man hunched under a counter that runs along the exterior wall. He stands up.

"Hi, I'm Fred." He is tall and lanky, a cross-country runner's build. He is in blue jeans and a thick flannel shirt over a tee shirt. He has a full beard. His appearance is languorous and blue collar, but his speech is crisp and quick, and his eyes are direct and full of life. He is holding several vials of red wine in his hand.

"Hi, I'm Victor, and this is Danny."

"How was the drive?"

"Easy, no traffic, nice day for a drive. So, it's awfully quiet around here today."

"Yes. We haven't picked anything in a few days. I drained a tank of Pinot Noir this morning. I'm running trials on the press wine right now."

"Yeah, we looked at the press on the way in. It looks like you're pressing slowly."

"I have worked with this press long enough to really calibrate it, to fine tune the pressure I use. I press more gently than before, and I love what I'm getting out of it."

I wonder what he was doing when we came in. He is still holding the vials. I say, "What have you got there under the counter?"

"Oh, that's my centrifuge," he says. I'm reeling. As you know, I have more than a few biases. When I think of centrifuges and winemaking, I think of massive manipulation and Two Buck Chuck. My preconception of Fred as a utopian wine-freak type is about to go poof.

"Really," I stammer.

“Yeah, I’m running trials on the press wine. I make a decision on each pan right after I drain it, whether to add it right into the tank with the free run or hold it out. I do it by tasting.”

He points to the centrifuge. “I bought this little centrifuge a few years ago, used. I love it.” He explains that it speeds up his process. Wine right out of the press is too gritty and muddy to taste accurately, unless he lets it settle overnight. A short gentle spin clarifies it so he can taste it accurately. This lets him make real time decisions, pan by pan.

“Would you like to taste with me?” he asks.

“Sure.” I say.

There are four glasses on the counter, filled to exactly the same level. He expected I would want to taste. He pulls out a calculator and punches in some numbers. Then he takes out a needle-thin pipette and sucks a precise amount of wine out of one of the vials from the centrifuge.

“I calculated that the wine from the last pan is .778 of a percent of the amount that is now in the tank. So I’m adding exactly that proportion of the press to these glasses, which were filled from the tank.”

He drains the pipette into one of the glasses, carefully refills it, and drains it into a second glass. He swirls the two doctored glasses, then lines up two glasses for me and two for himself.

“So the one on the left is the wine now in the tank, the one on the right is what it will taste like if I add in the last pan of press wine,” he says.

We taste in silence. The first glass is disarmingly gorgeous. It has pure, charming Pinot Noir flavors with classic Russian River notes. It is full of exuberance but retains a lovely delicacy. I know to be skeptical of my reaction. It is notoriously difficult, even for someone like me who tastes sometimes dozens, sometimes hundreds of wines a week, to objectively evaluate a wine this young. It is categorically different than tasting bottled wines. They are just so luscious and vivacious and easy to fall for, like a joyful, frolicking puppy. You know they are going to grow up to be something quite different. Only by regularly tasting wines at this stage can one develop a discerning palate for them. I did when I had winery jobs, but not now. I know to be wary of the seductiveness, but I also know that I can make a valid comparison between the two wines.

We move on to the second glass without comment. While it has the same charm, the same glamorous fruit flavors, there is more here, more spine, more spice, a twinge more depth, more grip. It is marginal, but clearly better, more animated. I definitely have a favorite.

“I think this one is clearly better, Fred,” I say.

“Me too,” he says.

“I love the extra backbone the press wine gives it, the extra depth. I don’t sense any more heaviness or bitterness,” I say.

“That’s the beauty of a gentle press,” he says.

I let Danny taste from my glasses. The aesthetics must be over his head, but he has been sucking up the conversation, and is loving the science of it all. Fred had saved me a set of glasses from his trial on the prior pan of press wine. The transformation is just

as impressive, marginal, but real and positive. Fred's process would go on for several more hours that afternoon, as the press dripped and the pan slowly filled.

I am giddy. Fred does not let his grapes get super ripe in order to manage tannins. He manages them through this elaborate press wine ritual, and avoids the high alcohol trap. His wine's flavors, freshness, and acidity are intact. This sort of approach is rare in California today, innovation in the pursuit of authenticity.

Fred takes us for a look through the winery. It is a bootstrap operation, money dedicated to the essentials, not the frills. Danny is fascinated by the fermentations. Fred lets him climb up and peer into the open top fermentors, touch the cap of skin and seeds floating on top, and feel the heat emanating from it. He tells Danny about the benefits (oxidation protection) and the dangers (suffocation) of the invisible blanket of carbon dioxide inside the top of the open fermentors.

We taste some 2006s from barrel, and then some 2005s from bottle. The Pinot Noirs are, to my taste, spectacular. They have classic Russian River flavors, just ripe, juicy, and pure. And they have this uncanny, subtle composition that displays a luscious substance and satisfying depth within a lithesome, feminine gestalt – the magic Pinot Noir is famous for. So much for not evaluating Fred and his wines.

We talk about the differences between 2005, 2006, and 2007. I ask about his approach to barrel ageing Pinot Noir. He shows me his bottling line and talks in detail about how he has solved some recent mechanical glitches. Each conversation topic, each set of my questions, has an agenda. Each time his answers tell me that he is on the right side of the issue, a kindred spirit. We taste some 2006 Pinot Noir barrels he has declassified, starting the discussion of another private label bottling for us next year.

We load up the cases and are ready to go. “Did you check your air pressure?” he asks.

I haven’t.

“We better. With this load your tires will get really hot if they are not fully inflated. Pull around to the other side beside the flatbed truck. I’ve got compressed air there.”

Fred appears to be the master of all things mechanical. We pull around and Fred fills my tires for me. They were low. I feel like an urban rube.

“Where do you get your truck serviced?” He asks as he is bent down filling one of the tires.

“Sometimes at the dealer, sometimes at a gas station.”

“Do they ever check your spare?” he asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Most places don’t. This will just take a second,” he says.

He burrows under the back and fills the spare. It was basically flat. I am embarrassed, but he handles the situation gracefully, with no hint at condescension.

As we drive away, we are both energized. Danny saw plenty that appealed to his interest in science and mechanical processes. On the surface, that is how Fred comes across – technically oriented, an engineer, a student of science. Danny picked up on that, and thinks Fred and his job are pretty cool. I do too, but I see it differently. Fred is an artist. The science and engineering he is so adept at are the tools that allow him to excel at his art. In his press wine trials he crunches numbers to three significant digits and uses a centrifuge. Then he tastes, and trusts his palate. He does not manipulate the wine into

what he wants. He is trying to let it express its own ultimate potential. Though we never spoke about it directly, it is clear to me that he is driven by this ethic.

Back at the winery I had asked Fred when he would release his two 2005 Pinot Noirs.

“Probably this winter for the Sonoma County, maybe next spring for the Russian River. But I’m not sure. You cannot exactly predict when a wine will be ready. When I’m trying to decide if its time to release a wine, I’ll start taking bottles home. My wife and I will drink them with dinner. That’s how I decide when its ready.”

Later, I mull over meeting Fred and my funk about California wines. Fred is every bit the equal of the winemakers I most admire in Europe in terms of talent and temperament. Maybe it’s time to rethink my Old World versus New World bias. It is not that one is intrinsically better than the other, it is that Europe has a larger number of talented winemakers pursuing the goal of authentic wine today than California does. Fred is not unique in California, but he is rare. I have a lot of thoughts about why this is, but for the moment let’s just say that Fred Scherrer is the kind of person I want making the wine I drink.