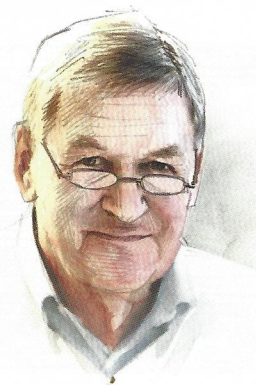


Seduction along fault lines and whale-paths

Hugh Johnson



I can't remember when I last reacted to tasting a new wine by getting into my car and setting off to find the vineyard. We were in the Napa Valley—St Helena, to be exact, and the Grill Room at Meadowood to pin it down precisely. I'd been tasting lots of Cabernets and felt like a Pinot catch-up. I recognized the name Hirsch from one or two good bottlings under other makers' names—Williams Selyem in particular. Behind the times as ever, I didn't know the farm is now a winery.

It was a stout Cortez moment. We sipped. We looked at each other with a wild surmise. Purity of fruit, firmness of purpose, a sense of place to set my satnav spinning: This was Pinot Noir of a kind I had never seen, and didn't expect to see, in California. Nor in Burgundy, for that matter. I simply had to go and see where it came from.

The elusive perfection of Pinot

It's a long haul. St Helena is not the ideal place to start. It's only 60 miles (100km) or so as the crow flies, but double that on the tortuous roads: northwest to Santa Rosa, then winding through the redwoods down the Russian River to the tiny settlement of Janner on the Pacific. En route you pass, besides many more recently distinguished producers, the historic Korbel winery, or (as its façade proudly boasts) "Champagne Cellar." Nothing Paris or Epernay can say, apparently, will discourage its claim to the name. Korbel also, to show its even-handed disdain for international norms, produces "Port."

At Janner you join Highway One, the famously curvy coast road—slow progress when a pod of whales catches your eye far below. Can vineyards flourish up on this storm-swept coast, where the memory of Russian fur traders is kept alive by the onion dome of their brown wooden church at Fort Ross? A turn inland after Fort Ross takes you straight into redwood forest, then climbs

twisting into patches of bare pasture with distant glimpses of the sea. Vine rows, when they eventually appear on scattered slopes, pitched at random angles, seem too organized for this chaotic, almost uninhabited landscape. There must be a convincing reason to come this far in search of the elusive perfection of Pinot. There is.

The winemaker at Hirsch Vineyards is Ross Cobb, a neighbor (there are few) with his own production of what could be a rival wine. He showed us both, Hirsch and Cobb, with the zest of a grower in Pommard showing you his Rugiens and his Epenots. They are different. It's about terroir. On this exposed coast, they distinguish East Ridge (relatively sheltered, facing inland) from West Ridge (facing what ancient poets would have called the whale-path). From the clearing in the forest where the vines tilt seaward, the fog bank is a permanent presence; a dark horizon where the continental shelf gives way to deeper water. The perpetual question is, When will the fog sweep inland and smother the vineyard in dank air?

I was too absorbed in the spectacle, I confess, to take detailed notes. My impression was of Pinot flavor at its most electrically alive—higher-voltage on the landward east slope, perhaps; and more instantly alluring, more feminine, where it sees the sea. The kernel of sweet stone fruit is there in both, silkiness on the tongue edged and defined by crisp tannins. I am always seduced when I smell kirsch in Burgundy. Here was that heady scent but in a context that combined salt, resin, and coffee. Was that the sea, the forest, and the French barrels? Then where did the orange zest come from?

The secret of the terroir

Burgundians know the factors that distinguish one *climat* from another and dictate the relative success of vintages. Centuries of experience have

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taught them when and where frosts can be expected, that summer hail is a catastrophe, about rain at flowering time, rain at vintage... and all the possible permutations. Here, they are learning year by year.

On what they call, with reason, the extreme Sonoma coast, there is little history. For example, 2010 was the sort of dark year you might expect: snow, frost, rain, wind, warm sunshine but wet soil, unstressed vines producing nothing but leafy shoots, then 90°F (32°C) for the harvest.

2011 brought a cold spring; a cool clear summer; a steady flowering and ripening, and a warm dry harvest—altogether excellent wines. 2012 started well, then summer brought alternating sun and fog—perfect conditions for the fungus diseases. Ross Cobb credits biodynamic precautions for holding them at bay: Certainly there was a big crop of the beautiful pure-fruit wines we went on to taste, both Pinot Noir and what to me is a model Chardonnay, with vibrant acidity and just-detectable oak. All these wines, incidentally, weigh in between 12.8 and 13.8% ABV.

The secret of the terroir (though secret is hardly the word) is the San Andreas Fault and the resulting coastal mixture of soils—from volcanic, to sedimentary (expressed in sandstone, clay, and everything in between). The original forest soils, ubiquitous before the logging companies plundered the coast in the 1800s, have eroded into the

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valleys (there are 80 inches [200cm] of rain up here), leaving a pretty thin surface layer. Are fault lines (like the Côte d'Or) the prerequisite for great Pinot Noir? (But then the other great vineyard on the San Andreas Fault is Ridge's Montebello, 200 miles [320km] to the south, where the beneficiary is Cabernet.)

To talk of terroir at all in California is revolutionary. None of the canonic texts of the University of California even mention soil: their theme is uniquely based on climate—or indeed, even more narrowly, on temperature. Terroir, of course, is by definition the interaction of the two, soil and climate, with a host of local factors that differ place by place.

Nothing is doing more to drive the tectonic movement of today toward better wine—or rather, more fine wine—than this realization.

Chappellet coeur capture

I didn't leave my heart in Sonoma. It is a versatile organ, as well as a susceptible one. It was captured again in the Napa Valley, as it has been many times before, by the wines from high on Pritchard Hill, east of St Helena on the steep road that eventually leads, via many a sharp bend and beautiful view (it was the time when one hillside is blue with lupins, the next golden with poppies) to Sacramento. My destination up here was the historic house of Chappellet.

I say historic because Donn and Molly Chappellet (they seem addicted to double consonants) built their winery here in the late 1960s, the next estate to be established after Robert Mondavi's legendary Oakville arch and the first in the mountains since Prohibition. Were the Chappellet winery on the highway, it would be as iconic as the Mondavi adobe, but it stands remote and mysterious on a secluded hillside, embosomed in oaks, overlooking the silver waters of Lake Hennessey, hundreds of feet above the valley floor. Birds happen on it; no one

else. It is a three-sided pyramid of rust-colored Corten steel, a mini-volcano echoing the distant peak of Mount St Helena. The Chappellet vineyards form a steep amphitheater with the pyramid, as it were, on the stage. Many costly winery buildings have gone up in California since, but is any so modern, minimal, or apt?

The wine that proved—and still proves—that this is a propitious spot for Cabernet Sauvignon was, extraordinarily, Chappellet's first vintage, the 1969, made from vines that were only five years old. It still provokes gasps of admiration 40 years on. The artist, if that's the word, was Philip Togni, who has gone on to make excellent wines elsewhere in Napa, but none of quite this stature.

I remember meeting it (the '69) for the first time, unbriefed and unprepared for its impact. It was at a supper party in golden evening light on the Chappellet's picnic lawn. Donn's 1970 had been my absolute favorite. On several occasions I had served it with Château Latour 1970 or Miguel Torres's Gran Coronas 1970, or both. Latour is the Chappellet ideal, and I don't know another California wine that can come so close to the breed, the tough structure nursing a marvel of ripe fruit that takes a generation to evolve. There is no overt sweetness in these deeply mineral wines. The typical sweet boozy Napa Cab is a thousand miles away. Latour says gravel dunes and the seaside; Torres says something similar with a Catalan accent; Pritchard Hill says Napa mountainside, volcanic earth enriched with millennia of oak and redwood, madrone, and mesquite. And all three prove that in warm soil Cabernet Sauvignon towers above lesser grapes.

But the '69. Before I even lifted my glass, I became aware of its smell—as though a nearby shrub had suddenly opened its flowers in the sunshine. It was absurd for a senior wine to open

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with such sweet floweriness, spice, and the unique ripe-currants smell of Cabernet. In fact, it was one of the most different wines I ever tasted, its openness and its tight-knit concentration like two poles in opposition: a Savile Row suit with a brocade tie. With certain rare wines, the texture becomes a major part of the equation. It was true of the '47 Cheval Blanc. You can hardly bear to let it slide down your throat.

For the past 25 years, the winemaker on Pritchard Hill has been Philip Corallo-Titus. There are not many estates in California whose owners and winemakers can show a record of such consistent style, a certain flavor and balance varied only by patterns of weather. You would be less surprised in Bordeaux—but that's the point: This is a château. The terroir does the talking.

Another savory seducer

There is another seducer on Pritchard Hill, though: a wine I keep coming back to, wondering why everyone doesn't. Chenin Blanc is a tradition here from the original '60s planting. It is a totally dry wine with the substance and vinosity of a Chardonnay, but savory in a way Chardonnay rarely is. It runs from light touches of fruit—lemons and stone fruit and what the French call *fleurs blanches*—to an almost cashew-savory finish. It joins my favorite stable of Chenins from the Cape as some of the world's most underrated wines. ■