

## **Panelists rank 16 Carneros pinot noirs**

Artesa Reserve called sweet, simple, seamless, balanced

By Emily Bell

FOR THE ST. HELENA STAR

Thursday, March 06, 2008

When the St. Helena Star tasting panel meets to evaluate the wines that are eventually written about in this column, I attend but I don't taste. I think it helps me consider the panel's comments, and ultimately to write about the wines, with more objectivity.

The recent pinot noir tasting at CIA's Rudd Center for Professional Wine Studies was a difficult one to sit out. As the wines were poured from bagged bottles, I yearningly watched transparent ruby liquid splash into glasses, and wondered: what is it about pinot noir that is so intriguing?

Perhaps it is the varietal's element of elusiveness. During the discussion that followed the tasting, one of the panelists called it "indiscernible" and "emotionally different." Much has been written about pinot's sexiness, but for anyone who truly tries to understand it, it is also cerebral. At its best, pinot noir expresses a complex balance between sweet and savory, with fruit, earth, and spice gracing a texturally silky, balanced wine. But there is an allure to great pinot that is not easily communicated by describing its aromas, flavors and texture.

Great pinot can be transporting, but it is also rare. The grape is notoriously temperamental in both the vineyard and cellar. It buds early, making it vulnerable to late frosts, and is highly susceptible to disease. The most compelling examples of pinot noir are produced over long, cool, growing seasons; when it ripens too quickly, it lacks the subtlety and nuance that help to define great pinot. Considering this, it is not surprising that the panel's top wines (and most of the submissions) were made with grapes grown in the Carneros region, Napa's coolest sub-district, and the only one renowned for pinot noir.

Our panelists: Stefan Blicher of BP Wines (who also coordinated the tasting), John Clews of Clos du Val, Jac Cole of Spring Mountain Vineyards, Crystal Collins of the Rudd Center for Professional Wine Studies, Christopher O'Gorman of Merryvale, Linda Reiff of the Napa Valley Vintners Association, Rob Renteria of the Martini House, and Patrick Sullivan of Rudd Wines, met on Feb. 14 at the Rudd Center for Professional Wine Studies to taste pinot noir from the 2005 vintage. Of the 16 wines tasted, they preferred the following six.

- The 2005 Artesa Reserve Carneros Pinot Noir (\$37.99) was the panel's favorite wine. They found a "perfumey nose," with cherry, plum, cedar and cinnamon. One taster called it "seamless and balanced," with good structure, and another remarked on its sweetness and simplicity.
- The 2005 Signorello Vineyards Las Amigas Vineyard Pinot Noir (Carneros, \$38) was taster's second place choice. They noted an "inviting and suggestive" nose that was "a bit funky," with caramelized sugar, black cherry, raspberry cedar and clove exotic spices texturally, tasters found a "silky attack," with substantial tannins.
- Tasters voted the **2005 Renteria Wines Carneros Pinot Noir** (\$40) their third place wine. It showed tasters dusty cherry, candle wax, and sweet oak on the nose. A few panelists remarked that the wine was a bit closed, though one thought it opened up over time, and overall the notes pointed to good weight and structure.
- The 2005 Cakebread Cellars Carneros Pinot Noir (\$49) was the panel's fourth place wine; plum, slate, cherry, "Flintstone's vitamins" and bittersweet chocolate were noted, along with leather, earth and mushroom. A "big, extracted wine," commented one taster.
- The 2006 Reynolds Family Winery Carneros Pinot Noir (\$45) showed sour cherry, flint, black tea, vanilla, cola, spice, and floral notes, in what was summed up by one taster as a "very sweet, soft pretty nose." Several tasters were disappointed by a short finish, but another one felt the wine had "nice length," and still another summed it up as "simple but tasty."
- Finally, tasters chose the 2006 Clos Pegase Carneros Pinot Noir (\$35) as their sixth place selection. Panelists found violets, strawberry, black tea, cola, green hops, and "warm backed raspberry tartlet." Though one commented that the wine showed abundant oak and had "drying tannins," another described it as "a very charming wine."

Emily Bell is the California sales manager for Ehlers Estate and a freelance food and wine writer. All wines for the tasting panel are provided by the member wineries of the Napa Valley Vintners, the non-profit trade association representing more than 300 wineries. Many wineries offer local residents discounts on their wines through the Napa Neighbor program, visit [www.napavintners.com/programs](http://www.napavintners.com/programs) and click on Napa Neighbor to learn more.