

WINE & SPIRITS

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MATTERS OF TASTE

A proper noir mystery

Did this Paso Robles Pinot actually beat out a legendary Burgundy? It takes some sleuthing to find out.

By DAVID SHAW
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IT was a most intriguing e-mail. Joe Gargiulo, a publicist based in Sonoma County, was alerting me to what he called the "coming-out, 2002 vintage" of Adelaida Cellars' Hoffman Mountain Ranch Pinot Noir, the first from new winemaker Terry Culton, made in the Adelaida district of Paso Robles.

But it was the history of Hoffman Mountain Ranch that intrigued me — and that Gargiulo thought would engage my interest in the new wine.

"Most of the wine world is aware of the 1976 Paris tasting where a Napa Valley Cabernet and Chardonnay upset their French counterparts," he wrote, "but few have heard of a subsequent competition that selected a Paso Robles Pinot Noir over the highest rated red Burgundy."

That Pinot, Gargiulo said, was from Hoffman Mountain Ranch, and the Burgundy it bested was from "the revered Domaine de la Romanée Conti." The tasting took place in 1976 or '77, he said, and he quoted Dr. Stanley Hoffman, who owned the property at the time, as saying, "The French cried 'Foul!' so the blind test was repeated in New York City with the same results."

Wow! Like most wine lovers, I was, of course, familiar with the celebrated '76 Paris tasting in which a 1973 Stag's Leap Cabernet and a '73 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay stunned the wine world by beating their French counterparts in a blind tasting. That event put California on the global wine map. But I'd never heard of a Pinot-Burgundy tasting with a similar outcome.

I immediately asked researchers in The Times library to see what they could find in our archives or the archives of other major publications. I also asked Gargiulo to see if he or Hoffman, who sold the property 20 years ago, could provide any contemporaneous reports or other documentation on these two tastings. And over the next few months, I asked about the tastings virtually every time I spoke with anyone in the wine world who I thought might know of them — collectors, merchants, journalists, winemakers, anyone and everyone.

The only information turned up in these inquiries was a 1979 New York Times column by Terry Robards that briefly mentioned a 1975 Hoffman Mountain Ranch Pinot finishing third in a tasting in a Paris suburb sponsored by Le Nouveau Guide of GaultMillau, then a relatively new French magazine and restaurant guide that was challenging the "Guide Michelin."

But Robards' column made no mention of any DRC wines or a second tasting.

Then, purely by chance, there landed on my desk a new book: "North American Pinot Noir" by John Winthrop Haeger. Surely this 443-page encyclopedic tome would have some mention of an international triumph by a North American Pinot Noir.

I flipped to the index. Nothing. No mention of Hoffman Mountain Ranch. I decided to track Haeger down through his publisher, the University of California Press. He responded almost instantly to my e-mail.

Yes, he said, he knew about the Paris Pinot tasting. It was called "Les Olympiades GaultMillau du Vin," and it was conducted in Paris in 1979.

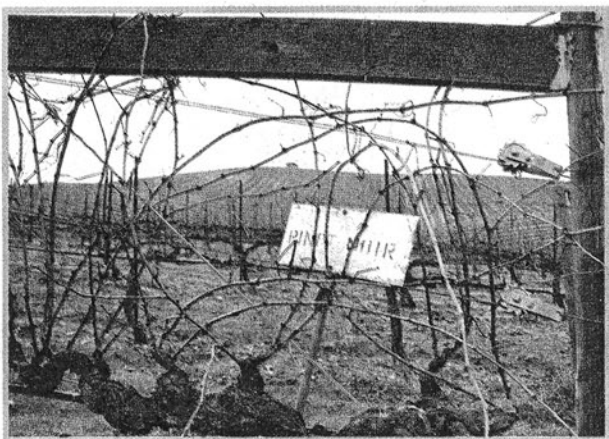
The Hoffman Mountain Ranch Pinot Noir?

"I don't know exactly how high it placed," he wrote, "but I know it was one of the six top non-French Pinots... because only the top 6 were invited to Beaune for the 'rematch.'" So there was a second tasting — but in Beaune, not New York.

Did Hoffman Mountain Ranch really beat a DRC wine in Paris? Haeger didn't know.

"I don't have the full list of the 586 wines in the Paris tasting," he said. "I don't know if any DRC wines were among them."

He offered to get the full results of the Paris tasting from friends at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and I told him I'd greatly appreciate that. In the meantime, he



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VINEYARD LORE: Paso Robles locals believe this is the original sign marking the Pinot Noir vineyard at Hoffman Mountain Ranch.

said, he could send me some information on the Beaune tasting, which took place at Maison Joseph Drouhin and pitted six Drouhin red Burgundies against the top six non-French Pinots from the Paris tasting.

Excellent.

The evidence

A week or so later, Haeger's package of articles from the French press arrived at my office. I went immediately to the tasting results. Uh-oh. It was clearly not a shining moment for Hoffman Mountain Ranch, no matter what Hoffman and Gargiulo now say.

Their Pinot finished ninth out of 12 contenders, losing to all six Drouhin wines and beating out only two Swiss Pinots and a Greek Pinot. (A Greek Pinot?)

Gargiulo subsequently sent me copies of the GaultMillau magazine covering the Olympiades tasting. It showed Hoffman Mountain Ranch in third place, behind an Australian Pinot and a French Burgundy. But it listed only what appeared to be the first 11 finishers, and there was nothing from DRC — nor from any other high-quality Burgundy producer — on the list.

Then, four months after I first began looking into this, Haeger e-mailed me to say he'd heard from his friends at the Bibliothèque Nationale. It turns out that although there were 586 wines in the Olympiades, there were many different categories, and the category for Pinot Noir-based wines had only 11 contestants — "the oddest damn lineup of Pinots I've ever seen," Haeger said.

So, bottom line: "The HMR didn't beat anything very good in the first tasting and beat nothing French whatsoever in the second."

It was time to call Hoffman.

He told me he had been a cardiologist in Los Angeles from 1950 to 1972 before moving to Paso Robles to practice medicine and make wine on 1,200 acres he'd acquired in a three-way land swap in 1960.

The land is in west Paso Robles, about 16 miles from the coast, 1,900 feet up in the Santa Lucia Mountains.

Hoffman told me he'd first made wine in his garage in Beverly Hills, then built a 12,000-square-foot winery in Paso Robles in 1975 — "the first premium winery in the area."

"The vines didn't do so well at first," he said. "The leaves all turned yellow."

So he consulted oenologists at UC Davis and elsewhere and relying on their advice — and on his own medical experience — he stuck needles into his vines and hooked them up to a series of IV bottles, which he pitails use to give patients medicine, fluids and nutrients intravenously. He dripped various mineral mixtures into the vines until "we found the right combination and the yellow disappeared."

Before I could ask, Hoffman brought up the "victories" of his wine in France and New York. "It put Paso Robles on the map," he

said.

Gently — after all, he is 84 now — I told him of my long and futile search for confirmation of that performance. He insisted that his wine had indeed beaten a DRC red Burgundy in that blind tasting in Paris.

"It happened," he said, several times. He had no explanation for why the contemporaneous records I'd turned up didn't confirm his memory, but our conversation was pleasant, and he wanted to continue talking about his wines and vineyard.

Not long after those tastings, he said, inflation and high interest rates left Hoffman Mountain Ranch Vineyards strapped for cash. Hoffman had to sell his land and winery. The land passed through several hands and largely lay dormant until 1994, when oilman Donald Van Steenwyk and his wife Elizabeth bought about 400 acres and gradually restored the winery.

The Pinot today

THREE years ago, they hired respected winemaker Terry Culton, from Calera Wine Co., specifically for his expertise with Pinot Noir. He reduced yields, introduced native yeasts and switched to French oak barrels, "but only 20% to 25% new oak," he told me. "I want people to be able to taste our terroir, not cover it up with oak."

Culton took over final blending for the 653 cases of 2002 Hoffman Mountain Ranch Pinot, now in stores at \$25 a bottle, and he was in full charge of the '03, 873 cases of which were bottled in January and will be released in June at \$28 a bottle.

Now Adelaida Cellars-Hoffman Mountain Ranch plans a series of celebratory events — among them a bicycle rally and wine tasting on Memorial Day weekend.

And what about Culton's first vintage, that '02 Hoffman Mountain Ranch Pinot?

I poured it a few weeks ago for guests at a casual dinner. For comparison purposes, I also poured a few other '02 California Pinots I had in my cellar — a Bonaccorsi Pinot from the Santa Maria Valley, a Brewer-Clifton Melville Vineyards Pinot and a Williams-Selyem Russian River Valley Pinot.

The Hoffman Mountain Ranch Pinot was perfectly pleasant, the fruit very forward, the length good. It was easy drinking, almost like a liquid bowl of strawberries, albeit a touch vegetal on the finish. But when tasted alongside the others, it didn't fare any better than its "legendary" predecessor did in Beaune 26 years ago. No one among our crowd of seven ranked it No. 1, and only one person ranked it better than fourth among the four wines.

On the other hand, at \$25, it was the least expensive of the four — the others were \$34, \$39 and \$40 — and it was drinkable, especially with the fried chicken we'd bought at Roscoe's House of Chicken and Waffles.

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