

VIEW FROM THE CELLAR

By John Gilman

January-February 2014

Number Forty-Nine

ANOTHER ROUND OF RECENTLY TASTED OLD SCHOOL AND NEO-CLASSICAL AMERICAN WINES

Introduction

I am drinking and tasting more American wines as the years go by, and with greater and greater pleasure with each passing vintage. I continue to taste examples of new releases from “old school” producers (who may or may not have been around for a long time) and I have been very happy in the last few years to add many new wines and producers to my cellar.

“Pinot Days” in New York

I had not attended the previous “Pinot Days” tasting in New York. I was very pleased when Stewart Johnson of Kendric Vineyards dropped me a note to see if I was going in early January of this year, so that I was able to attend the event on the 18th of the month. It was a very well-organized and jam-packed tasting held at City Winery here in New York, with a couple of hours for the press and wine trade folks, followed by three more hours for the Pinot noir-loving public. Thanks to the kind intervention of Craig Haserot of Sojourn Cellars, I stayed on for the final three hours of the public tasting and really covered a bit of ground. That said, even with five hours of near non-stop tasting, I did not have an opportunity to taste even a third of the wines presented this year. I would have loved to have had the opportunity to try each and every wine that was being poured, as there were a great many estates whose wines I have not tried previously or have not kept up with what they are doing these days. It was a real learning experience for me and I found more than a few estates (new to me) that are really making stellar wines.



Fog rolling in at the Rodgers Creek Vineyard on the Sonoma Coast- one of Sojourn Cellar's top bottlings.

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Sojourn Cellars (Sonoma County)

Sojourn Cellars is a relatively new estate founded in 2001 by Craig Haserot and Eric Bradley, with Eric handling the winemaking duties and having previously been Assistant Winemaker at Arrowood Winery prior to co-founding Sojourn Cellars. The estate purchases small lots of grapes from some of the top vineyards in Sonoma for their Pinot noir and Chardonnay bottlings, as well as making a small amount of Cabernet Sauvignon from top vineyard sites in Napa. I was very impressed with the quality of the wines the Sojourn team had brought along for the Pinot Days tasting, and Craig very kindly sent me out some additional bottlings from the winery to round out my coverage. The winery produces seven distinct, single vineyard bottlings of Pinot noir from top vineyards in the Sonoma Coast and Russian River Valley, as well as several Chardonnay bottlings and their Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa-sourced fruit. I was very impressed with the elegance and understated style of these wines, as even the ripest bottling at 14.6 percent alcohol was very refined, light on its feet and precise, with no signs of jamminess.

Pinot Noir

2012 Pinot Noir “Rodgers Creek Vineyard”- Sojourn Cellars

The three single vineyard bottlings of Pinot noir that I tasted from Sojourn Cellars (there are seven in total, with the winery splitting them up into spring and fall releases) were all a touch deeper and more structured than the fine Sonoma Coast bottling, with a few a bit riper as well. The 2012 Rodgers Creek Vineyard bottling was the closest in octane to the Sonoma Coast bottling (14.2 percent versus 14.1 percent for the SC) and was really an excellent bottle in the making. The deep, youthfully complex and very refined nose offers up scents of red and black cherries, woodsmoke, a touch of gamebird, herb tones, raw cocoa and a nice framing of cedary wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with fine focus and grip, moderate, well-integrated tannins, good acids and a very long, pure and still quite primary finish. This is going to be an excellent bottle of Pinot, but it will need at least three or four years in the cellar to blossom and will probably not reach its apogee until its tenth birthday. Fine juice! 2017-2035+. **93.**

2012 Pinot Noir “Sangiaco Vineyard”- Sojourn Cellars

The 2012 Sangiaco Vineyard Pinot noir is a touch riper than the Rodgers Creek bottling, coming in at 14.5 percent alcohol, but it is still a very fine and succulent wine that is impressively light on its feet and finesseful for its octane. The sappy nose wafts from the glass in a lovely blend of cherries, beetroot, a touch of cocoa powder, cinnamon, fresh herbs and a judicious touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and succulent on the attack, with a lovely core, ripe, suave tannins and a long, tangy and very classy finish. I was expecting a bit more opulence, and the ‘light on its feet’ personality of this wine was most impressive and a very pleasant surprise. This is really fine as well. 2018-2035+. **92.**

2012 Pinot Noir “Gap’s Crown Vineyard”- Sojourn Cellars

The Gap’s Crown Vineyard lies just east and above the Sangiaco Vineyard, with the higher elevation (300 to 800 feet above sea level) keeping it a bit above the fog that helps moderate the temperatures in Sangiaco, so this wine tends to be one of the riper of the single vineyard bottlings from Sojourn Cellars. The 2012 is 14.6 percent, but shares the same refinement and restraint of the other Sojourn Pinots, as it offers up a lovely bouquet of black cherries, chocolate, gentle notes of Sonoma herbs, a lovely base of soil, woodsmoke and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite plush on the attack, with a sappy core of fruit, silky tannins and fine length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This is not quite as complex as either the Rodger’s Creek or Sangiaco bottlings in 2012, but it delivers plenty of enjoyment and will drink better out of the blocks than either of these other two single vineyard bottlings. 2014-2025. **91.**

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2012 Pinot Noir “Sonoma Coast”- Sojourn Cellars

The Sojourn Cellars Sonoma Coast bottling hails from eleven different vineyard blocks in this Pinot noir hotbed (or should that be cool-bed?) and the blended wine is really a lovely and complex middleweight that offers up fine value. I was very much struck by the nice, pale red color of the wine, and the very stylish nose wafts from the glass in a complex blend of cherries, beetroot, Sonoma herb tones, cocoa powder, a lovely base of soil and a gentle touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is medium-full, juicy and complex, with a nice core of red fruit, fine soil signature and a long, complex and bouncy finish of very modest tannins. This is made to drink on the young side and it is indeed drinking with great charm out of the blocks, but it is so well-balanced that it should have no problems lasting a decade or more. 2014-2025+. **90**.

Chardonnay

2012 Chardonnay “Sangiaco Vineyard”- Sojourn Cellars

The 2012 single vineyard bottling of Chardonnay from the Sangiaco Vineyard is a nice step up in terms of focus and precision and this is a serious glass of Chardonnay. This is one of the most important sources of fruit for Sojourn Cellars, with the vineyard (which lies close to Durell Vineyard in the Sonoma Coast AVA) having been planted in 1998 and offering up very high quality Chardonnay and Pinot noir grapes. The wine wafts from the glass in a complex mélange of apple, a touch of passion fruit, peach, salty soil tones, musky white flowers and a judicious framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a fine core of fruit, a very nice base of soil tones, bright acids and excellent length and grip on the classy finish. A fine bottle. 2014-2020+. **92**.

2012 Chardonnay “Sonoma Coast”- Sojourn Cellars

I quite liked the 2012 Sonoma Coast bottling of Chardonnay, which is sourced from a three different vineyards and blended together. The wine does see a fair bit of battonage to add core richness, and I had the sense that the lees stirring might have taken away just a bit of precision on the palate. But, there is an awful lot to like here, as the wine offers up a very pretty bouquet of apple, pear, leesy tones, acacia blossoms, butter and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and juicy, with fine mid-palate concentration, lovely balance and very good length and grip on the crisp finish. There is just a touch of blurriness here that keeps the score down a tad, but this is good juice. 2014-2020. **88**.