

A Conversation With Roger Nicolas

We have been members of the [RN Estate](#) wine club ever since we first tasted their products a few years ago. During our July, 2013 trip to Paso Robles, we were lucky enough to spend a couple of hours with owner-winemaker-everything else Roger Nicolas. Around 1970 [M. Nicolas emigrated from France, landing in New York](#). After stints at La Grenouille in New York City, The Lodge at Pebble Beach and L'Etoile in San Francisco, Roger realized one of his first dreams of opening his own restaurant, La Potiniere in San Francisco. Fast forward to 2005 and the first release of an RN Estate vintage. In eight short years, Roger has established a quality standard for California wines that is unparalleled.

On July 7 we joined another couple for two memorable hours with M. Nicolas. This is our report.

Background

RN Estate has, for years, specialized in pinot noir, syrah, and red blends (notably both Bordeaux-style and Rhône-style). Roger's wines are approachable, but will improve with ageing. Wine club members get two good-sized shipments a year. Enclosed is a set of tasting notes that include Roger's estimate of how many years in the bottle before the wine peaks. Other winemakers could help us by including similar information in their tasting notes. We don't want to know just how the wine tastes today, but also what it's likely to become in five, ten, or twenty years.

RN Estate puts all their current releases on a single web page. Instead of linking each wine separately, I'll just say [click here](#) to get to the wine descriptions, prices, and so on.



Tasting Lineup

Two Pinots With a Chardonnay Interruption

The tasting began with two pinot noirs. The **2011 Solomon Hills (\$55)** is lighter style with silky tannins. At 13 percent alcohol, this wine is food-friendly. This is also his first wine from Solomon Hills (in the Santa Maria valley). Characteristic aromas and flavors that we call “desert” style, the wine is an excellent representative of Santa Maria Valley pinot noirs.

Roger revealed that he now has access to grapes from 1.5 acres of chardonnay from the Solomon Hills. The first release will be half stainless steel only with the other half aged in French oak and neutral oak. The first grapes should have arrived and been crushed by now.

The **2011 Santa Rita Hills (\$49)** is from the justly famous **Fiddlestix vineyard**, 45 minutes from the winery. It is darker, smokier, and heavier than the Solomon Hills. Dark cherries are from the clone 667 grapes. Roger told us Fiddlestix is co-owned by [Kathy Joseph](#) and [Kendall-Jackson](#).

At this point, we were interrupted by **deep basso barking from another wing of the house.** Two Great Danes (no, neither was

named Hamlet) were making their presence known. They were begging for treats.

After the canine segment was satisfied, we returned to the wine. **Current production of pinot noir is 400 – 500 cases per year.** Roger mentioned that the most recent pickup party for club members had featured one of his 2006 pinots that was “just barely ready to drink.” We only hope we have that kind of patience.

A Detour North

The talk turned to Oregon wineries. Roger recommended **Domaine Serene**, [White Rose Estate](#), and [De Ponte Cellars](#). *Warning: do not confuse White Rose Estate with White Rose Winery. If you accidentally go looking for the White Rose Winery you’ll end up in Carthage, Missouri. You want the one in Dayton, Oregon.*

If you visit De Ponte, be sure to ask about **Isabelle Dutartre**, their **French import and winemaker**. And, for a mere \$595 per night, you and two other couples can [rent the on-site estate house](#) (3 bedrooms, 3 full baths, 2 half baths, click the link for more details).

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Roger also recommended an Oregon pinot noir that he found on a recent trip to Big Sur’s legendary Nepenthe restaurant. [Evening Land](#) actually was started in California, but they migrated to Oregon. They make wine in California, Oregon, and Burgundy. Regarding their **2009 Eola-Amity Hills Seven Springs vineyard pinot noir**, he commented that, “I thought I was drinking my Solomon Hills.” ([On their website the 2010 vintage is priced at \\$75.](#))

Back to the Present

Returning to the in-house selection, we moved to the **2010 Cuvee des Artistes (\$39)**. “It’s an unusual blend. We are open-minded here in Paso Robles” was Roger’s comment. This blend is syrah (52%), cabernet sauvignon (32%), zinfandel (10%) and petit verdot (6%). **The spiciness of the syrah complements the cabernet nicely, resulting in a wonderful experience.** The blend varies slightly from year to year depending on the qualities of the grapes. By blending the wines immediately after racking, they have a chance to get to know each other in the barrel. Or, as Roger put it, **“it takes some time for them to polymerize again.”** (He clearly looked up Tony’s background in chemistry before we arrived.)

The **2010 Harmonie des Cepages (the “Five Cepages,” \$49)** is a blend of five varietals: cabernet sauvignon (39%), cabernet franc (20%), merlot (18%), malbec (14%) and petit verdot (9%). This wine is still improving with age. **The 2011 will not have any cabernet sauvignon and will (naturally) be Quatre Cepages.** But the 2010 is excellent. From the tasting notes: **“Aromas of dried cranberries and candied cherries lead to deep red berry flavors, raspberry and red licorice; lively tannins with balanced acidity.”**

A Digression on Health

Like many folks, **Roger believes that wine is healthy.** When he was growing up on his family’s farm in France, he started drinking wine as a child. **Good wine, good food, and staying active are the keys.**

Next Up

The **2010 Cuvee des Trois Cepages (\$55)** is a blend of three varietals. (You could have guessed that by now.) Cabernet sauvignon (70%), merlot (17%) and cabernet franc (13%) are the chosen three. Again we rely on the tasting notes: **“A show of**

finesse and elegance in Bordeaux characters; from the aroma on, a cascade of black fruit, cherries, black licorice, cassis, anise and crushed sage; subtle firm tannins with rounded edges.”

Roger confessed that **he grows about 0.25 acre of zinfandel**. When he was in the restaurant business, he found that zinfandel wines did not complement his food, so he avoided them. That opinion still guides him as he uses the zinfandel entirely for blending. That’s even more true as the newer zinfandel clones produce more sugar and lead to the 15 percent plus alcohol levels.

Conclusion

RN Estate tastings are by appointment only. Roger’s preferred time slots are 11 am and 1 pm Saturday and Sunday. There are about half a dozen people allowed at each tasting. Make an appointment, try to show up on time (tip: there is no sign on the road, look for the street address), and you will learn a lot about wine, food, and life. Highly recommended.