

Political Wine

When she was still writing for Bloomberg, Megan McArdle did a winetasting of two wine clubs: National Review and The Nation. The former is conservative, the latter is very liberal. Hence, political wine. Her article is pretty entertaining as well as being informative. The specific piece was ["Drinking to Blur Party Lines. A taste-test battle of two partisan wine clubs: National Review vs. the Nation"](#) (November, 2015). Forthwith, a few paragraphs.

Naturally, I had to subscribe to both. I imagined a titanic showdown between the somewhat stuffy traditionalist wines of the heirs to William F. Buckley, and the strident cosmopolitanism of the Nation's approach. Then I placed the orders, and realized that both wine clubs are supplied by the same third-party company.

In a way, this made things even more interesting. Would the wines in both shipments be the same, denoting the collapse of American politics into a single corporatist enterprise? Or would they be different – the Nation's box stuffed with little vintages hand-produced by impoverished Guatemalan villagers under a fair trade cooperative, the National Review box full of American wines with little flags on the labels? And which would be better?

For \$70 apiece, I was sent two boxes of wine, each containing 14 bottles. Then I invited over my friend Matt Ficke, a software developer who used to be a sommelier and the manager of DC's fanciest cocktail bar. We sat down with his wife, Becks, and my husband, Peter, to discover what we had.

...

It took us three bottles to get to anything that anyone would consider drinking for any reason other than scientific inquiry. This was the Willow Springs California Cabernet

Sauvignon (from National Review). My companions' reviews were more along the lines of "I would totally drink this" than "Let's make a note of the name so we can buy it again."

"This has many of the flavors that you associate with cabernet sauvignon," Matt said carefully.

The next bottle, a Silver Pony Cabernet Sauvignon from the Nation, represented a substantial regression. Matt licked his lips, stuck out his tongue and looked pained. His wife dumped the glass into our spit cup, declaring that it was too sweet. Indeed, when I tasted it, it was unpleasantly reminiscent of communion wine.

En Route Redux



(click for larger image)

We discovered [En Route pinot noir](#) at Pinotfest 2015. And we were very impressed. On Norma's recent birthday we took a

chance on [The Post, a new local restaurant](#) (full review forthcoming, stay tuned). On the wine list was “**Nickel & Nickel Russian River Valley “Les Pommiers” pinot noir.**” That sounded familiar, so we took a chance. But, frankly, it’s hard to screw up grapes from the RRV AVA.

When the wine arrived, Norma looked at it and noticed that **the label said En Route, not Nickel & Nickel.** I did a quick search of [CaliforniaWineFan](#) on my phone and found [our old review](#). Sure enough, this is one of the sisters of that winery.

We are, if anything, more impressed with the **2016 vintage (\$60) and priced fairly at \$75 at The Post.** We can do no better than the sensory description from their website.



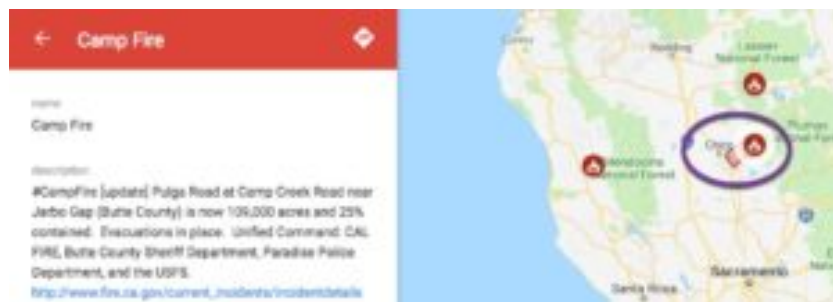
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California Fire Donation Resources



Woolsey Fire (click for larger image)

It was just over a year ago that fires swept through northern California wine country. We [posted a link](#) to various resources. Now the fires are back. The two largest are the **Camp Fire in Butte County** and the **Woolsey Fire in Malibu**. There are many others. Normally the winter rains would have started by now. Not this year, our bad luck. This is **our very unofficial guide to California fire donation resources**.



Camp Fire (click for larger image)

If you're not familiar with California geography, [CALFIRE has an excellent interactive map](#).

People have been asking how they can help. As of 6 pm Sunday November 11, many locations have run out of space for donations of food, blankets, and other goods. We advise giving money, the most fungible of all products.

The list below is actually a meta-list. These are four articles that are from reputable sources that list ways you can help. Assistance in any form is appreciated.

[Refinery 29](#) has the most comprehensive list.

The [Sacramento Bee](#) has a good list, focus on the Camp fire.

[KTLA in Los Angeles](#) is a good source for the Woolsey fire.

The [Orange County Register](#) is also very good.

RN Estate 2012 Pinot Noir Solomon Hills



(click for larger image)

If you have a bottle of this beauty laying around, don't hesitate to open it. Aromas of Bing and black cherries. The palate features one of the finest, silkiest tannin finishes I've ever tasted. Mid-palate of cola and spice with a hint of cinnamon. Outstanding. And worth every minute of the wait. Added bonus: the [RN Estate 2012 pinot noir Solomon Hills](#) is available as a library selection for the bargain price of \$49. Scroll to the bottom of the current releases page to find it.

Belden Barns 2017 Sauvignon Blanc



Wine Specs

Vintage 2017
Varietal Sauvignon Blanc
Appellation Sonoma Mountain
Harvest Date September 28, 2017
Acid 8.3
pH 3.23
Aging 50% Neutral Oak 50%
Stainless Steel
Fermentation Stainless Steel
Bottling Date February 23, 2018
Alcohol % 13.0

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We've written about these folks quite a bit over the years. About a week ago we got our wine club shipment. The pinots can wait but the lure of the Belden Barns 2017 sauvignon blanc (\$26) proved irresistible.

And we were not disappointed. Aromas of honey and tangerine with just hint of grassiness lead to a palate of pineapple and honeydew melon. The finish is long and multi-layered moving into a touch of wet slate. This is a major bargain.

The Beldens planted a unique clone of sauvignon blanc. Nate describes it as "the pedigreed vine material originally sourced from Collio, Italy near the Slovenian border." We are pretty sure the terroir is a contributing factor. Sonoma

Mountain is rocky with an interesting soil structure. They benefit from being directly aligned with the Sonoma wind gap. Days are cool and foggy, something very unique for properties east of highway 101 in Santa Rosa.

Buy this wine and try it. Unless, of course, you are a fan of the grassy, vegetal sauv blancs. In that case, this is not for you.



Nate in the barn
(click for larger
image)

Piper-Heidsieck Visits Chef

Chu's With Artisan

Our friends at [Artisan Wine Depot](#) invited us to a special food and champagne pairing on September 19. The champagne was from [Piper-Heidsieck](#) with their local expert and evangelist Kyle Kaplan. Food pairings were from **the legendary Larry Chu** who also put in several appearances. [Chef Chu's](#) has been a fixture in Los Altos (CA) for 48 years. It was the first restaurant I visited that fused California cuisine with traditional Chinese recipes. **If you're ever in the neighborhood, this landmark is worth a special trip.** We put together a video montage of this event.

There were *nine* champagnes on the menu. Five were vintages, including four with the coveted "Cuvee Rare" designation. Those included the 2007 Brut Rose, the 1988 Brut, the 1998 Brut (magnums only), and the 2002 Brut. A fifth vintage, the 2008 Brut was actually our favorite. We bought half a case.

Cuvee Rare is a special designation for vintages that are exceptional. There is a special label, affixed by hand, for these vintages.



(click for larger image)

Kyle got to (literally) show off his chops by demonstrating **how to open a champagne bottle with a sabre.** The image below

doesn't do the event justice. Watch the video above to get the full impact.



(click for larger image)

Hahn Visits Artisan

Long-time readers will remember our admiration for [Hahn Family Wines](#). We were delighted to be invited to a tasting by our friends at [Artisan Wine Depot](#). **Hahn visits Artisan** and we are there to report on the event. As always, all prices are from Artisan.

Browsing the Hahn website, we discovered the fascinating biographies of the Hahn family. I'll include photos and bio sketches between wine reviews. Let's start with co-founder Nicky Hahn.



NICOLAUS 'NICKY' HAHN, FOUNDER

Nicky Hahn's commitment to Monterey's wines and his vision of their potential began 30 years ago when his adventurous spirit brought him to the area in search of world-class vineyard properties. His original investment and continued support culminated in a three-year revitalization program through 2004, which has brought the winery to international acclaim.

Nicky, a Swiss citizen, grew up in both the U.S. and in Europe. He studied economics, starting his professional career as an arbitrageur in Paris. He also worked as a credit analyst in New York and for years was based in London as the chairman of a leading international computer software company. Nicky and his wife Gaby now divide their time between their homes in Monterey and Zurich along with their 50,000-acre wildlife preserve in Africa where Nicky works on saving wildlife and strengthening the economy.

(click for larger image)

There were ten wines on the menu. In the interest of promoting only the best, we'll limit our review to five of them. (Naturally, we'll skip the Smith & Hook cabernet sauvignon and the Boneshaker zinfandel.)

Hahn's **2016 Monterey County chardonnay (\$16)** is a bargain. The opening is tropical aromas of citrus, and orange zest. The palate is more citrus with a nice acid balance and luscious mouth-feel.



GABY HAHN, FOUNDER

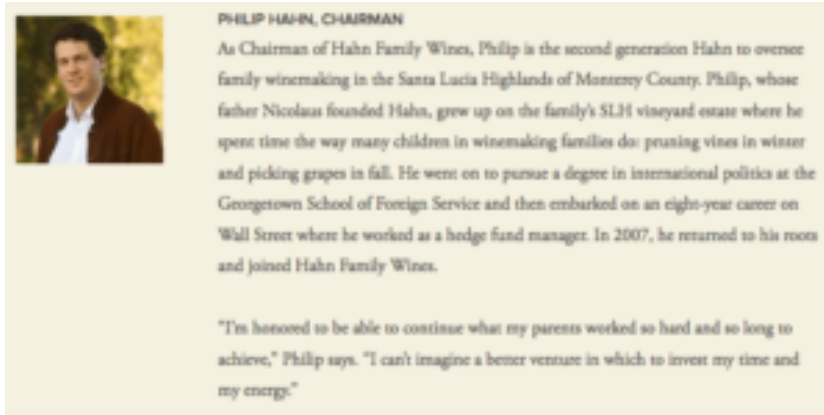
After earning law degrees in both Germany and France, Gaby followed her passion for the arts to the Tate Gallery in London. There she started as a docent, then became a lecturer on both British and international contemporary art.

After coming to California with her husband, Nicky Hahn, she continued her commitment to the arts, lecturing on topics such as British art, Californian art, Impressionism and sculpture. She served as a trustee for the Monterey Museum of Art, the Monterey Symphony, and the Monterey Institute of International Studies. She also founded an art appreciation unit at the Washington Union School District to introduce art to children in Salinas.

In 1997, the Hahn family acquired a 50,000-acre farm in Laikipia, Kenya where they created a wild animal conservancy. Inspired by the profound beauty of the people, animals and landscape, Gaby has made the farm the primary topic for her art.

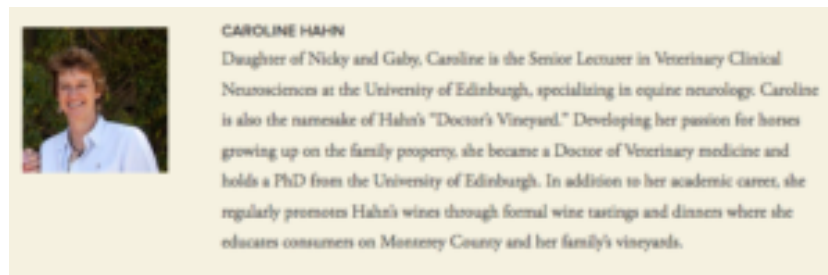
Co-founder Gaby Hahn (click for larger image)

The **2016 "SLH" Santa Lucia Highlands pinot noir (\$20)** is also a bargain. This one is the forest floor – earthy style. The nose is ripe cherry fruit with touches of newly-plowed earth. The palate features dark berry flavors, with hints of spice and dried thyme.



(click for larger image)

Lucienne is one of Hahn's higher-end labels. The 2016 Smith Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands pinot noir (\$45) begins with enticing aromas of strawberry and blackberry with a hint of chocolate. The palate features dark fruit, especially plums with spice undertones. Add a nice acid balance and this is a winner.



(click for larger image)

The **2016 Doctor's Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands pinot noir (\$45)** is a good illustration of why terroir matters, even at the vineyard level. Aromas are toward the earthy end with hints of leather and, unusually, cedar. Flavors feature wild raspberries, blackberries and more cedar. Incidentally, this vineyard is named in honor of Dr. Caroline Hahn (see bio sketch above).

It was a pleasure to be reminded of this outstanding winery.

Why the Dinosaurs Went Extinct

At last, after centuries of “scientific” chicanery, we can reveal the true story of why the dinosaurs went extinct.



Three Excellent Pinots From Gregory James

We wrote a brief review of [Gregory James Wines](#) in [Part 2 of our Garagiste Northern Exposure preview](#). We liked their wine so much we ordered half a case. We've now tasted each of the three wines. We were not disappointed. And, as an added bonus, their 2014 Patchy Fog Vineyard is a major bargain at \$31.

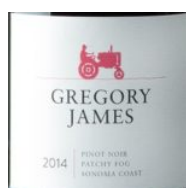


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The **2013 Hawk Hill Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$48)** opens with aromas of earth and leather. The palate is bright with Bing cherries and notes of spice with a hint of cranberry. The finish is long and complex with lingering spice. This wine will improve even more with another year or two in the cellar. (We also have several bottles of the 2014 but two seemed like enough for last night. We'll add to this review in the coming days.)

The **2014 Hawk Hill Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$48)** carries a lesson in how the California wine industry has evolved. If you have any friends who still believe vintage doesn't matter in California wines, have them taste this side by side with the 2013. The two could not be more different. This one starts with aromas of Bing cherries and raspberries leading to bright cherries on the palate. The characteristic long finish with a terrific acid – tannin balance rounds out a

great experience.



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image)

The **2014 Patchy Fog Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** (\$31, **major bargain!**) begins with lush, ripe aromas of black cherries and chocolate. The palate is more black cherries, a bit of licorice, and a hint of spice. Another long, complex finish makes this a terrific experience.

About Gregory James

The winery name is a combination of the first names of the two owners. Greg Adams is the winemaker and viticulturist. Jim Demuth is the president and handles the business side of the operation. They share a mutual love of the land and grapegrowing – in fact, they met while digging around in a vineyard.



Greg (left) and Jim (click for larger image)

From their website:

Site matters to Gregory James.

We grow and source our grapes from vineyards located within the maritime reach of the Pacific Ocean. Here, the cool foggy nights and mornings dramatically shroud the varied terrain producing grapes of remarkable intensity and character.

Our vineyard sites are tucked away among rolling hills, bucolic valleys and dramatic ridge tops of the West Sonoma Coast where each location tells its own story.

We invite you to share in the hard won results of farming in the extreme coastal environment of the Pacific Ocean.

Greg and Jim actually have help from a third partner.



Charley the vineyard
doodle. “Fastest
doodle in the west.”

Charley joined the family in 2009 thanks to a gift from cherished friends Paul & Jamie. He has been an integral part of the wine team specializing in moral support and gopher scenting. He leads a charmed life in the hills and vineyards of the Sonoma Coast.

Garagiste Northern Exposure in Sonoma Preview Part 2

This is part 2 of our [preview of Garagiste Northern Exposure](#). We advise [reading Part 1 first](#) if you haven't already.

As an overview note, many wineries were pouring 2013 and/or 2014 vintages. We preferred the 2013's by and large.

[Gregory James Wines](#) is, like several others, named after **owner Jim Demuth and winemaker Greg Adams**. Their pal Jenny greeted us and gave us the rundown on the wines and the winery. She was pouring two 2014 pinots. The **Hawk Hill Vineyard (\$48)** and the **Patchy Fog Vineyard (\$31)** are both on the western edge of the Sonoma Coast AVA just outside Freestone, a town south of Occidental and west of Sebastopol. In other words, terrific terroir. And the wines are excellent.

[Fallon Place Wines](#) was represented by **winemaker Cory Michal**. The winery is **named after Fallon Place on Russian Hill in San Francisco**, one of the famous staircase walkways in the city. Cory used to make a barrel of wine on the landing outside his apartment when he lived there. Luckily for us, he turned professional. His 2016 Herbitage Vineyard (\$38) is an excellent representative of the Carneros AVA. It will improve over the next few years, so be patient.

[Betwixt Wines](#) featured **owner-winemaker Tim Tello**. They, too, are located in San Francisco. Their 2015 pinot noir (\$40) is from Anderson Valley's Helluva Vineyard (say it out loud). Tim makes about 450 cases per year including grenache, grenache rosé, and chardonnay. The pinot is all of 85 cases so get it while you can.

[La Pitchoune Winery](#) was our last stop of the day. **Owner Tracy Nielsen** greeted us with enough enthusiasm to bolster our flagging energy. They featured two pinots, both 2014. One is

a Sonoma Coast blend (\$48). The other is from the Holder Vineyard in the Russian River Valley (\$68). Tracy offered us their **2017 Sonoma Coast *vin gris* of pinot noir (\$28)**, a heavier style of rosé. That process preserves more of the pinot character while still retaining rosé quaffability. **All three wines were as charming as Tracy herself.** Incidentally, **La Pitchoune is a Provençal expression for “the little one”,** deriving from the Occitan word pichon. It’s also the name **Julia and Paul Child gave to their cottage in Provence.** Which, by the way, [you can now rent on AirBnB](#). (For our regular readers, Tracy is quite familiar with [Picayune Cellars](#). We’ve written about them [several times](#).)