

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.



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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.

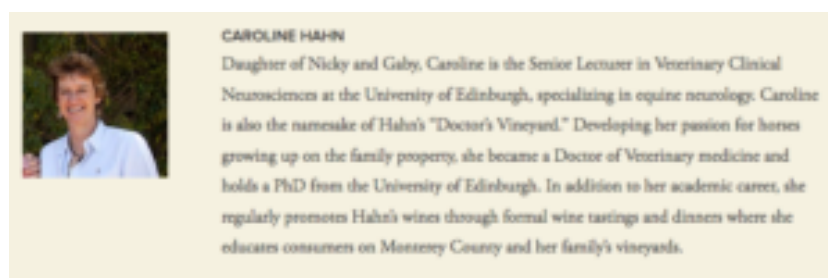
Co-founder Gaby Hahn (click for larger image)

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.



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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.



(click for
larger
image)

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.



(click for
larger
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](#).)

Garagiste Northern Exposure in Sonoma Preview Part 1

On May 12 we traveled north to the town of Sonoma for the first Garagiste event north of Paso Robles: [Garagiste Northern Exposure](#). And we were not disappointed. We found **eight new wineries, each producing at least one pinot noir**. Quality varied from **very good to outstanding**. This is part 1 of our summary in roughly the order we tasted the wines. We’ll publish part 2 followed by more in-depth articles about individual wineries in the future.

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

[Burning Bench Cellars](#) owner, grapegrower, winemaker, and bottle washer **David Mease** greeted us. These folks only make pinot noir. And it’s really good. All 175 cases per year are from their Moon Hill Vineyard in the North Coast, Marin County

AVA. The 2013 and 2014 vintages are **\$45 each**.

[Camlow Cellars](#) offers their **Magna Porcum Estate Pinot Noir**. **Yes, that's a wild boar in their logo**. The winery name is a hybrid of the names of owner **Alan Campbell** and winemaker **Craig Strehlow**. They make all of 400 cases per year, including a **pinot noir rosé featuring the winery mascot, Pigasus**.

[Von Holt Wines](#) featured **two 2014 pinots, both Sonoma Coast**. The Sonoma Coast blend is \$35, while the Suacci Vineyard is \$45. Both are excellent. **Co-owner Chris Von Holt** probably has no problem collecting his accounts receivable. The winery is his second career. He retired after **20 years as a Secret Service agent**. (The other **co-owner is his wife Pam**.)

Charlie Chenoweth greeted us with an amazing story about [Chenoweth Wines](#). Charlie grew up in agriculture. **In 1980 they ripped out their vegetables and planted grapes**. And we sure are happy they did. Their pinots are a blend of three vineyards: Treehouse, Bootlegger's, and the estate Home Ranch. The 2013 is \$55 and the 2014 is \$65.

More coming, hopefully next week.

Two GSMs from Dilecta



Orion and Tony

Dilecta was one of our discoveries on [our trip to Paso Robles in January](#). Following the recommendation of **Wills and Kath Carter** (proprietors and hosts at [the fabulous Canyon Villa](#)), we visited the winery for a delightful hour of tasting and conversation. Owner – winemaker Orion Stang knows his way around the standard GSM grapes. But technically these are not GSM in that he often uses only two of the three grapes. Tonight we opened the **2014 Unorthodox and Cookie**. The two could not be more different. Before reading further, here's some advice. **If you have these in your cellar, leave them for at least another year, and two would probably be a good idea.** They're tasty right now but will improve with more age.

Unorthodox 2014 78% syrah 22% mourvedre opens with aromas of earth, licorice and black raspberries. The palate is spice with some tannins and more black raspberries. A long and tangy finish rounds out a very pleasant experience. This one could wait another year. (The 2014 is no longer available from Dilecta. The 2015 is \$52.)



Playful Dilecta dog

The 2014 Cookie is big. Really big. The wine opens with deceptive aromas of black olives, black raspberries and spice. The palate is a bomb. Deep, rich, and opulent with more spice and dark fruit. Youthful tannins with a good acid balance and fruit backbone imply this one will continue to improve for at least five years. (The 2014 is no longer available from Dilecta. The 2015 is \$62.)

Orion's mom is an artist. She designs the labels for the wines. These labels are much wider than the traditional size. As such, only a video clip can do them justice.

<http://californiawinefan.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/DilectaLabel.mp4>

If you're a fan of syrah, you can do no better than Mr. Stang's wines.



(click for larger image)

Sean Minor Returns

[Editor: Mr. Minor never really left. What went missing was the author's brain.]

We were excited to [get an e-mail from this old favorite](#). And we were even more thrilled to discover that **Sean is still making pinot noir**. We ordered a mixed case. This review will cover tastings made over the course of a week. We've [reviewed Sean's wines before](#), but somehow he fell through the ever-widening cracks in our brains.

We had remembered – incorrectly, as it turns out – that Sean had stopped making pinot noir. Thankfully, a helpful employee refreshed our ever more failing memory. He stopped making *Carneros* pinots, shifting instead to the Russian River Valley and Sonoma Coast AVAs.

The Wines

His **2016 Central Coast pinot “Four Bears” (\$16)** opens with mild aromas of black cherries and leather. The palate is lush and full with flavors of chocolate covered cherries and a hint of spice. The finish features long, smooth, silky tannins.

Another terrific deal.

The **2016 Central Coast chardonnay “Four Bears” (\$14)** tends to lemon curd. Aromas of citrus and smoke lead to pineapple and lemon curd palate. A nice long finish rounds out the experience.

But the real champion is the **2015 Sonoma Coast pinot noir (\$22)**. Aromas of cranberries and bing cherries lead to a palate that features more cherries and spices. A long, complex finish opens with smooth tannins and a touch of acid, merging seamlessly into more spice. At \$22 per bottle this counts as a major bargain. Get this one while it lasts. And don't be afraid to let it sit for a year or two. This one has some aging potential.

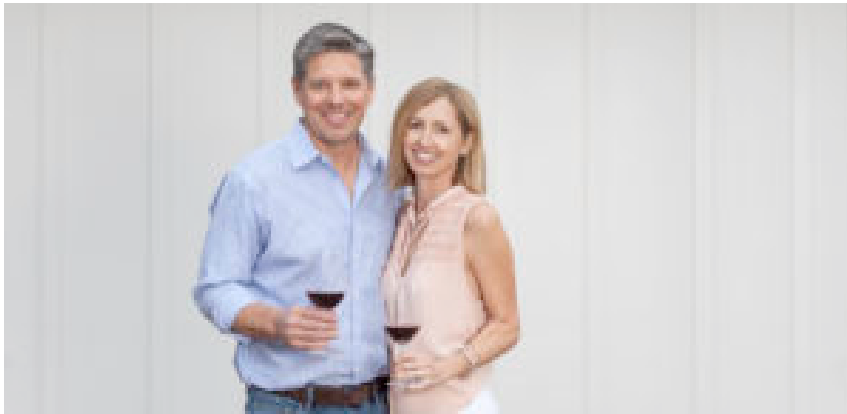
The Business

The website has been updated significantly since our last visit. Vibrant colors with a sparse, almost Japanese, layout. The design is warm and welcoming. Here's an example:



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Sean and Nicole are the perfect winery couple. For those who are curious, the “Four Bears” designation refers to their four kids.



Followed by a clear, clean statement of purpose. Companies searching for a mission statement could learn a lot from this:

Not long after Nicole and I were married, we discovered our second largest monthly expense was wine. We enjoy wine every day with dinner, when friends and family come to visit, during celebrations... actually, I can't think of times we don't enjoy wine.

After a number of years in the industry, I knew there had to be a better and more affordable way to produce great wines without severe consequences on the pocket book. In 2005 we started our wine business and began producing wines from premier appellations throughout California. With the help of a family friend and colleague, Will Buckle, our initial production featured a Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, Central Coast Chardonnay, and Dry Creek Sauvignon Blanc.

Will continues to be our consulting winemaker and we collaborate on the selection and blending of all wines. Will is a graduate of UC Davis' prestigious ecology program and started his career with an internship at the historic and world-renowned Chateau LaFite-Balzacq. Following a stint with Thomas Hardy in Australia, Nisum Vineyards in Mendocino he worked at us both old and King Estate in Oregon. He has now settled in Sonoma County where he works closely with many of the vineyards we source from.

You will find our wines at fine restaurants and general grocery stores all over the country, and of course here on our website. I am happy to share my love of wine with you.

- Sean

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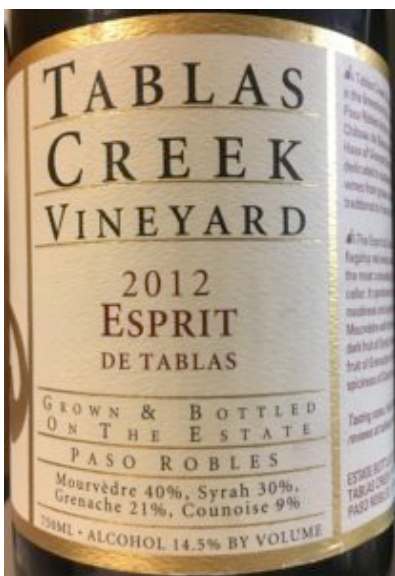
An interesting side note: Sean was born in Kansas “surrounded by surrounded by agriculture and the hard work and values responsible for the enviable work ethic of Midwestern people.” It happens that Tony’s maternal grandparents owned a farm in Kansas. He spent many summers there when he was a child. [Editor: That’s what Tony claims. Given the state of his memory, I would be skeptical.]

These are good folks making wines that are incredible values. If you’ve never tried them before get online and order a case or two! Here’s their team:



Stuart, Nicole, Larry, Barbara, Sue,
Sean, Kristi

Tablas Creek 2012 Esprit de Tablas

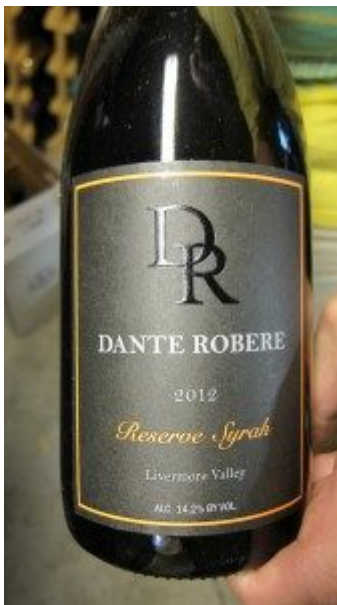


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“Like a French Rhône, only good!” were the first words out of my mouth. The [Tablas Creek 2012 Esprit de Tablas](#) opens with aromas of smoke, leather, and black cherries. The palate is black raspberry, cassis, black tea, and sweet spices. A nice finish, with silky tannins. You can’t buy this from the winery, [even though it’s listed in their library](#).

A quick search of several wine retail websites produced zero hits. [Wine.com](#) estimates the retail at around \$55. If you go looking and find a place that has some for sale, please let us know.

Dante Robere 2012 Reserve Syrah



Rummaging in our Eurocave I ran across this goodie. It’s been a while since we visited Dante Robere, one of the best wineries in the Livermore Valley. The Dante Robere 2012 Reserve Syrah was **excellent after decanting**. Smoke and black raspberries on the nose. Palate of spice, milk chocolate, and more raspberries. A long, delicious finish with well-structured, silky tannins. **If you own a bottle or two, this may be the time to pop the cork.**

They’re selling the 2015 vintage right now for \$42. Pick up half a case if you have the patience. Dan and Bob know their stuff.