

RN Estate 2012 Pinot Noir Solomon Hills

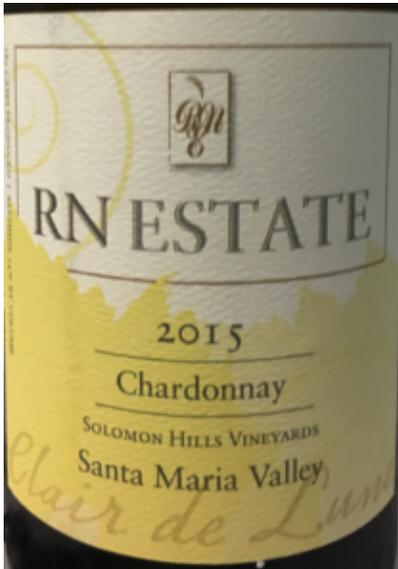


(click for larger image)

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.

RN Estate 2015 Chardonnay

Solomon Hills Santa Maria Valley



(click for larger image)

This is [Roger Nicolas's](#) first chardonnay and it sure is a **winner**. Aromas of wet slate and lemon curd lead gently to more minerality on the palate with hints of lemon and tropical fruit. A long finish with a slight butter tinge. We rate the **\$49** as a fair price for a wine this subtle and varied.

RN Estate 2009 Cuvée des

Artistes



(click for larger image)

We are long-time members of the [RN Estate wine club](#). Today, as I was browsing the [Eurocave](#)[™] I spotted this beauty on the shelf. Before I write about it, here's some advice if you're lucky enough to own some of this: give it a few more years. There are still some slightly rough tannins and a bit of oak. But we're old and impatient. (If you're curious about our history with this winery, search for RN Estate.)

Forthwith, my notes: aromas of smoke and black pepper followed by a dark, brooding palate. Notes of brambleberries and dried tart cherries lead to a long, slightly tannic finish. If you can find it, buy it and be patient.

Amazingly, [you can still buy this on the RN Estate website for a mere \\$49](#). This is a serious bargain.

Owner-winemaker Roger Nicolas regularly makes these blends, using proportions adjusted to each year's vintage. **The 2009 is 50 percent syrah, 19 percent cabernet sauvignon, 18 percent merlot, and 13 percent zinfandel.** In Bordeaux and Burgundy a

blend like this would be illegal. Luckily for us, Roger is beyond the reach of the French wine authorities.

RN Estate Vertical 2009 and 2010 Fiddlestix

Yesterday was my birthday. To celebrate we opened two bottles of [RN Estate pinot noir](#). These bottles are both from the justifiably-famous **Fiddlestix Vineyard in the Santa Rita Hills AVA. The vintages were 2009 and 2010.** And the two could not have been more different. Before going any further, I hasten to add that they were both terrific.

The **2009** opens with aromas of black cherry and licorice. The mid-palate is dense and luscious featuring more black cherries with some added black raspberries. A finish of spice and silky tannins rounds out a wonderful experience.

By contrast, the **2010** has a nose of black cherries and a hint of forest floor. The mid-palate is brighter than the 2009, tending to red cherries and strawberries. The finish is just a touch of spice and the same silky tannins.

We acquired both of these wines before we got our Eurocave. And we did not handle them particularly carefully. Their durability and development are both testimonials to the skills of [Roger Nicolas](#). If you've never tried his wines, do it now.

RN Estate 2009 Cuvée des Trois Cépages



(click for larger image)

Opened a bottle of [RN Estate](#) 2009 Cuvée des Trois Cépages tonight and it is terrific. Aromas of black cherries, blackberries and a hint of licorice. Long, complex palate starting with spice and tannins, developing into more black cherries with a hint of caramel. Absolutely wonderful.

RN Estate Malbec Vertical

For Labor Day we cracked open a couple of malbecs that had been in the cellar for a while. Both were from the infamous RN Estate. We've written extensively about [Roger Nicolas and his Paso Robles venture](#), so we won't repeat that here.

The two wines were vintages 2009 and 2012. And they could not

have been more different. The 2009 (after decanting) is positively decadent. Chocolate, coffee, and Chinese five-spice aromas lead to a dense, tangled weave of more chocolate and coffee, but with a touch of Ancho chile on the palate.

The 2012 exhibited youthful exuberance. Aromas of strawberries and raspberries followed by even more on the palate.

We're pretty sure we'll continue as members of the RN Estate wine club.

RN Estate Solomon Hills Vineyard Vertical

While exploring our wine-cellar^[1] this afternoon, we were pleased to discover two bottles of the [RN Estate Solomon Hills Vineyard \(Santa Maria Valley\)](#). The vintages were 2011 and 2012. Forthwith, our RN Estate Solomon Hills Vineyard vertical tasting.

The 2011 (\$55, two bottle limit) is the more approachable of the two. In a word, this wine is "pretty." Aromas of black cherry and strawberry lead into Asian five-spice and more black cherries on the palate. The finish is slightly spicy with lingering silky tannins.

The 2012 (\$49) needed to breathe a bit to open up. (If you are lucky enough to have a bottle or two, I'd advise waiting another year, at least.) Aromas here are more consistent with what we call "desert," creating images of sand and tumbleweeds. But the palate is an explosion of delectable fruit with just a hint of tobacco. There is also a very small hint of spice on the finish with more smooth tannins.

The Vineyard

The Solomon Hills Vineyards takes its name from its neighboring hills named for Salomon Pico, a celebrated bandit who in the 1850's traveled frequently along the stretch of El Camino Real that is known today as Santa Maria Valley. Pico's life was so colorful that it is believed by many to have inspired the legend of Zorro.

The [Solomon Hills Vineyard](#) was developed in the late 1990s. It is located on a western slope of the Santa Maria Valley, adding a more pronounced ocean fog influence to the terroir. The soil is sandy loam, reflecting the sea that once filled the valley. This vineyard is near the justly-famous Bien Nacido and Sierra Madre plots.

But, of course, the name must have a story →

We hope the partnership between Roger Nicolas and the Solomon Hills team continues for many years.

[1] OK, it's really just a couple of wine racks in the garage with a portable air conditioning unit for summer use. We can call it whatever we want.

Syrah Tasting: RN Estate and Dante Robere

If you've been reading this blog with any regularity, [Roger Nicolas's RN Estate Winery](#) in Paso Robles will be familiar. [Dante Robere in Livermore Valley](#), however, is a new discovery for us. There will be a feature article about our recent visit

to Livermore later this week. But tonight, as I was mulling a wine choice, I realized we had syrahs from each of these wineries. Why not a side-by-side tasting?

This is heavy competition for the newcomer. RN Estate has established a reputation for very high quality interesting wines. We were so impressed by Dante Robere that we joined their wine club on the spot. So let's see how they stack up.



The RN Estate is a 2011 from La Vista Vineyard, most likely one of Roger's own. Aromas of forest floor and herbs are followed by a burst of huckleberries and chocolate with subtle tannins and spice.

I believe in long, slow, deep, soft, wet kisses that last three days.

To describe the finish, I will quote Crash Davis from the movie Bull Durham →

Dante Robere offered a 2012 Livermore Valley edition. The aroma features black cherries and caramel, slightly better than the RN Estate (albeit somewhat less traditional). The palate is simpler, with about three notes. The traditional syrah spice is paired with red cherries and soft tannins. The

finish is less structured and shorter than the RN Estate.



On balance, RN Estate is a superior syrah. I know, these are different vintages from different terroir. Hey, we drink and taste what's in our cellar! The real message, however, is that Dante Robere is one to watch. Right now they're the second-best winery in the Livermore Valley. Placing them behind [Steven Kent](#) is high praise indeed.

RN Estate Vertical "Cuvee des

Trois Cepages”

Sunday night we opened two of [Roger Nicolas's](#) blends, the “Cuvee des Trois Cepages” 2010 and 2011 vintages. The two could not be more different, each excellent in its own way.

This was our RN Estate vertical “Cuvee des Trois Cepages.”

The two vintages are nearly identical blends. The 2010 is 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17% Merlot and 13% Cabernet Franc. The 2011 is ever so slightly different with 70% cabernet sauvignon, 16% merlot, and 14% cabernet franc.

The 2010 (\$55) features aromas of black cherries, plums and black licorice with a palate of anise, crushed sage, but overwhelmingly dark fruit. Soft tannins on the finish make for a wonderful experience.

The 2011 is more austere, needing some time to breathe. The aroma is lighter with elements of leather and brambleberries. On the palate the tannins are noticeable but not overpowering with good acid balance. The finish is long and enjoyable. As we were tasting it, Norma pointed out that I had written “2019” on the bottle. Have to check the cellar to see if we have more. (This wine is not currently listed on the RN Estate website.)

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.