

Daniel: Chalone's attributes extend to pinot noir

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When Richard Graff became a partner in Chalone Vineyard in 1965, he quickly established a reputation for his superb chardonnays. The 1974 Chalone chardonnay even took third place in the Paris Tasting of 1976, which pitted it and other California chardonnays against some of the best whites of Burgundy.

But California winemaking legend Andre Tchelistcheff recognized the greatness of Chalone pinot noir, too. The book "Chalone: A Journey on the Wine Frontier" (Carneros Press, 222 pp., \$20) recounts an occasion in the 1970s when Tchelistcheff tasted the 1969 Chalone pinot and knelt in front of Graff. He said it was the only time he'd had that reaction to a great California pinot.

For years, Chalone Vineyard was the only player of note in the Chalone appellation, which lies between Soledad and the Pinnacles National Monument, on the eastern edge of Monterey County. There were a few small vineyards in the area, but they sold their fruit to the Chalone winery. But now these growers are selling fruit to high-end boutique wineries outside the area and starting their own labels. And the grape variety that's grabbing much of the attention is pinot noir.

Two of the most important vineyards are Michaud and Brosseau. Michael Michaud, the longtime former winemaker at Chalone Vineyard, sells to a handful of wineries but uses most of his grapes in his own Michaud Vineyard label. The Brosseau family – who planted their vineyard in 1981 and used to sell all the grapes to Chalone Vineyard – now sells to nearly a dozen wineries, including Testarossa Vineyards, Loring Wine Co., Tantara Winery and Roessler Cellars. They also keep some grapes for their own Brosseau Wines, run by son Bill Brosseau (who's also the winemaker for Testarossa) and his wife, Kilene.

A defining characteristic of the appellation is the soil, an unusual mixture of well-drained limestone and decomposed granite. That soil imparts a minerality to many of the wines. Although that

minerality is particularly evident in the whites, it's usually easy to spot in the pinot, too.

You can see it, for example, in the 2003 Michaud Vineyard Estate Pinot Noir (\$38), a wine that also offers plump cherry and a firm core of tannin and acidity. It's also evident in the 2005 Brosseau Wines Pinot Noir (\$38), which is big and fairly muscular, with flavors of ripe cherry and raspberry and hints of anise and sage.

The mineral undertone is less prominent but still pokes through in the 2005 Loring Wine Company Pinot Noir (\$48) from Brosseau Vineyard. The wine is rich, concentrated and structured, with bright raspberry and rhubarb flavors and a long finish. The minerality is also subtle in the not-yet-released 2005 Tantara Pinot Noir (\$52), also made from Brosseau Vineyard grapes. It's big, concentrated and fairly tannic at this stage, with ripe cherry and raspberry flavors, good acidity and a very long finish.

The 2005 Roessler Cellars Pinot Noir (\$42, summer release) from Brosseau Vineyard doesn't show much minerality, but it's plenty rich and ripe, with flavors of cherry, vanilla and spice and firm but approachable tannins.

The other common thread I see in Chalone-appellation pinot noir is firm structure. And that helps explain something else that's unusual about the pinot noir and other wines from the appellation: their ability to age. Most of the wines are at their best when they have a few years of bottle age. This appears to be true both for the more elegant wines of Michaud Vineyard and for riper styles, such as that produced by Testarossa Vineyards.

"The wines for the most part from this appellation are on their own time scale – and most people aren't willing to take the time," says Michaud, who holds back his wines for longer than most wineries to give them some time to evolve.

Bill Brosseau says Testarossa's Chalone-appellation wines can be slow sellers when first released. But after a little more time in the bottle, "they're flying off the shelves." (Testarossa will release a 2005 pinot from Brosseau Vineyard this winter; the 2004, which is no longer available, is still quite tight.)

Brian Loring, who makes more than a dozen pinots from around the state for his Loring Wine Co. label, adds, "Of all the pinots we make, we think that the Chalone AVA stuff might be the ones that could age the longest. Not only do they usually have good acid, but they're also usually our most tannic wines. Of course, saying 'tannic' is relative, since they're not overly tight or hard."

I recently tasted through some older vintages of Chalone-appellation pinot noir and chardonnay from Chalone Vineyard, Michaud Vineyard and Testarossa. A 1979 Chalone Vineyard Estate Pinot Noir was remarkable, and Michaud and Testarossa pinots that were 5 to 7 years old were showing extremely well.

It's unclear why the wines can be so long-lived. Michaud, who has nearly 30 years experience working with grapes from the appellation, credits the elevation – about 1,600 to 1,800 feet – and the dry climate. Those conditions combine to give the area intense, unfiltered sunlight during the growing season, which develops a lot of flavor and tannin in the grapes, Michaud says.

The dry climate also results in small berry size, Brosseau notes, which increases the fruit intensity and tannin. "The vines really struggle up there to survive," he says. If you're interested in tasting older vintages, check Michaud's Web site, www.michaudvineyard.com.

PINOT FILES: The annual Pinnacles Wine Festival offers an opportunity to taste a variety of wines, including pinot noir, from the Chalone appellation. This year's festival is from 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. April 28 at the Inn at the Pinnacles, east of Soledad. Food purveyors will be on hand, too. Tickets are \$40 in advance, \$50 the day of the event. For more information, go to www.pinnacleswinefestival.com.

On the other side of the Salinas Valley, Wine Artisans of the Santa Lucia Highlands will hold their first consumer tasting May 19 at Paraiso Vineyards. Pinot noir is sure to be a big part of the tasting, although the appellation's wineries also produce wines such as chardonnay, syrah and riesling. The tasting is from 3 to 6 p.m.; in addition to wine, hors d'oeuvres by Bernardus Lodge chef Cal Stamenov will be served. Ticket sales (\$85) are online only. Go to www.santaluciahighlands.com.