

ROAD 31 WINE CO.

grin-inducing pinot

Fall Update 2012

Dear Truckers:

Never has being “sold out” of wine been more disappointing than right now. I keep getting emails from Truckers on the Eastern Seaboard saying, “I drank all my Road 31 during Sandy-the-superstorm. Got any more?”

As some insiders know, I do occasionally save back an emergency stash. But the 2010 sold faster and more furiously than anticipated last spring; I even had to short my mother-in-law (sorry again, Debi). Instead, all I can offer is to open my annual fall update with an acknowledgement of the hardship of those in the wake of Sandy. Know that we feel your pain, both meteorological and oenological.

And while I’m at it, I guess I should also extend my sympathies to those poor Detroit Tigers fans out there whose team got spanked by our scruffy-and-scrappy San Francisco Giants. So much misery...

I write this year’s harvest report with enthusiasm that borders on giddiness. We have enjoyed a glorious 2012 crush out here in California. Before I get into the details, however, I thought I might attempt a bit of philosophizing about the nature of a wine-grape harvest.

If you ask my wife to explain harvest, she’ll tell you it is a time when her winemaker husband leaves before dawn and rarely gets home for dinner. When he is at the table, he eats enough to gain five pounds in the month. He goes back to the winery at all hours of the night. He never smells too good, and he leaves a red grape stain on every towel in the house. “Harvest widow” is a common term in the valley. But she’ll also tell you I have a peculiar grin on my face for being so overworked.

Harvest is thrilling. I come from Kansas farm stock. Whether it was apples for cider, sugar cane for sorghum (molasses), corn, or eggs, my childhood experiences on my grandparents’ farms moved from one exciting harvest endeavor to another. It is the same exhilaration with wine. But there is a difference, in that those Midwest harvests were mostly about bounty and quantity (and using me and my cousins as child labor). With wine-grapes we’re harvesting *flavors*. We’re looking for inspiration, not merely sustenance. It is an intellectual pursuit.

And the wine-grape harvest is more a transition than a culmination. Yes, it is the end of the growing season, but — provided disaster doesn’t strike — it is the beginning of months of intense cellar work. Having just voted, I’m struck that perhaps presidential candidates share similar “harvest” sentiments on election night. It has to be both relieving, and hard, to jump off the intense campaign bandwagon. Obviously, election night can easily end in agony and defeat. And while victory is electrifying, ultimately, there must also be the thought: *boy, if this goes well, I get to deal with a nuclear Iran and the fiscal cliff.*

If you’ll allow me a slight aside, I enjoy another, more personal aspect of harvest: the crush coincides with little league soccer. If Road 31 is only 99 percent as good as it could be, the 1 percent shortfall



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is due to this: I coach my kids' soccer teams while fermenting grapes. Now, it certainly helps to coach in a community — Napa Valley — where everyone understands, and works around, the demands of a the grape. Furthermore, my particular coaching task is made immensely easier by the fact that our kids attend a large Spanish-immersion school, where half of the student body is made up of Hispanic, soccer-crazed virtuosos who were born with a “fútbol” waiting for them in their crib. Despite my lack of coaching prowess, we crush the likes of the little private Lutheran school across town. (And before you accuse me of religious intolerance, just know that tiny St. John's Lutheran cleans house come basketball season).

But I digress.

Harvest was simply beautiful this year. We had a really moderate (read: great) growing season. The grapes came in over a long stretch of ideal, cool, sunny weather. The only surprise was that the crop was huge: 20-30 percent bigger than anyone had forecasted. Rarely do quantity and quality both match up, but the resulting wines from 2012 are superb. Winemakers, vintners, and bankers are *all* grinning.

That large crop made for a lot of work. Pinot is early-ripening, so I've been done for a couple weeks. But as of the writing of this letter, the tanks in the north coast are still full of the wine. Everyone is tired. Nobody has enough barrels. My Cabernet brethren will be scrambling (and lucky) to get their wines to bed before Thanksgiving, which is late indeed. But everyone's quality is very, very high.

This harvest has been such a contrast to 2011, when the wines were exquisite, but the heartbreaking weather inflicted mental anguish, resulted in a miniscule quantity, and the whole crush season was over so quickly. If you do the calendar math, it means I will have a somewhat-limited supply of wine to offer with the next release (the 2011 vintage, to be offered to you in the spring). But in spring of 2014, I'll have a great and sizeable batch of 2012 with which I will finally be able to truly refill your cellars (storm-ravaged or otherwise).

Before I sign off, I'll extend my annual entreaty that if you still have Road 31 in your cellar, please consider pulling it out for the holiday meals. Pinot simply makes the bird taste better. And, I'd be honored to be there in liquid spirit.

For me, raising a glass at Thanksgiving is always a celebration of harvest. But this year, I will also give a nod to the East out of concern for those affected by Sandy. Oh, and I'll be toasting another successful soccer season.

Kent Fortner
Proprietor/Truck-Owner/Road-Warrior/Coach



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