

ROAD 31 WINE CO.

grain-inducing pinot

Dear Truckers (Fall Harvest Update 2020):

I lost the entire vintage to smoke this year.

For context, let me explain my contractual relationship to my vineyards. I don't actually own the land where my grapes are grown; my side of the tracks can't afford such things. It is not an uncommon arrangement in Napa: A wealthy grower owns the vineyard (and gets the tax advantages), and I — as a cash-strapped but scrappy operator and winemaker — enter into a long-term contract to take the fruit every fall. The contract allows me significant control over the farming practices — pruning, watering and harvesting decisions — and thus I have agency over (and am responsible for) the quality and outcome of the harvest. But there is a clause in the contract that says the fruit must be “sound” at the end of the season when I pick my fruit and pay my bill. And “sound” includes ... free of smoke.

2020 was not free of smoke. And I'm not talking about the metaphoric dumpster fire that we're all experiencing this year with the pandemic. In August, a freak dry thunderstorm rolled up the entire state of California, laying down a record number of lightning strikes. When I was a kid back in Kansas, on days threatened by classic Midwest thunderstorms, my friend and I used to take his cat into the bathroom, shut the door to achieve utter darkness, and rub the cat's fur against the grain to create entertaining blue sparks of static electricity (for what's it worth, the cat would purr during all this). That's how I imagine this freak thunderstorm as it rubbed its way up California's drought-ridden forests in 2020.

The last decade has brought wildfires into the calculus of winemaking; scientists say this fire activity is exacerbated by drought due to climate change. The luck so far is that I, as a Pinot guy, have generally dodged this cannonball. The fires and smoke typically come with late-season, off-shore winds that arrive after I have safely harvested, leaving only my Cabernet brethren to fret about their fruit still hanging on the vine. But this year, with this freak August firestorm, we Pinot-heads were thrust into smoke-taint-picking-decision anxiety. I can now report firsthand that it is an utterly terrifying place to be.

Modern technology may have provided us with the likes of Super Glue and iPhone facial recognition, but science has yet to come up with a definitive chemistry test that can determine whether your hanging grapes are actually compromised by smoke. The only true way to find out is to spend the money, time and energy to make the wine and see if it develops some level of the burnt-vinyl and lick-the-ashtay unpleasantness that is “smoke taint.” There is no cure for smoke taint: you can do some temporary filtering for it, but only for the “unbound” aspects of it. “Bound” smoke compounds can become unbound (and unpleasant, sometimes extremely so) later, even years into bottle aging. There are even some unfortunate people with a unique saliva that unbinds smoke taint. Maddening.

So, it is 2020 harvest time. Grapes are ripe. Smoke has been sitting in my vineyards — sometimes very thick smoke — for days at a time. I have the option of walking away from the fruit, but then I have no vintage to make or sell (spiritually and financially difficult). Option two: I can gamble and make the enormous investment of making the wine. It could turn out smoke-free (glory is mine!), but if it turns out smoke-tainted, well ... bankruptcy is a real possibility. There is no insurance I can purchase for this risk. It is a lunacy-inducing decision that has to be made while the fruit is sitting on the vine, quickly approaching over-ripe.



NAPA VALLEY

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Science is not completely useless. It has developed some indicator testing that one can do. A lab in California has identified two chemical “markers” that loosely accompany smoke-tainted wine. But that lab was so overrun by samples this year that results were not going to be available until way past harvest decision time. Even with quick results, some varieties have a baseline amount of these markers even in non-smoke years, so you really need years of contextual data about your varieties, from your appellation, to understand the numbers. The Australians are the leaders in all this, having dealt with annual brush fires for decades: they actually have tests for *thirteen* different markers and reams of baseline data. We in California have a lot of catching up to do. Science has also made some progress in that we now know the age of the smoke makes a big difference: fresh smoke (under 24 hours old) is the real enemy; older smoke, even if thick and lingering, is relatively benign.

And so, as the horrid 2020 August fires and smoke unfolded, I spent hours scrolling through wind and air-quality maps on my iPad, trying to trace and understand the origin, age and intensity of the smoke that was sitting in my vineyards (and at my house). I was pulling grape samples almost daily and sending them to labs both here in California, as well as via Fed-Ex to Australia (yup). I pored over the results. I logged hours of calls with my fellow California winemakers, and even badgered my Australia contacts repeatedly. I took in every data point I could; and eventually made the decision.

The fruit was sure to be compromised. The Truckers deserve better. I would leave it on the vine. I can't tell you how devastating and disorienting that decision was. For the first time in 25 seasons, I didn't spend autumn at the crushpad. I think the emotional void cut more deeply than the future actual financial hit. And, of course, that was all on top of this great 2020 that we're all having.

All that happened two months ago, and I am now starting to recover. Starting. I'm gaining perspective that fretting over spoiled grape juice is a First World problem; many out there are facing way more adversity in 2020 than I. Hell, I should just be grateful that my children are relatively self-winding on their remote Zoom schooling. I'll/we'll survive all this. And the reality is that this 2020 vintage wasn't going to be released until 2022; I have some time to figure this out, and I've already started on a potential substitute wine project to offer to you Truckers at that release. (In truth, I'm really excited about this, but not ready to reveal it just yet.)

I also find great solace in that my 2019 vintage, which I just bottled in August, is truly stellar. Stellar. That will be your offering this upcoming spring, and I can't wait to share it with you. I may have lost 2020, but 2019 is one of the best wines I've ever made.

I know this letter finds you with your own challenges in 2020. I didn't mean to dwell on bad news. But this is the harvest update, and well, that is what happened this harvest. Also, the holidays are coming, and as long-time Truckers know, I love, love, love when someone pops the cork on a bottle of Road 31 and includes me in liquid spirit at their holiday table. Lord knows we all need wine and camaraderie more than ever these days. I'd be particularly honored and appreciative if you'd raise a glass of Road 31 this holiday season. We'll get through 2020 together.

Keep on truckin',

Kent Fortner (Winemaker/Truck-Owner/King of the Road)



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