

ROAD 31 WINE CO.

grin-inducing pinot

Dear Truckers (Fall Harvest Update 2022):

Greetings from Napa, where the grapes are glorious, the dirt is dry, and my in-laws are in town.

Let me start with the in-laws. The full contingent has been landing all week in anticipation of our daughter's cheerleading performance and our senior son's final high school cross country race this weekend. But here's the thing: I'm currently isolating, having tested positive for Covid. Don't cry for me, Argentina, as I've managed to dodge the bullet for two-plus years now. I'm fully vaccinated, and it's mild/medium. Though I guess you can cry a little because a guy can only stay sane alone in the upstairs bedroom for so many days in a row (my closets have never been so organized). Actually, you can shed tears for my wife, as right now she has no domestic help downstairs whatsoever. Also, I like my in-laws; I'm missing out.

Concurrently, our son Owen hit send on his first few college applications this week. My, oh, my. Of course, we're celebrating this moment. But ... how do you make such an expensive/large decision in partnership with a 17-year-old who, while he no doubt worked his academic arse off to earn the right to apply to these schools, still retains a baffling inability to hit the laundry hamper with his dirty socks?

Those are the challenges I'm currently facing. But you know what challenge I'm not facing? Winemaking challenges, that's what! Yup, in addition to a damn-near perfect 2021 Pinot Noir vintage that is in bottle and awaiting release this upcoming March, I have a 2022 vintage that just went to barrel and is aspiring to similar glory. Two vintages without fires, without smoke, without disruption, with classic Napa Valley growing conditions ... ahhhh.

Not that we are free of the threat of fire. It is so, so dry here in California. All the neighborhood's critters (cats both feral and collared, turkeys, squirrels, opossums, and we even have a family of racoons that visit—word is out that my wife is their patron saint) sit in our yard at night waiting for our drip irrigation to activate so they can steal a drink. I was certain we'd have wildfire smoke again this year. But did the wind just blow the right way? Or could it be that so much has already burned that there's not much left? We had a godsend of a small rain early this month, and we need about four-dozen more of those this winter.

A small vineyard shift has occurred between the two vintages I have in house. Stanly Ranch, a venerable source of Carneros Pinot for many top producers, has been the backbone of my wine for decades. But the owners recently put in — gasp — a hotel where there used to be



NAPA VALLEY

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grapes. I knew this was coming, as entitling a hotel takes years, if not decades, in Napa Valley. Moreover, it wasn't the specific blocks that supply my fruit that got turned under. But then I heard of visions of expanding the hotel. So, in 2022 I dipped a toe into a new vineyard that has always intrigued me, just to test the waters.

That vineyard has the awesome name of "Huichica Hills" (pronounced "HOO-ee-CHEE-ka"). If you come tour the caves, you'll hear me say it aloud numerous times, simply because the word rolls enjoyably off the tongue with a beguiling, syncopated melodiousness. But Huichica is also a killer vineyard. A rocky, very steep, south-southeast facing slope, it is located about a mile farther inland from the Napa River than Stanly. It is planted with the classic and proven "Pommard" clone of Pinot Noir, which speaks to my affinity for tradition. So far in the fermenter, it has a vibrancy and depth of dark fruit, as well as an intriguing tea-leaf aroma, that has me very, very excited. It's only 15% of the blend in 2022, but that could increase with future vintages in my quest for more perfect Pinot (and a hedge against wine country resort expansions). Stay tuned.

Let's get on with the thanks in the Thanksgiving season. I'm grateful — and certainly flattered — by the positive response to my one-off Blanc de Noir Sparkling Wine that I offered last year to fill the release cycle of the lost-to-smoke Pinot Noir vintage. I hope, if you have a bottle in the cellar (or your hyper-organized closet), that you will do that bottle — and me — the honor of liberating the cork with your holiday meal. If you are feeling truly adventurous, please do so via saber (Google it) and send me a photo for my wall of fame at the caves. And while Pinot is the ultimate pairing for the holiday bird, I will say that bubbles go with everything: stuffing, cranberries, hot tubs ... even in-laws.

Keep On Truckin',

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kent" followed by a stylized monogram of "F".

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

P.S. I probably should have stated this up front, but this is just a fall harvest update. Look for the annual "offering of the hooch" in the spring.