

# ROAD 31 WINE CO.

*grin-inducing pinot*

Fall Update 2011

Dear Truckers:

Sometimes Mother Nature knocks you rump over teakettle.

I'm starting this fall update later than ever. In fact, I'm not entirely sure I'll get it sent before Thanksgiving, which, as the long-time truckers know, would be heartbreak for me, as I always like to be with you in literary and liquid spirit at that glorious holiday. But truth is, harvest was late, extremely late. And it was hard, extremely hard.

The vintage just finished reminds me of an RV trip my wife and I decided to take our family on last December.

It was a noble idea on paper. We'd rent an RV, drive down to Southern California where my father-in-law lives, and spend a week over the holidays camping right off the beach. See the state, save on hotels, have our own space, and be ... together. Yeah, right.

To start, Mother Nature sends record rain the weeks before Christmas. I head over (in the rain) to get the RV; you know, the kind that has on its side the big picture of the Grand Canyon complete with a perfectly groomed family rafting down the river. I'll offer a tip at this point: Don't select the cheapest RV you can find on the Internet. This beast maxes out at 50mph, it's hard to keep on the road, and it just sorta ... rattles.

Back at home we are loading up, and Owen and Lila (age 5 and 2) are bouncing around the thing like pinballs, excitement meters pegged. Suddenly, I realize our son is soaking wet. It turns out the thin foam mattress above the cab is a giant saturated sponge; the RV place had left the skylight above the bed open during the rains. Four phone calls and as many hours later, and we finally get that replaced and on the road.

I had envisioned all this room for the family to romp around the back as we're driving: stretch out on the bed, grab a snack from the fridge, play some guitar, do jumping jacks. But the reality is very different; surely it isn't legal for your kids to run free in a moving (rattling) RV? Legal or not, we decide it isn't a good idea, so the kids are strapped in like Indy car drivers. And the whole contraption is too loud for anyone to talk to each other, or for the kids to even hear the portable DVD player. The trip ... is ... long. And it's costing us \$180 every time we stop for gas, which we're doing with alarming frequency.

Eventually we maneuver our covered wagon right through the teeth of rain-ravaged Los Angeles rush hour traffic. Nightmare. We'd reserved (and paid a mint for) a camping/parking spot right on the beach, but as we finally pull up in the dark, we're confronted with police tape across the entrance. The entire RV park is under water from the storms. We drive around for an hour until we find another, open RV park. And now another tip: Make sure the first time you set up your rental RV it's not late, pitch-black, and raining. Oh, and splurge on the extended sewer hose. We do eventually settle in, but our daughter falls out of her bed in the middle of the night, I have to sleep with our son to keep him in his bed, and I'm pretty sure my wife doesn't sleep at all.

I'll finish the story in a moment, but first let me tell you about the 2011 harvest.

A simple concept in winegrowing is that great wine is made at the margins. If you play it safe, you can pretty much guarantee OK wine. But to make truly great wine, you have to push to the edges. Specifically with Pinot Noir, you want the coolest, longest growing season possible, with the fruit getting ripe *just* before the fall rains (and rot) set in.



NAPA VALLEY

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2011 started as a glorious potential growing season on paper. First, we had a lot of winter rain (see above RV story). So, the season started out cool, and the rainy spring meant yields were low—both positives for wine quality. But the yang to this yin is that the inoculum for rot was established early. Then, as the season progressed, the temperatures never warmed. My wife wore a fleece pretty much every morning of the summer; you really couldn't even call it a summer. The fog didn't lift for days at a time. The vines just sat out there in that coolness, developing flavors, truly *intense* flavors. It was awesome ... until I wondered if it would get ripe at all. The first week of September—the typical start time for Pinot Noir harvest—came and went. A threat of rain materialized, and it was a race to see what would come first: rains and rot, or magnificent ripeness.

Then, Mother Nature decided to assert herself. A large rainstorm descended in late September. I could have picked just before, but that wine would have been just OK. I decided to wait and go for glorious, knowing I was risking disaster. And this is what happened: walking through the vineyards, after the storm, boots caked with pounds of mud, was one of the worst moments of my enological life. Of the already small crop load, half of it had burst or was rotting before my eyes. It was too wet to harvest, and it didn't look worth harvesting anyway. All the winemakers I know went to the bar, or the therapist, where we bumped into our bankers.

But then something kinda crazy happened. Mother nature cracked a smile. It dried out for 48 hours, and when I returned to the vineyard, I realized that it really was only *half* of the crop that was ruined. Certain parts of the vineyard—even certain parts of some vines—had fruit that looked pretty darn good. Resurrection?

With slightly optimistic grimaces, we sorted the bad fruit off the vines (talk about a painful process—try picking fruit just to drop it on the ground), and let the rest hang. And hang it did, for two, beautiful, sunny, dry weeks.

The half that did make it through? It's unbelievable how good it is. I want to repeat that: it is unbelievable how good the wine is. Truly, it's wine that was made at the ultimate margins: dark, inky, retaining acidity, earthy, beautiful, and powerful at the same time. I can't wait to share it with you. But there is just so little of it. It was a financial disaster, but it is a winemaking triumph.

And thus is the spirit of the ending of my RV story as well. Early the next morning after that hellacious drive, my son poked me in the ribs and pointed out the cheap sliding-glass window. The view was glorious. We'd managed to park in a high, dry spot, with the beach just ten strides away, and the rain had scared everyone else away. We stepped out as a rumpled family to a beautiful sunrise—intense red clouds over a calm Pacific Ocean. We had it all to ourselves. Though certainly tired, I wouldn't have traded that moment for anything. Christmas was, of course, a blast (it always is with kids), and the \$1000 we spent in gas for that dreaded beast of a vehicle is now just a funny footnote to the whole memory. The trip has officially passed into family lore. The kids, well, they want to do it again this Christmas...

So, as you raise a glass this Thanksgiving (or maybe the week after Thanksgiving), realize that every vintage is a story, every story is a journey, the best journeys are adventures, and the best adventures include a fair dose of peril.

Here's to the adventure,

Kent Fortner  
Proprietor/Truck-Owner/Road-Warrior

P.S. As the long-time truckers know, I've no wine left to offer with this fall update; today I present only my drivel. But if you are getting this note, you are on the list for the 2010 release this upcoming spring.



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