

ROAD 31 WINE CO.

grin-inducing pinot

Fall Update 2013

Dear Truckers:

My 94-year-old grandmother just schooled me in Scrabble.

To be sure, her victory is typical of all our matches; Grandma Mary has been a fierce Scrabble competitor since well before I was born. Furthermore, we were playing on her antique board at her doily-covered coffee table in Kansas; she had the home-field advantage. Still, I consider myself a reasonably good wordsmith, and yet she absolutely mopped the floor with me. Laying down “aardvark” off my opening play of “rave,” she chuckled as she scored aloud the 70-point bingo. And that was the closest the score ever got. Grandma is merciless when the tiles come out.

I’m penning this fall update from a truck-stop diner just outside Fredonia, Kansas, my family’s proud town of origin. The “Welcome to Fredonia” sign proclaims a population of 2,000, and my family quips—with some seriousness—that 200 of those are Fortners. I suspect I have distant, unknown cousins sitting in the booths nearby.

I’ve come to see my grandmother, the old homestead, and also to visit the namesake of my wine: Road 31 passes our old family farm on the outskirts of this outpost corner of Kansas. The green truck, given to me by my Grandma Mary when my grandfather died, knew Road 31 well (and certainly handled the bumpy gravel road better than a rented Chevy Aveo).

Typically, the Napa grape crush keeps me too busy to make this Kansas pilgrimage in the fall, but the 2013 harvest was most cooperative in that regard. That said, it was an unruly crush season in other ways.

Early, large, and fast, this year’s harvest turned September into a mad dash. Napa enjoyed an early bud break in spring, and we were blessed with a decent amount of heat during the summer. But, come late August, I was still caught off guard (in denial?) as to the progress of ripening. I was actually trying to plan one last summer family vacation when I realized that the grapes were indeed only days from picking. Then, something about this growing season—we’re still figuring out what—left us with elevated levels of nitrogen in the crushed fruit (typically N2 drops as the autumn wears on). This is generally a good thing, as yeast loves nitrogen. But the nitrogen-fueled, rapid pace of the fermentation, on top of the compressed and early picking schedule, meant a lot of all-nighters in the caves to get all the wines to barrel. At times, my family wondered if I had moved out permanently.

But it all got done, and the results were well worth the effort. The 2013 Pinot Noir is already amazingly soft in barrel.



NAPA VALLEY

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As with previous fall updates, I'm afraid I have no wine to offer you at this time; I am just writing to say hello. The minuscule 2011 vintage that I released last March sold out extremely quickly, and I'll take advantage of this forum to apologize again to those I had to short (which includes my own mother). That wine has been very well-received, and if you haven't started popping the corks, then right about now (Thanksgiving!) is a great time to start. I also look forward to sharing an equally compelling—and much more bountiful—2012 vintage with you (and my mother) next spring. Look for that offering/email then.

I should try to wrap up this letter. In the time it has taken me to write this, I have become the last remaining patron at the restaurant here; the young waitress is wiping the counter in front of me for the third time. And with the dining room empty, I am now even more self-conscious of pecking away on my laptop. We're not in the San Francisco Bay area anymore...

Speaking of technology, I'll leave you with this nugget of wisdom from my grandmother (and she's full of them). I had the thought of getting her an iPad, with a Scrabble app, so that she and I could play long-distance. Given that Grandma didn't drive until she was 60, and she still gets up to change the channel on the TV, I was expecting pushback on the technology. But here was her response: "You mean you wouldn't be with me in the room? ... Why would I want to do that?"

It has taken me a couple hours to digest that incredible insight into the limits—and perhaps even the downfalls—of technology. With that in mind, let me share this: To me, fine wine (and I'm talking about wines of people and place, not wines of industrial process) is about sharing a story of place (the vineyard) and experience (the winemaker and the cellar) through a sip of wine that can transcend distance and time. Given that, I draw immense joy if I can join you at your holiday table in liquid spirit. But I draw even greater joy if Road 31 is part of bringing the people you love around the same table. After all, Scrabble is not just about words, and wine is not just about taste.

Wishing you a bountiful holiday season,

Kent Fortner
Winemaker / Truck Owner



NAPA VALLEY

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