

# ROAD 31 WINE CO.

*grin-inducing pinot*

Dear Truckers (Fall Harvest Update 2019):

Greetings from Napa, where the rains have finally come, so has Frozen 2, and yes, this fall/harvest update is a wee bit delayed.

Many loyal truckers have reached out with considerate and urgent concern asking why this letter wasn't out by Thanksgiving, as is tradition. All is well, I assure you. And I have a whole basket of excuses for the delay: the main culprit being the clown car down at Pacific Gas & Electric, who have been turning our power off in random intervals (more on that in a moment).

Other valid excuses for the delay include requisite attendance of opening weekend of aforementioned Frozen 2 with our 11-year-old daughter Lila. Helping our son Owen—who is navigating his first year of High School—interpret the significance of the happy face a girl drew on his bare leg with a sharpie during lunch hour. And, truth be told, I'm also perfecting a new waffle recipe, as well as having decided, after 45 years of crudely strumming a guitar, to attempt to learn fingerpicking (my poor wife has to endure my practice sessions). All these things take time.

The last fifty excuses for the delay reflect one for every candle on the cake at my recent birthday. Yup, turned a half a century old this year (gulp). Managed to gather a solid cadre of friends and family (and some truckers!) for a memorable shindig. The literal hangover lasted a few days; the spiritual one hung around for weeks. So here I am scrambling to get this letter out by Christmas.

Turning back to PG&E, the word "nimrod" comes to mind. I consulted Websters just to confirm the term's appropriateness, and with fascination I learned the word's original meaning was "a mighty hunter." It was only morphed into the ironic "a dimwitted person" in the 1930's when Looney Tunes applied the term to Elmer Fudd. I like that analogy: PG&E as Elmer Fudd. For sure there are an army of kind and hard-working PG&E employees just doing their jobs, and—truth be told—if I were a PG&E executive, I too would be hesitant to leave the power on in a windstorm knowing that I would be liable for billions in damage if a fire were sparked. But here we were, in the midst of wine-country harvest, and PG&E was seemingly firing their power-outage blunderbuss at random, killing electricity with little or no (or erroneous) notice. Their website, when not crashed, showed wildly inaccurate maps. At one point a PG&E rep contacted us to let us know the power would likely be back up in the next four hours...when actually, the power was already back on. Like I said: Elmer Fudd.

On the home front, we survived it all just fine. Owen and I had to dash to three Home Depots, but we finally found a generator (though the aisle we grabbed it from looked straight out of a zombie apocalypse movie). That covered our fridge, hot H2O heater, phone charging, and we even got the TV and X-box powered up intermittently (serious dad points). "Glamping" seems an accurate description, though it dragged on a few days too many.

But at wineries everywhere, the loss of power is no small thing. Later-harvesting-varietal winemakers throughout wine country were typing away on their computers, while babysitting fermenters, with the drone of the chiller and squeaks of pumps in the background, starting to see the light at the end of the harvest tunnel, when...wham—everything went dark and silent. Faced with the sticky wicket of



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controlling fermentations without electricity, more than one of my winemaking friends pondered the alternate reality had they taken that sales job out of college at the generator-rental company.

I am blessed to be obsessed with Pinot Noir, and unlike my Cabernet brethren/neighbors, my grape of choice ripens early (i.e. before the power outages this year), so I was entirely down to barrel in the caves before the lights went dark, and I saw no impact on quality. And the fires and smoke, while seriously affecting the Santa Rosa area, were always 70 miles and a mountain range away from Napa. Like 2017 I again dodged the bullet. But winemaking really is a team sport, and we were all working overtime to get through harvest this year.

All this overshadowed what was actually a spectacular 2019 vintage. We had this wonderfully moderate summer concluding with a very temperate fall; Pinot Noir grapes were bathing in glorious flavors at harvest time. I'm struck by how friendly the 2019 wines already are. Some years, when the wines are more angular, they will—at this early stage—nearly rip the enamel off your teeth until they get time in barrel. But these 2019 wines quickly settled into the caves with remarkably few knees and elbows. The vintage is already beguiling.

I'm also excited about 2018, which just went into bottle and will be released this upcoming spring (for those of you who know my cycle, there is no wine to be offered with this fall update, so you can stop reading now if I'm boring you). 2018 is one of these "it's so pretty" up front, and then "wow-the-power" on the back end; we got ripening at lower alcohols in this remarkable year. It is akin to the 2002, which I actually had the pleasure of tasting just a couple weeks ago...

Fiftieth birthdays definitely prime the nostalgia pump, and as winemakers are wont to do, I took the opportunity to pull some bottles out of the deep recesses of the library cellar. One relic was a 2002, which was only the second vintage of Pinot I ever crafted (240 cases in all). I had little expectation of it being even drinkable, and indeed the cork disintegrated upon contact with the corkscrew. But, after some ninja-level sommelier maneuvers, we got glasses poured, and lo and behold, it was glorious (if I do say so myself). I always had a hunch that my vineyards and style of Pinot would be long-lived, but even I wouldn't have guessed the wines would survive—alas thrive—15+ years. It was a fantastic revelation, and I'm sharing it with you not to brag (well, maybe just a little) but to let you know that if you have some really old vintages still in your cellar, don't give up on them.

Ultimately, the overarching theme of 50 years of reflection, for me, is gratitude. I am bummed I didn't get this note out by Thanksgiving, as I have so much for which to "give thanks." But as the holidays approach, I'll say this: I'm grateful that I've gotten to make a living shepherding yeast as they convert grape juice into wine. This was my 23<sup>rd</sup> vintage I just finished up. And that is made possible by you all—the Truckers—who have purchased wine year after year. I would be thrilled to be a part of your holiday in liquid spirit if you'd allow a bottle of Road 31 a spot on your banquet table.

I look forward to sharing the 2018 with you in the Spring,

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



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