

ROAD 31 WINE CO.

grin-inducing pinot

Dear Truckers (Fall Harvest Update 2021):

It's amazing how glorious "normal" can be.

What a difference a year makes. This time last year, I was writing of Covid and California wildfires blocking out all spiritual and literal sunlight. My entire vintage had been lost to the smoke. Now, with a little distance from it all, I can confirm that fall 2020 was the nadir of both my COVID-19 crisis as well as my 25-year winemaking career.

Fast forward to today and I feel remarkably bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Sure, I have yet to find a mask-and-reading-glasses combination that doesn't result in fogged lenses; a two-by-four at Home Depot costs \$117; and last week Safeway was out of stock on Grape Nuts (Grape Nuts?!). But I find myself curiously unaffected by such hardships. Thankfulness is coming easy this Thanksgiving.

Part of my buoyancy is family-related. Our kids somehow seem to have emerged from the Covid madness reasonably unscathed (so far). Owen, now an intrepid junior in high school, is holding down his first part-time job (washing golf carts!) and is learning the finer points of pain and suffering via the cross-country running team (my favorite motto: "Our sport is your sport's punishment."). Lila, now a lovely – though yes, at times capricious – 13-year-old, is ecstatic that she just landed her "round off, back handspring, back tuck" on the gymnastics floor. (Truth be told, I'm a little unsure what exactly that means, as I was brought up learning the finer points of baseball's infield-fly-ball rule, not gymnastics; Janet and I simply clap enthusiastically at all moments when Lila is competing.) Both kids are pursuing their sports – and academics – like warriors. All in all, they are normal, even self-winding kids, navigating a normal youth. Glorious.

Getting back to wine, I find myself ecstatic at the "normal" nature of this past (2021) harvest. Though made-for-TV flames burned up the West Coast yet again this summer, and the pesky drought continues, Mother Nature apparently hath both fury and fairness. After multiple years of ravaging Napa, none of the fires nor smoke reached the valley this year. I overheard another winemaker quip, "There was nothing left to burn around here." And there is some truth to that. But the breezes blew in off the Bay all season, pushing the smoke towards our neighbors to the east (sorry Nevada, Idaho, Utah ... New York). The growing season was long, with moderate temperatures; harvest was unrushed; and the fruit picked out beautifully. I have 41 barrels of damn-near-perfect 2021 Pinot Noir sitting in the caves for release to you in a year and a half.

The other winemaking joy I have is the state of the *replacement* for the lost 2020 vintage. Having sacrificed that Pinot vintage to the smoke gods, I wasn't going to have any wine to offer you at the upcoming traditional spring release (March 2022). That was a tragedy on so, so many levels (battle cry: "No thirsty truckers!"). But as I hinted in letters before, I hatched a plan, and now I'm excited – giddy, really – to announce that plan has come together.

~ over please



N A P A V A L L E Y

First, some further background and explanation. There truly was no quality Pinot to be had in 2020. When I realized my own vineyards were lost, and even though part of my secret sauce is that I harvest the same familiar vineyards year in and year out, I scrambled and looked as far as Santa Barbara and even the Willamette Valley for possible replacement grapes. Pinot Noir, typically impossible to purchase out of contract, was suddenly widely available and remarkably cheap on the spot market: a tell-tale sign that problems were afoot everywhere. I walked and tasted and tested probably a dozen vineyards, and they all had the unmistakable signs of smoke taint. (Side note: Some wineries did make 2020 Pinot Noir, and a few even managed to make some without smoke, so I don't want to bring hell-fire damnation down upon the entire vintage ... but based on the finished wines that I've sampled, buyer beware.) I recognized that I simply couldn't make a worthy Pinot Noir in 2020. Piling on the devastation was the realization that it was my 20th vintage of Road 31, and I wasn't even going to get to make it!

But then: the epiphany. It came amidst a long bike ride (cycling being my preferred form of thinking, therapy and now escape from the Covid-cocoon). I was pedaling through the unpicked vineyards of Carneros when the thought struck: There was some Pinot, from my same vineyards/areas, but from *previous* vintages, cellared in the form of base wines to be made into *sparkling* wine.

Ooh ... I've always wanted to craft a sparkling wine. Champagne is magic. Magic is just what we need here. And I didn't have to travel to Santa Barbara or Willamette; I just had to visit a different year.

I went to talk to my friends and neighbors who had these base wines sitting "en tirage" (the making of sparkling is a really long process, these are 2017 wines). I tasted extensively, and eventually persuaded them to sell me the raw base wines to make my first ever Road 31 *méthode champenoise*. I have spent the last 12 months working through tasting, disgorgement, more tasting, dosage, even more tasting ... and label design. It was a learning curve, but I loved every minute of it (did I mention the tasting?).

So, this upcoming spring, when I would typically be sharing with you my Road 31 Pinot Noir, I will instead be offering you my first ever **Road 31 Carneros Blanc de Noir Sparkling Wine**. Yes, there will be a gap in your standard Road 31 Pinot Noir vertical in your cellar, but I'm going to fill it with glorious bubbles, made from Pinot, that celebrate my 20th year of making Road 31.

I can't wait.

Well, I guess I can wait, because in a few days we have Thanksgiving, my favorite holiday. And for me, that includes liberating old vintages of Road 31 Pinot Noir from the cellar, all the while knowing that my friends, the Truckers, are doing the same all over the country. I'd be honored if we could join in liquid spirit at our respective holiday tables.

I hope this letter finds you similarly rebounded from Covid, equally optimistic for the future, and gathering with loved ones for glorious/normal holiday celebrations. Look for the special offering of bubbles in the spring.

Cheers,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kent" followed by a stylized "F" and "D" below it.

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