

Marcassin

July 25, 2011

2006 Marcassin Three Sisters Pinot Noir
2006 Marcassin Blue Slide Ridge Pinot Noir
2006 Marcassin Vineyard Pinot Noir

Dear Loyal (We Hope) Marcassin Customer,

I. The News

Because it is now almost exactly three months since this letter was supposed to be in the mail, there is neither time nor space for all the news fit to spit. But there are a few happenings that have occurred since the last communication that are too important to ignore.

First and foremost, after getting the cover for the “who is America’s Greatest winemaker” issue (7/13/10), Helen received the Wine Spectator’s Distinguished Service Award – the 30th. She thus joined Julia Child, her heroine even before having the title of winemaker, as one of the only five women recipients. And, unless one can imagine Phillipine de Rothschild or Corrine Mentzelopoulos or Joan Dillon pulling a hose or doing a pumpover, Helen becomes the first woman actually doing winemaking to be given the award. In any case, a pretty big deal, so off we went for the first and probably the last time to Las Vegas for the Grand Awards dinner on Halloween eve where we joined, at the head table, inter alia, Marvin Shanken publisher and host and the Prince of Piedmont, the 1997 winner Angelo Gaja. Marvin paid the ultimate compliment of asking for a larger allocation of Marcassin, and he and I discussed the difficulties of extricating oneself from the bunkers at St. Andrews (television had captured Marvin attempting to do exactly that at the last Dunhill Cup.) Then, Thomas Mathews had some very nice things to say about Helen’s career accomplishments, and, to a spontaneous (really) standing ovation, Marvin presented her with the plaque. Helen graciously accepted, saying that she hoped like Julia we all got better with time and that our best wines were still to come. All in all a fairly heady experience for the Calistoga recluses.

Secondly, after more than twenty years of making wine under our own Marcassin label, we are at last (4/1/11 – yes, April Fool’s Day) moved into our own brand new winery designed by us, for us and us alone (well, maybe space for a few barrels for our hands on guy Matt). The guiding principles naturally were quality, quality, and quality, and the particular way we grow and make wine. This may sound simple and look simple, but it embodies a lifetime of learning and reflection (not to mention being exposed to the less than ideal circumstances of clients and colleagues). Since the building is basically a (well-proportioned) box, and since I drew the floor plan, I won’t say that it’s beautiful, except in the never-to-be-ignored sense of form following function, which should make it easier year after year to realize fully the quality potential of the vineyard and vintage. And there is a work of art that pulls the project together—a latticed redwood door on a copper ground with the emblematic Marcassin M, also in copper, fabricated by Sonoma County artist Bruce Johnson. So we are happily ensconced and ready for our 22nd harvest.

Finally, it has been a cold and wet spring – we were in fact quite fortunate to get the winery completed. There were more than 22 inches of rain in March, and again fortunately, budbreak did not occur until the very end of March. Happily the soils and subsoils at Marcassin Vineyard are basically highly fractured rock and therefore super well-drained—they’ll never be water logged and we can always get into the field for necessary viticultural operations. In case Randal Graham is still wondering, this kind of drainage and not “minerality infusion” is the role of rocks in high quality viticulture. Then in the first week of April there were frost scares (32.1° F on 4/7 @ 6:45 a.m.), but we escaped and I went back to watching The Masters, my long-standing symbol of the beginning of spring (green, green, I want you green). Tiger played himself in on Friday, out on Saturday, back in on Sunday morning (32 on the front!), and out again in the afternoon. Will he get to the 18 majors? 6 Masters? What once seemed so certain now seems to be fading fast, but Tiger may just be playing rope a dope

with us. This being the 25th anniversary of Jack Nicklaus's sixth in 1986, there were lots of flashbacks, even to his fifth in 1975 when Jack broke Weiskopf's heart for the umpteenth time. There was the great Tom Watson, Jack's playing partner, walking up the 18th with a 2" white belt (these were all over the place in 2011), golf's special sartorial gift that I've always blamed on Johnny Miller. Tom is a Ralph Lauren endorser, I think from the beginning of his career, so how did this happen? Bad taste isn't dead, it's only sleeping (see below), and seemingly, can always be revived.

II. The 2006 La Tâche (#04636)—Not Your Standard Rant

When we first presented our '06's to Robert Parker, we also showed him the '06 Chevalier Montrachet from Domaine Leflaive¹ and the '06 La Tâche from the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti.² As noted in the last mailer, the Leflaive was "thin, acidic, botrytised and not good even for a Macon." It was a paltry \$475/bottle from a friendly retailer (also a Marcassin customer) who basically gave me his wholesale price. The La Tâche, a mere \$975/bottle, was if anything worse. Here's what Robert Parker wrote (Wine Advocate, #187, p24)

"John Wetlaufer and Helen Turley served it [their '06 Marcassin Vineyard Pinot Noir] next to a 2006 DRC La Tâche, which was almost undrinkable (stemmy, metallic, frightfully tart because of green acid, and obviously made from underripe fruit) and was dwarfed by the prodigious Marcassin."

Now even though one doesn't serve one's own best Pinot to Mr. Parker with Burgundy's supposed best without, however reasonably,³ expecting that Marcassin Vineyard would hold its own, one really doesn't anticipate that it would eclipse, or, to use Parker's word, "dwarf" the La Tâche. But La Tâche was definitely not good, and this is a somewhat unsettling result. I have in fact struggled with what, if anything, I wanted to say about it. And lest, dear reader, you might think this is a case of "California palates" or anti-Burgundy bias on either Mr. Parker's or our part, you should know that nearly 40 years ago 1962 La Tâche was the very first great Pinot we ever tasted, that we drank over a few decades, an anniversary case of 1966 with pleasure, and that bottles of 1978, 1980, and 1985 have been tasted or consumed without apoplexy or outrage. Mr. Parker, both in a vertical reported in issue #100 of The Wine Advocate and in his GWEW from 2005, rated the 1999 and the 1990 the perfect 100 points. Since 2006 is rated a very good Burgundy vintage (91 points in the 5/31/10 issue of Wine Spectator), and since "consistency" is a consensus criterion for judging an estate to be a "great domaine,"⁴ this tasting of the '06 La Tâche raises a whole host of troublesome questions.⁵ Most of these, naturally, will have to be reserved for "the book." But, as Mr. Parker notes, our bottle #04636 "was obviously made from underripe fruit," and I promised in the last mailer at least a preliminary explanation of why the Burgundians struggle so with ripeness,⁶ and here it is.

III. Burgundy and the Rarity of Ripeness⁷—Myths Die Hard

1) Though often referred to as a "cool climate" for viticulture, Burgundy has a continental climate (hot⁸ summers and cold winters) and, because of latitude, a short growing season—there are few sunshine hours and "degree days" after mid-September. There is also a 40 year average of 16.89" of rain during the growing season, which at 4,000 vines/acre translates into approximately 112 gallons/vine/season. And they call this "dry farming" (more like uncontrolled irrigation to the max).

2) Because of summer rain and heat, there is vegetatively vigorous growth in Burgundy vineyards, even in grand cru like Batard-Montrachet and Romanée-Conti itself (again take a look at the photo of "Heaven on Earth" on pp. 46 and 47 of the 5/31/10 Wine Spectator). Carbohydrate (photosynthetic assimilate) partitioning or allocation, which is mediated by phytohormones, strongly favors vegetative growth points over fruiting structures. These, i.e., vegetative growth points, include growing tips, shoots, lateral growing tips and shoots, and juvenile leaves, including young leaves on lateral shoots. At veraison⁹ vegetative sinks in actively growing vines dominate clusters, especially the grape skins, which are a weak sink for the carbohydrate necessary for biosynthesis of aromas, flavors, and color.

3) Burgundy vigneronns "manage" vegetative vigor by hedging and tipping with their over-the-row tractor as many as four to five times during the growing season.¹⁰ This hedging and tipping promotes lateral growth (energy sinks) and reduces the number of fully sized adult leaves (energy sources) on fruiting shoots to

±12 leaves.¹¹ It also places those leaves within the canopy¹² where they are no longer functioning (performing photosynthesis) at full capacity. This is why at harvest their canopies look like short, thick (dense) box hedges.

4) Burgundy vignerons actually prune too short: spurs with 2 nodes and canes of ±6 nodes for ±8 shoots on the whole vine (pruned "Guyot simple"), plus any non-thinned double shoots and laterals. With the rain and heat during the growing season, this is in fact too few growth points, and the shoots growing from them are too vigorous. The internodes on these shoots are thus too far apart, and the potential canes for the following year will have too few nodes. The pruning and management thus becomes a self-reinforcing practice resulting in excessive vigor, especially at veraison. They would be much better off, and their vines more in balance, if they were to lay out ±12 node canes of ~33" on which they could perform early shoot thinning¹³ to achieve 6-8 well-positioned shoots with a canopy more open to light and air movement¹⁴ and less prone to vegetative vigor. It is probably the case they do not have an adequate and adequately trained labor supply to perform these annual viticultural operations in a timely fashion.

5) Virus—both fan leaf and leafroll virus—despite significant replanting with virus-free clones, remains a problem, and both viruses inhibit full, uniform, and timely fruit maturity.

One might wonder why they would want to add vegetative and phenolic material, viz, the stems of the whole clusters (stems and berries), to their fermentors, thus further exaggerating the impression of underripeness, but this and other winemaking questions and practices will have to wait.

All right, enough with the viticultural diatribe. There are, believe it or not, things they could do to better their chances of achieving truly ripe fruit, but this topic too will have to be saved for "the book". Let us not forget that Hogan didn't write his book ("The Modern Fundamentals") until he was almost through competing. So upward and onward with the arts and, specifically, onward to our '06 Pinot Noirs.

IV. The '06 Marcassin Pinot Noirs

Like the '06 Marcassin Chardonnays these Pinots are already drinking very nicely: As I said in the Chardonnay mailer, there is no reason for even the Calvinists among you to delay gratification, although the wines, especially the Marcassin Vineyard, should continue to gain complexity and bottle bouquet. All three Pinots have beginning notes of maturity with nevertheless an underlying strong primary fruit component. To us the Three Sisters is the most drinkable and, if not powerful, immediately fragrant and a delicious drink. As usual the Blue Slide, a wonderful deep dark garnet, is broad and rich, redolent of blue and black fruits. And the Marcassin Vineyard, though at first reticent, is the most complex, penetrating, and persistent, possessing floral notes, (peonies) scents of roots (sassafras), and a long cleansing finish. In short, these are terrific wines for what most reviewers regard as a B+ vintage for California Pinot (89 in the 9/30/09 Wine Spectator). Here's what Robert Parker wrote in issue #187 of the Wine Advocate about all three wines:

"The 2006 Pinot Noir Three Sisters Vineyard exhibits a dark color... spicy, earthy, forest floor, smoked duck, plum sauce notes, and a fleshy style" (95);

"Extraordinary blueberry, raspberry, floral and forest floor aromas jump from the glass of the 2006 Pinot Noir Blue Slide Ridge. This cuvée always possesses a fabulous texture, a full bodied mouthfeel, and superb concentration" (97);

"The star of this trio is the 2006 Marcassin Pinot Noir Estate... A multi-dimensional wine of exquisite intensity, it offers up notes of rose petals, wild strawberries, cherries, blueberries, and blackberries. Its floral component, fabulous concentration, awesome texture, and expansive, broad mouthfeel make for a Pinot Noir bordering on perfection" (99).

We should note that Mr. Parker's notes were in the context of tasting Marcassin Vineyard with the '06 Ta Tâche and before re-tasting with the '07 Marcassin Vineyard Pinot, which we regard as our best to date (if not perfect, and we're not sure if "perfection" has any meaning here since we're always trying to make it better). But we're more than happy with his reviews and scores.

As tasting and talking about the wonderful world of wine with Robert Parker is one of the pleasures of our business, we're sad to report that he's giving up, apparently, his annual visit. Perhaps we can get him at least to come to the new winery, maybe for a Marcassin vertical from magnum. If not, au revoir and bon chance.

V. Tender Loving Care and What's Coming

Our long-standing customers know the drill but some of you are or will be new additions to the mailing list and haven't yet had it drummed into you. Our wines are neither filtered nor fined, and, in fact, only racked once shortly before bottling. They consequently have a very light sediment that can affect appearance and taste. To give the wine its natural clarity and finesse, and to obtain the most pleasure, just observe the following simple rules.

1) After you receive the wine, gently shake the deposit off the cork, and store the wine in a cool (<65°F) dark place on its side, ideally with the top of the bottle at a slight upward angle and the label up so that the sediment settles at the back of the bottle.

2) At least 3 or 4 days (ideally a week or two) before drinking, set the bottle at a 25° angle so that the sediment settles completely in the punt.

3) When serving either carefully decant or pour in one pour without agitating. This will leave about ½ oz. of "dregs" to be consumed by you when your guests aren't watching because you can't resist.

To those of you who have read or read about billionaire (Microsoft) scientist Nathan Myhrvold's recommendations that you put your young red wines in the blender before drinking, we can only say that we're guessing he hasn't tasted many unfined and unfiltered young Pinots, or he can't taste, or both. As we haven't plunked down the purchase price (~\$600), you're on your own for deciding whether to buy his cookbook ("Modernist Cooking," 5 volumes or more). He also tells you that your wine glass doesn't matter for taste, and that you should use "whatever you think is pretty." Even though he's a billionaire scientist, he's also wrong about this. And even though Riedel has never given us a peso for endorsement nor even a free glass, we're still recommending the Riedel Sommelier (yes somm) Burgundy (yes Burgundy) glass if you want the best from your Marcassin Pinot.

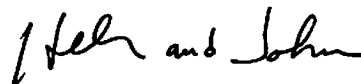
Given that we have (way too many) bills for the new winery and the new harvest, we're asking that you please, respond ASAP. We do have enough wine for this offering that we can offer a small amount to the waiting list, which we will do roughly 3 weeks after this letter goes out: To avoid disappointment, you really must respond promptly.

We intend to offer the '07 Chardonnays early autumn without a viticultural discourse, so do your fine-wine budget planning now. As we have indicated above, 2007 is, among many outstanding vintages, and unqualifiedly great vintage for Marcassin and hence you'll want to stay onboard.

We'll ship the '06 Pinots as soon as it's cool enough (late September?) and the '07 Chardonnays probably a month later.

As always, please know that we are very grateful for your support because it allows us to do what we love.

In vino bonitas,



Matt, Jeanne, Lynzie, Jaime, Obdulio
and Roscoe.
(the Marcassin gang)

Notes

¹ Chevalier Montrachet is generally still regarded as the best wine from the best white domaine in Burgundy, although Mr. Parker and I might regard Coche-Dury as more consistent and a source of higher highs. In fact, Coche's Meursault-Perrières, a premier cru, is often better than his grand cru Corton-Charlemagne. So much for terroir and its reflection in the Burgundian classification.

² Romanée-Conti is generally still regarded as the best red (Pinot Noir) producer in the Côte d'Or, the world's benchmark for Pinot Noir as the Wine Spectator cover (5/31/10) refers to it, and La Tâche is also generally regarded as the qualitative equal of Romanée-Conti itself, even though, presumably because of scarcity, Romanée-Conti is three times the price of La Tâche at release (e.g., \$3,000/bottle versus \$1,000/bottle for the '06). Robert Parker says "I have always felt the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti's single most compelling wine is La Tâche rather than Romanée-Conti", The World's Greatest Wine Estates (WGWE), Simon and Shuster, 2005, p. 273.

³ For the record, we did this tasting twice, once blind three weeks before Mr. Parker's visit (no surprises please) with the same result. The tasting with Parker was indeed of bottle number 04636 of 22,140, and it literally was undrinkable – more than half of it remains (with original cork) in my study. The hope that the Marcassin Vineyard Pinot would show well was based at least partially on the fact that the average score of Parker's ratings for 1996–2007 (including every vintage) was just under 97 (96.75), while La Tâche 1996–2002 (excluding one presumes the mediocre 1998 and 2000 vintages) averages just below 95 points (94.75). (These averages have been computed from scores in both the Wine Advocate and WGWE.)

⁴ See Remington Norman and Charles Taylor MW, The Great Domaines of Burgundy (GDB) 3rd ed., Sterling, 2010, p.9: "In deciding who to include [in this volume], there have been two overriding considerations: first, absolute, quality – the ability to produce something especially fine in its class; and, second, consistency – that dimension of year-on-year excellence that give one the impression that a bottle from this domaine... would rarely disappoint" (my emphasis). See also Parker, WGWE p.218 "The producers profiled in the following chapter are Burgundy's finest, and they have proven this time and time again, even in difficult vintages [my emphasis]. They continually transcend what Mother Nature throws their way, making compelling wines in both great and mediocre vintages."

⁵ Here I won't attempt to list, let alone address, the most important of these, and I won't discuss vinification issues (especially "whole cluster" fermentation) at all. But, to give you some idea of their seriousness, I will mention a few concerns that jumped immediately to my mind:

- i. Bottle variation. We are aware that after the (awful) 1983 vintage, the domaine (i.e., DRC) says that, to avoid bottle variation, it no longer bottles wines from the barrel barrel-by-barrel, and in fact bottles 5 or 6 barrel ("mini") "assemblages" (see Norman, GDB, 2nd ed., p.92, and Parker, WGWE p.273. But, inasmuch as there can be in a given vintage ± 75 barrels of La Tâche (=1875 cases), that would still be ± 12 bottlings. Are "we" (especially those reviewers that gave the wine high marks) tasting the "same" wine? And if we are tasting the wine knowing that it is La Tâche, and that it will be approximately \$1,200/btl., does that influence the score? Are we British wine merchants, or closet British wine "critics," that wish to continue being welcome at the domaine?
- ii. Fermentor variation. Do the bottlings represent different fermentors and how is it decided which fermentors to blend from barrel, given that there isn't one total assemblage? Further, do grapes from different parts of the vineyard (consistently) go into different fermentors? And are there any fermentors that are ever "declassified" (into the 1er cru Vosne Romanée, for example), or deselected and sold in bulk?
- iii. Picking variation. Are different parts of La Tâche picked on different dates (at different potential alcohols, acids, and/or pH's)? We are told that preharvest sampling is "very, very, serious" (see Norman, GDB, 2nd ed. P. 91), but we're also told (ibid.) that it's only done "once per week." (At Marcassin, near harvest we sample every 2 or 3 days and, in our experience, grapes can go from near ripe to ripe in 24 hours or less.) Does the domaine have the necessary flexibility to schedule harvest within 24 hours of sampling?
- iv. At what time and temperature does the domaine stop harvesting grapes?
- v. Is the domaine, as they indicated to Robert Parker (Burgundy, Simon & Shuster, 1990) p. 148, still a "notoriously late harvester" (at full ripeness)? The third edition of The Great Domaines of Burgundy seems to indicate that Aubert de Villaine may have taken the "dim somm" turn because he thinks "sur-maturité is a catastrophe in Burgundy" (GDB, p. 14). This, in turn, raises the question of whether a taste for underripeness,

- however unnatural, can be learned, a sort of false connoisseurship (British?) favoring the acidic, the hard, and the painful. Given the ongoing pronouncements of the dim somms and their apologists in the wine press (names available on request), we'd have to say "yes," that like "white belts" bad taste can never be wholly beaten down. We, however, remain of the school (first described to me by Haut Brion's Jean Delmas) that great wine, however complex, always gives pleasure, whether it is young, middle aged, or old
- vi. Are there significant differences in ripening that correspond (consistently) to environmentally different (e.g. soil and elevation) differences within the vineyard? We know about the inclusion of the premier cru les Gaudichots in 1936, but what about the "thin, stony limestone of the top" ($\pm 300\text{m}$) and the "deeper, heavier clays at the bottom of the slope" ($\pm 255\text{m}$) (Wine Spectator, 5/31/10, p.65)? Do these differences, as they do everywhere else in the viticultural world, give differences in vegetative vigor and hence ripening? Take a look at the picture of the La Tâche on p.66 in this same 5/31/10 issue of Wine Spectator. Even ignoring the young vines nearest the gate, there is a little foreground swale and slope behind it to the west with an obvious vigor difference. Do the grapes all go into the same pot?
 - vii. Are these DRC "Monopoles" (La Tâche and Romanée-Conti) really "Heaven on Earth" and "the world's benchmark(s) for Pinot Noir"? (Wine Spectator, 5/31/10) What is the relation between price and wine quality? (Believe me I know something about the cost of developing and farming vineyards for wines of the highest quality, and am of course saving the topic for "the book", but this is not quite the same question.) Is the market always right and did you sleep through the bursting bubble? Are the Emperor's new clothes truly splendid?

⁶ And it is ripeness that is the point. As Mr. Parker wrote on his web site post of 3/9/11, "high quality producers want fully ripened fruit... not over-ripe... not under-ripe... it takes no great skill or risk to harvest a vineyard too early when the fruit is under-ripe because the goal is "lower alcohol."

⁷ Ripeness is not simply a matter of sugar being accumulated and sequestered in the pulp of the berry (see John Gladstones, Viticulture and Environment, Wine Titles, 1992, p. 50. However difficult it may be to formulate analytical criteria for ripeness, it is also clear that fruit ripeness is a necessary precondition for richness of flavor and textural suppleness of wines made from that fruit, as well as a condition of intensity, presence, persistence, and depth of aroma, flavor, and (appropriate) color. I assume here that richness (primarily from the vineyard and viticulture) and finesse (primarily from winemaking) is the governing aesthetic for great wines from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

⁸ "Hot" especially in good vintages like 1990. The 40-year average daily mean temperature in Dijon for June, July, and August is in fact slightly warmer than in Napa. See John Gladstones, ibid. pp. 202 and 247.

⁹ There is recent evidence that actively growing shoots at veraison are associated with vegetative flavors in the wine.

¹⁰ One actually needs at least 15-17 fully functioning adult leaves (~1m of vertically positioned and displayed canopy) to ripen 1-2 small clusters per shoot.

¹¹ In 1990 during our late July, early August (i.e., beginning of veraison) visit to Burgundy growers were in fact hedging and tipping for the fourth and fifth time. This (1990) was (i) a low rainfall year, and (ii) still the best vintage of my more than 40 year experience of Burgundy wines.

¹² Leaves in the shade (within the canopy) senesce prematurely and export potassium to the fruit on the same path that a healthy mature leaf exports carbohydrate. This leads to acidification of the wine in an effort to remediate elevated pH from potassium to the fruit.

¹³ Early (pre-bloom) shoot thinning at ~2 ½" of growth is devigorating.

¹⁴ This in turn reduces rot and mildew pressure.