

Norm Roby

A new pedigree



Trying to turn Petite Sirah into a noble variety with a cult following may be overly ambitious, but Lou Foppiano of Sonoma County is giving it his best shot. Encouraged by recent DNA research that concludes what is called Petite Sirah in California is a clone of Syrah and Peloursin, Foppiano Vineyards is hosting its first annual celebration of this often maligned but indomitable grape variety.

Until recently, Petite Sirah was assumed to be Duriff, a minor French variety. With that sort of unexciting profile, its acreage, like its customer base, steadily declined. But after publishing her findings on Zinfandel and other varieties, Dr Carole Meredith, a highly respected scientist at UC Davis, also reported that Petite Sirah is not genetically Duriff. Knowing it has Syrah genes in its make-up was enough to get Foppiano energised. His winery has been making Petite Sirah since 1964. Back then, Petite Sirah was a key component in most of the better red jug wines. Then in the 1970s Ridge, Stags Leap Vineyard, Concannon, Parducci, Robert Mondavi Winery and Freemark Abbey joined Foppiano with varietally labelled Petite Sirah. The better examples from the 1970s were inky black, and were usually immense, mouthfilling reds with huge tannins. Twenty-five years ago, Petite Sirah was a rising star. Then real Syrah appeared and Petite Sirah was said to be Duriff. Before long, its fans switched to Zinfandel, and later Syrah.

With its mysterious origin and special place in California history, Zinfandel had a great story to fuel the fan club. As Duriff, Petite Sirah simply lacked sizzle. But now with the Syrah connection there is a story to tell. Ironically, DNA studies by Meredith show that Zinfandel is native to Croatia (as the Crljenak variety). This seems to have zapped the enthusiasm of many Zin producers.

Meanwhile, those who remained loyal to Petite Sirah can share Foppiano's optimism. Other leading producers include Fife, Barra, Hidden Cellars and Parducci in Mendocino. In Napa, look for Turley, Biale, Madrigal, Rockland and Stag's Leap; in the Central Coast, Eos Estate Winery makes a stunning Petite Sirah from Paso Robles.

Norm Roby is a co-author of the best-selling New Connoisseur's Handbook of Californian Wine.

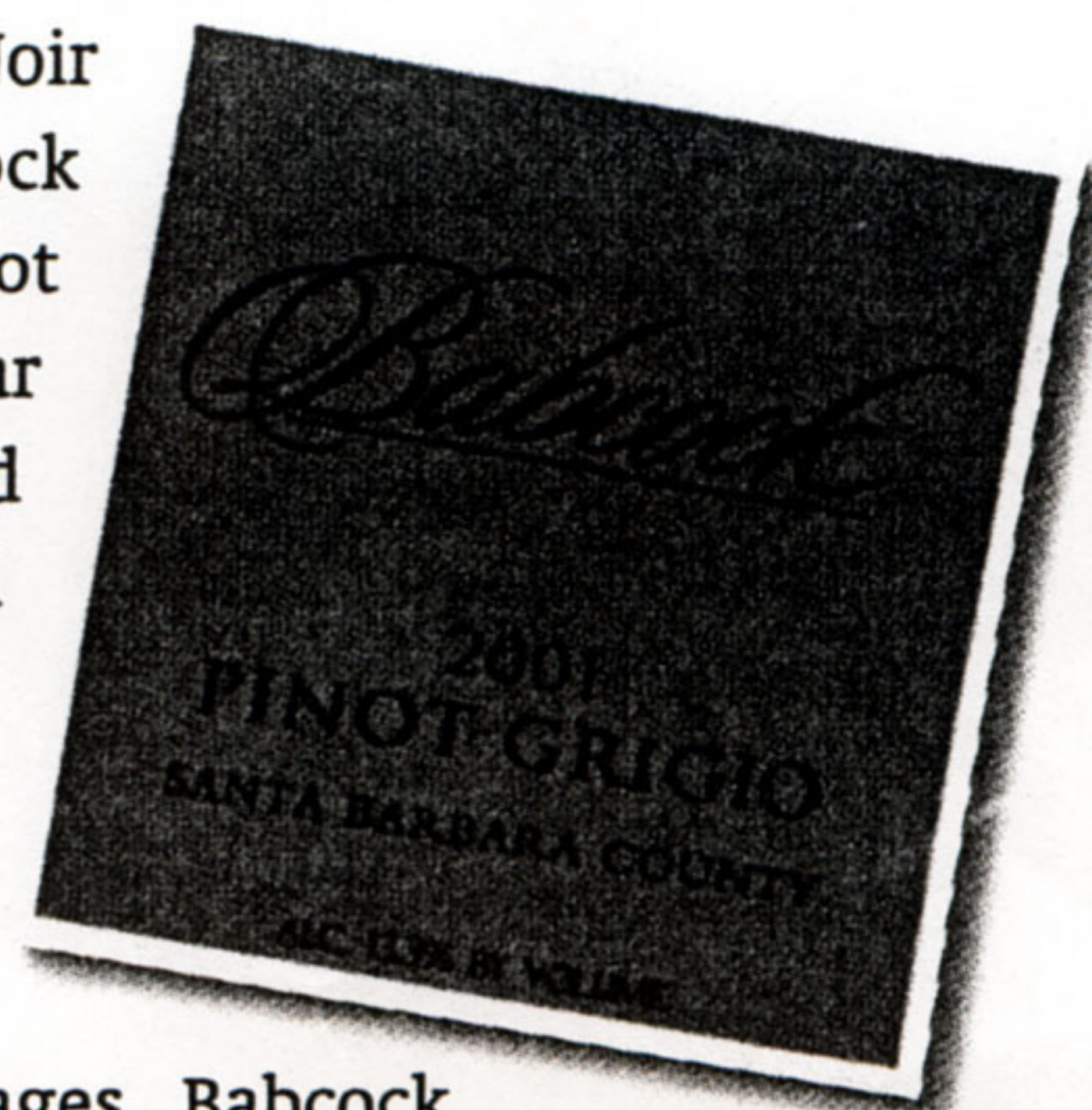
Norm Roby's wines of the month

BEST WHITE

BABCOCK WINERY, PINOT GRIGIO, SANTA BARBARA COUNTY 2001

Traditionally known for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, Bryan Babcock began experimenting with Pinot Gris about six years ago. Each year he becomes more confident and now feels that the vineyard used 'is just starting to hit its stride'. One taste of this 2001 rendition backs him up. After allowing the fruit to reach slightly higher maturity than in previous vintages, Babcock fermented all the juice in stainless steel. Only 30% saw malolactic fermentation which may explain the unusually crisp and bright impression on the palate. Oak ageing was modest with only 20% of the blend spending two months in barrel. The minimal cellaring treatment has preserved lovely fruit and intricate, multi-layered flavours. The aroma is a mélange of flowers, lime, minerals and ripe apple. Smooth in texture, the wine has lively flavours of spice, anise and white peach. Enjoy over the next year.

\$13.50; US MARKETS



BEST RED

BEAULIEU VINEYARD, ZINFANDEL, NAPA VALLEY 2000

To its credit, Beaulieu Vineyard seems determined to focus on Zinfandel as a mealtime companion, not a showstopper. Displaying uncommon wine-making restraint, this wine is a textbook example of what Zinfandel is meant to be – deliciously fruity, accessible, big but well mannered. Much like the successful 1999, Beaulieu's 2000 Zin is loaded with forthright varietal character. Deep in colour, it unfolds in your glass to reveal concentrated blackberry fruit and spice. As it evolves, it reveals subtle notes of liquorice, lovely spice and black pepper. On the palate it has the richness and bravado one expects, and an unexpected velvety texture and good acidity. Its lively flavours are dominated by spice, ripe plum and pepper. With subtle oak tones, it finishes long with softish tannins. Enjoyable today, it should reach a plateau in two to three years.

\$15; US MARKETS

