

Dave McIntyre's WineLine

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De Loach is Back, Baby!

One of the saddest developments in the Great California Wine Industry Shakeout of the past several years (at least up until the implosion of the House of Mondavi) was the bankruptcy of **DeLoach Vineyards**. This family-run winery in Sonoma County was producing excellent wines at fair prices – especially Chardonnay and Pinot Noir – long before we paid attention to the Russian River Valley appellation as a top source for those grapes. In the great wine boom of the '90s the winery expanded too fast, and when boom turned to glut they were left with excess inventory and no way to sell it.

This story could have followed a typical pattern in which great California wine names like Paul Masson, Almaden, Inglenook and Mondavi get bought up by corporate giants solely for their brand recognition and get turned into plonk. (Is it happening now with other “brand” names, beginning perhaps with B and R?)

Fortunately for us, however, DeLoach Vineyards was purchased by **Boisset America**, the oeno-imperialist branch of the Boisset family of Burgundy negociant fame. Boisset has some nice wines in its portfolio (**Louis Bernard** from the Rhone, among others) as well as some that scream “CASH FLOW!” and clumsy marketing (the unfortunate **Lulu B**), so it could have gone either way with DeLoach. But **Jean-Charles Boisset**, the 36-year-old family scion in charge of Boisset America, wisely decided to keep DeLoach’s focus on Burgundian varietals and techniques and refocus the winery on quality.

To accomplish that end, Boisset decided to shrink the winery’s production from 320,000 cases annually to 110,000 and reduce the product line from 48 wines to 17 (though that has increased slightly to 25 with the recent addition of some single-vineyard bottlings). He also converted 22 acres of estate vineyards to biodynamic farming, which has not yet shown up in the wines as it involves replanting the vineyards after letting the soil lay fallow.

Boisset's wisest choice may have been to hire **Greg La Follette** as winemaker. La Follette is an expert in Burgundian winemaking techniques whose resume includes stints working with California icons **Zelma**

Long and **André Tschelistcheff**. Washington political junkies will appreciate La Follette's family relation to "Fightin' Bob" La Follette of Wisconsin progressive politics fame. "Pinot-philes" (his word) will recognize La Follette as the original winemaker at **Flowers Vineyard**, a relatively new Sonoma County winery that quickly gained cult status for its Pinot Noir.

I met Boisset and La Follette recently over dinner at Washington's IndeBleu restaurant, where they re-introduced the winery's line to some DC-area writers. Their enthusiasm for rebuilding De Loach is contagious. But of course, the proof is in the glass. Here are my impressions of the wines we tasted that night, with suggested retail prices:

2004 O.F.S. Sauvignon Blanc (\$20): Rich and full with tropical stonefruit flavors, not big in the grass like a blowsy Kiwi, more of the "new California" style. Only later did I realize it was packing a whopping 14.6% alcohol; this is a rare Sauv Blanc that can handle it. Only 432 cases produced.

2004 Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$16): Tropical mixed with apple flavors and a good balance of oak and malolactic fermentation. Medium-long finish. Value priced. 10,845 cases produced.

2004 O.F.S. Chardonnay, (\$?). Richer than the Russian River bottling, showing more complexity and elegance. 818 cases produced.

2004 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$18). Silky texture with berry and cherry flavors bolstered by enough woody spice to give it interest, complexity and structure. Very competitive in this price range. 5,150 cases produced.

2003 O.F.S. Pinot Noir (\$?). If you're not a convert to Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, this one ought to convince you. Still fairly young, this Pinot is already showing complex flavors of fruits, spices, wood and smoke. Each sip is sort of like reading Joseph Campbell's take on Star Wars – you realize there's a lot more to it than you thought. 1,067 cases produced.

We also tasted two other Pinots Noir, a 2004 30th Anniversary Cuvée and a 2004 Maboroshi Vineyard, that were outstanding but produced in extremely limited quantities (only about 300 cases each).