



July 17, 2007

Wine Tasting

DeLoach Vineyards

By James Knight

Qu'est-ce que c'est? Doesn't look much like a French winery on the outside? True, there's no chateau at the end of the short, winding drive through recently replanted vineyards, but the modest reddish-brown, 1970s barn is quite French on the inside. The funny thing is, neither the name nor the trademark *fleur-de-lys* has got anything to do with it. In the 1970s, Cecil DeLoach established this pioneering producer of Russian River Zinfandel and Pinot Noir par excellence. Such was the DeLoach success story that in expanding upwards of 300,000 cases, they wrote themselves right into Chapter 11.

It took a French intervention to turn it around. One of France's largest wine exporters bought out DeLoach in 2003. The Boisset family, featured in the 2004 film *Mondovino*, were on a worldwide buying spree, adding to their ensemble of Burgundy vineyards. It happens that they share a fortuitous *fraternité* with the DeLoach family (who still make wine at Hook & Ladder down the road) and their values, including biodynamic farming. But in terms of Old World winemaking, they go a little further.

After the purchase, Jean-Charles Boisset was seen the very next harvest demonstrating an ancient Burgundian technique of *pigeage*, stripped down darn near *au naturel*, jumping around in small oak vats of warm purple grapes. Supposedly, this is a more gentle, authentic way to reintroduce the *chapeau* of grape skins to their juice. Fortunately for Francophobes who grimace at the thought of--*quelle horreur*--wine laced with the gymnastics of sweaty men, whom they imagine smelling of Gitanes and aged cheese, this was more of a stunt than an everyday occurrence. (Or so I was once told.)

You might expect such ancient vinicultural regimens to result in, well, historic aromas. *Quelle* surprise--no bracing soup of barnyard, no nose of truffles lurking in the fertile humus of a forest floor. The wines are as clean and bright as any contemporary Pinot Noir nurtured in Glycol-chilled stainless steel. But don't be too disappointed.

I preferred the 2006 Russian River Sauvignon Blanc (\$14), with its mineral lemon-honey tones, to the astringent grapefruit-pineapple of the limited release 2005 O.F.S. Sauvignon Blanc (\$22). *Au contraire*, the 2004 O.F.S. Pinot Noir (\$38) is more complex, bright cranberry-cherry and fermented garden trimmings, with a glossy mouth-feel, than the 2005 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$20). Happily continuing the *ancien régime's* old-vine Zin tradition, the 2005 Nova Vineyard Zinfandel (\$32) has aromas of dry cocoa, blueberry flavors and a certain *je ne sais quoi*. 2005 Forgotten Vines Zinfandel (\$32) is not forgettable--lush and plummy, with an elegant finish.

Cabernet Sauvignon, the king of grapes, is still on the menu but being chased out by the Boisset *sans-culottes*. As for the ever-popular DeLoach White Zinfandel, it's still in production, but there's none of that *hoi polloi* stuff at the tasting bar. Let them drink Chardonnay.

DeLoach Vineyards, 1791 Olivet Road, Santa Rosa. Tasting room open daily from 10am to 4:30pm. Fees vary. 707.526.9111.