

ROAD 31 WINE CO.

grin-inducing pinot

Dear Truckers (Fall 2024):

Greetings from Napa, where the truck is green, the rain is soon to turn the hillsides the same, and there is a red wine stain on my ear.

Before I get to the wine stain, I want to share a story — a parable? — of my daughter Lila, the prodigal maze runner.

Lila was a little chucker, maybe 5. A single red ponytail atop her head. We'd embarked on a fall family field trip to a massive corn maze out in the sticks; \$5 per person to enter. Off to the side, for another 5 bucks, you could blast gourds from a pneumatic cannon at an abandoned car, resulting in glorious melon carnage. It was a redneck dream, and, well, I was born in Kansas...

We got tickets to the maze from a pimply teenager who had clearly been dragged out of bed too early that morning, and he waved us vaguely towards the entrance. As I'm wont to do, I was determined to lead my family flawlessly through the labyrinth by sheer blunt force of intelligence and cartographic mastery. Forcing our two ants-in-their-pants kids to stand still, annoying both them and my wife, Janet, I deeply analyzed the map, plotting our path. When we finally set out, I led the way, head down in the paper in my hands, proclaiming: "Follow me" and "Stay close!"

Lila, however, had other ideas. She soon dodged past me in the corn and headed to the front of our procession. This, of course, disrupted and annoyed me to no end. Now I not only had to interpret the map, but I had to do so quickly to guide Lila at the front. I barked out increasingly desperate orders: "Two intersections, then right," then "Lila, left at the T!"

That's when it happened. I suffered a momentary, stress-induced loss of concentration, and had to pause. But Lila, she plowed forward, taking another turn with utter confidence. I was near apoplectic. But then I realized Lila had proceeded down the right path (the lucky munchkin). I caught up to her, with Janet and 8-year-old Owen bringing up the rear (both clearly not having one stitch of fun by this point). But before I could give Lila the next instruction, she took yet another correct turn. Then, quickly, another correct turn.

I was, pardon the pun, a-mazed. This was Mensa-level brilliance. Her future ticket into Princeton. I caught up to her. "Lila, how on earth do you know where to go?" I asked, mouth agape. She responded simply: "All the turns you were calling out were the most worn-down paths. A lot of people have already walked through this maze to the end, Dad. The path is obvious."

Let me now switch to a story from a couple weeks ago at the winery. I was at the crushpad, bathing in the glory of a stellar, just-finished 2024 harvest. My Pinot Noir was all put to bed in the caves, and I had just been checking on the barrels.

~ Over please



NAPA VALLEY

In the lab before me stood a new fellow winemaker, fresh out of UC Davis, holding a printout, clearly distraught. He was struggling to interpret some contradictory malolactic data analysis, and muttering to himself, “How will I know whether it has started or finished?” Just as I was about to chime in, he looked up, cocked his head to the side, and asked, “Why the hell do you have a wine stain on your ear?”

A quick sidebar for this whole story to make sense: There are two main fermentations in winemaking. First, yeast turns grape sugar into alcohol. This is “primary fermentation” — the big, obvious part of the process. But there’s also “malolactic fermentation,” where friendly bacteria convert tart malic acid (think green apples) into smooth lactic acid (think milk). This secondary fermentation, which happens in barrel, not only softens the wine, but makes it much more stable. Thus, it is a reasonable stressor, particularly to a new winemaker fresh out of Davis, to make sure malolactic is proceeding.

But what this young buck apparently wasn’t taught in school was that if you put your ear to the open barrel, you can actually hear the CO2 bubbles produced by the enzymes during malolactic fermentation. It’s just like snap-crackle-pop (if you are old enough to have an ear for Rice Krispies). Forget the lab analysis; you just have to listen to your wine to know what’s happening. And, sometimes when you do, you end up with a small wine stain on your ear...

You probably have already gotten the point of these two stories. Suffice it to say, the more vintages of wine (and life) that I notch on my belt, the more I have come to realize that while data is great, “paralysis by analysis” is a real thing. And the best path forward is often divined through a combination of all the senses, including your gut. Not to be too grandiose, but I think this is particularly poignant in the modern context of big data, A.I., and political polls.

With all this in mind, here’s a reminder to trust your senses — especially at Thanksgiving. There’s no better chemistry than a colorful holiday dinner, Pinot Noir, family and friends, and some simple gratitude. No need to overthink it ... though I do hope Road 31 is your Pinot of choice.

We will be embarking on yet another family field trip this Thanksgiving, this time with my mother, to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. And for that, I am grateful. It’s Mom’s 85th birthday (I’m sure she’s thrilled I’m announcing that to all the Truckers), so there’s that. And Nag’s Head is an easy spot for Owen to take a quick break from college up the road in Williamsburg, VA, where he seems to have found his sophomore groove (and is headed to Denmark to study next semester, and then Sevilla — yup, Spain — for a summer internship...geez).

Lila, well, she’s the youngest of us at 16, so she will theoretically be in tow this holiday; but then again, perhaps it is best we just let her lead the way.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kent" with a stylized flourish at the end.

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

P.S. Apologies if you’ve read this far and expected to get offered wine. As per, well, always, I sell out every spring and this is just a little fall update and hello. Look for the next release this upcoming March. That 2023 vintage was just put to bottle, and it is sublime.