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Steamboat Conference History

Stephen J. Cary

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STEAMBOAT CONFERENCE HISTORY

The idea to establish a Pinot Noir makers' Symposium was germinated late one evening in the fall of 1979 at a dinner in Salem, Oregon. A group of four; Eugene Chef Del Pearl, Sun River Sommelier Rick Denton, California Winemaker Jim Olsen of the J.W. Morris Winery, and Oregon Wine salesman Stephen Cary had enjoyed an evening fired by three fine bottles of Burgundy - 1966 Ponelle Montelie, 1972 DRC LaTache, and 1972 Comte deVogue Musigny Vieilles Vignes. Well into the evening Jim Olson turned to the group and said, "We should have a meeting of Oregon and California Pinot Noir producers to talk about how to make better Pinot Noir". It struck a chord. The modern era of Pinot Noir was largely just getting started in both states and the going was difficult. It seemed like a good idea.

At the outset the group was loosely known as the Pinot Noir Society. Originally the idea was to have the event rotate annually between Oregon and California. Cary was familiar with Jim and Sharon Van Loan's Steamboat Inn and suggested it would be a good place for the first year. That was agreed to and the Inn was booked for the summer of 1980. Steamboat was a very different place then, the back half of the dining room was an open porch, the "Library" now used for tastings had not been built, and the entire lodging facilities amounted to eight rustic cabins on the river side of the Inn.

The first meeting drew 17 winemakers and friends of Pinot Noir. It lasted two days and two nights. The tasting was held on the deck behind Cabin 8. Initially finished wines, those already in bottle, were tasted and compared with other Pinots from around the globe, primarily Burgundy. As the event grew the format changed to include only wines produced by the attending wineries in the formal, blind tastings. Evening informal tastings and dinners remained free-for-all with all wines accepted.

From the start it was obvious that Steamboat was a very desirable location for the meeting. It was isolated enough to make winemakers feel secure from any sense of public display. The conversations from the beginning were open, frank, and constructive. After the rigorous blind tastings the marvelous outdoor recreational activities proved to be the perfect counterpoint. And the food from day one, due to the skill of Chef Sharon Van Loan and Inn Manager/Chef Patricia Lee, has been a major part of the entire experience.

There were a few non-participants staying at the Inn that year and it became obvious that it would be best if the Conference grew to the point that it would book out the Inn. Some of the non-participants were ready to join the Society but others were less enthusiastic. Steamboat was known far more as a fishing lodge than as a retreat/convention center in those days, and not all the early rising fishing guests appreciated the lively dinners.

One early aspect of the Conference that would eventually change was the inclusion of selected members of the wine press. The idea was that Pinot Noir needed all the exposure it could generate in the early years. In time, with a growth in popularity it was decided to no longer include the media in the event.

In accordance with the original plan, the second meeting was held in California. Michael Richmond, who had started Acacia Winery in 1979, graciously offered his home in Carneros for the venue. By now attendance was up to 24. The first tasting lasted all day. When finished for the day the California winemakers went home since they all lived so close. Michael Richmond was left to endure dinner and a long evening with the 12 Oregonians who had made the trip and now camped out on his lawn. A second day of tasting ended in similar fashion. The sense of camaraderie that Steamboat engendered was not forthcoming without dining and late evening talk together. It was concluded that henceforth the California venue would be somewhere far away from the Pinot Noir growing districts so the event would be a retreat.

The third event took place at Steamboat, had increased attendance, and was once again a clear success. By now David Adelsheim of Adelsheim Vineyard had begun to take an active role, along with Stephen Cary, Michael Richmond, and Amity's Myron Redford, in organizing the growing event. David was particularly helpful in clarifying the goals of the event. Steamboat has never been officially chartered. It has evolved under the guidance of the above and lots of other winemakers and friends of Pinot Noir in a

sort of quasi democracy/dictatorship. Jim Olsen, Dick Erath, Dick Ponzi, Bill Fuller of Tualatin Vineyards, Richard Sommer and Bill Nelson of Hillcrest, Ted and Terry Casteel of Bethel Heights, and Bob McRitchie and Bill Blosser of Sokol-Blosser are a few of many who helped guide the early years of the Conference.

Year four was a seminal event in Conference history. The plan was to meet in Yosemite but due to a serious mix-up in communications, the hotel was not booked. As a fall back position, we held tastings one day at Acacia in Carneros and the next day we met at Jim Olsen's home in the East Bay. The tastings were fine but again the group did not stay together through dinner and the stronger sense of kinship that Steamboat encouraged was not present. As a result the group decided to move the Conference to Steamboat permanently. It has been there ever since.

For several years after establishing permanent residence at Steamboat it continued to be called the Pinot Noir Society, or sometimes, Association. But over time it was so often referred to as just "Steamboat" that the group simply changed the name to the Steamboat Pinot Noir Conference, Steamboat for short.

Another milestone occurred in 1987 when the first International Pinot Noir Celebration was held in McMinnville, Oregon. A number of Burgundian producers attended and one of them became the first of many international attendees at Steamboat. Robert Drouhin, of Maison Drouhin and later Domaine Drouhin Oregon, was a welcome ambassador for Burgundy that year. It is also remembered as a wonderfully warm year when the swimming in Steamboat Creek was especially fine.

The Conference and the Inn have grown substantially through the years. The back porch was enclosed just in time to fill it with tasters. New cottages were built nearby as Conference attendance grew. The "Library" (aka the tasting room) came along when the stress of using the dining room for both meals and tastings became unworkable. What hasn't changed is the same warm, friendly atmosphere, the caring and attentive staff, and the wonderful, ever-evolving food. The Inn is very proud of the Conference and it shows in their performance. What Jim, Sharon, Pat, and the entire staff of Steamboat have accomplished over the years is quite remarkable and all to the benefit of the Conference.

In the years following 1987 the Conference would welcome participants from France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Italy, Spain, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Chile, Israel, Japan, and five more US States. Eventually the Conference, and Pinot Noir, grew in popularity to the point that it was necessary to find some way to limit the attendees. At first there was some talk of moving the Conference to a larger venue. But then the realization that Steamboat's size limitation was part of the Conference's charm and a big reason for the openness that has been a hallmark from the start. It was decided to stay at the Inn and deal with the growing popularity in other ways. A lottery was instituted in an attempt to give all interested parties a chance.

In a confirmation that imitation is the purest form of flattery, there are now Steamboat like Pinot Noir Conferences being held in New Zealand, Central Coastal California, Chile, and both Victoria and Tasmania in Australia,. It is testimony to the guiding principles that were established by the passionate and thoughtful people who guided the early years of the Conference and those new members who continue to improve it today.

Stephen J.Cary
Director