

The Taste of Luxury

Fundamentally Grounded in the Vineyard

An Interview with Jon Priest,
Winemaker, Etude Wines

EDITORS' NOTE Jon Priest assumed his current post in the spring of 2005. Priest was hired as Winemaker for Taz Vineyards in 2003, where he helped launch this boutique brand from Santa Barbara County. Priest previously received critical acclaim at Adelaida Cellars, particularly for his estate red wines. Prior to this, he spent more than a dozen years at Wild Horse Winery and Vineyards, where he oversaw the crafting of more than 30 varietals.



Jon Priest

COMPANY BRIEF Etude Wines was founded by Tony Soter, who created the brand in 1982. Etude specializes in two classic red varieties – pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon. The wines from Etude (www.etudewines.com) are found in fine restaurants and select retail stores around the United States, and also can be purchased through direct sales at the winery.

Can you give a brief overview of Etude Wines' development and the portfolio of wines you offer?

Right now we are enjoying being in our current location, which is a beautiful winery in Carneros. Our portfolio is certainly grounded on expressing both pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon. We have other varietals that we make in small amounts, but those two varietals are our main focus. Beginning with the 2004 vintage, 100 percent of our pinot noir is sourced from the Etude Estate Vineyards, which are tucked away in the far northwest corner of the esteemed Carneros appellation. Our flagship cabernet sauvignon is sourced from several outstanding vineyards that express the major benchmark sub-appellations of Napa Valley – Rutherford, St. Helena, Oakville, and Calistoga. We've expanded our cabernet offerings somewhat by producing small, very exclusive bottlings of individual districts up and down the Napa Valley.

Etude seems to be focused on grape growing. Is that very common, or is that specific to the philosophy of Etude?

Grape growing is central to the approach we take at Etude. That was the premise laid out by the founder, Tony Soter, and it's the way that I've approached my craftsmanship in the 20 years of my career as a winemaker. Winemaking really has to be fundamentally grounded in the



vineyard. We are mere caretakers in the winery. Someone once said that the potential of a great wine is actually developed in the vineyard, and its actualization is achieved in the winery. At Etude, we also put great emphasis on being stewards of the land and minimizing our environmental footprint. Our estate vineyards are a model for sustainable viticulture. Native flora and naturally occurring wetlands have

been protected, and creeks are being restored. Wildlife has been afforded safe passageways through the vineyards.

Are Etude wines ready to drink upon release, or do they need a certain amount of time before people can enjoy them?

Stylistically, for our red wines in particular, we make a wine that you can enjoy and appreciate near release, but that has the structure, development, and build to hold up in the cellar. I think our wines really do improve over time.

Is there a growing interest in pinot noir? What advice can you give to those who want to become familiar with it?

Finally, after all these years, pinot noir is getting some serious attention and more widespread appeal – perhaps because it is easy to be seduced by the charm and accessibility of pinot noir. This is a wine that is immensely inviting, yet at the same time beguiling, ethereal, and cerebral. There is such a transparent thread between the wine in the glass and the land from which the grapes were grown. I always encourage those gaining interest in pinot noir to explore the nuances of wines grown in different regions or vineyards.

Are you of the school of thought that says there is a wine to drink with certain meals, or should personal preference win out?

I don't subscribe to the idea that there's a set of rules you need to follow. I think you might find more enjoyment in those really successful wine and food pairings, but having said that, if you don't like the wine, you're not going to enjoy it no matter what meal you have it with. Because of the structure and palate weight of pinot noir, you can actually pair it with a wide array of foods and be pretty successful most of the time.

How has technology affected the wine-making process?

We are very rooted in the traditions of winemaking. But you can argue that stainless steel is an updated modern approach to winemaking that we all use pretty regularly in the industry. From our standpoint, using technology to make things easier and more efficient isn't part of the approach we take to winemaking. We take a very hands-off approach to our processing. We use gravity as much as possible, and it does take us longer to make wine. We employ a very labor-intensive process. We do that because there is so much care that needs to be taken every step of the way. So we don't rely on technology unless it's something that mimics what would be the tradition.

With pinot noir, what makes an individual brand or specific wine unique?

One of the magic traits of pinot noir is that it does translate across different areas quite well. It's so transparent that, with some study, you can identify those places and the traits of those particular areas. I think that's part of understanding and appreciating pinot noir.

What are your priorities over the next couple of years to ensure Etude's continued success?

First and foremost, we're focused on wine quality and vineyard development. In regard to pinot noir, our estate vineyards are still developing, although they have already showed immense quality and tremendous promise. So we're continually improving in the vineyard and maintaining and improving the quality that we've been able to achieve so far. One of the other key objectives is to maintain our market position so that we remain financially viable, so we're focused on building distribution and getting our wines on top restaurant wine lists and in more fine wine shops.

Is it challenging in this position to turn off the business?

Two things are really hard to turn off. One is the business; the other is my palate. Every time I have a glass of wine, I'm trying to deconstruct it. I guess the wheels are always turning in that regard. ●

The Etude Winery