

Wine Connoisseur

Bobby Lee Lawrence

Photography courtesy of Schug Winery



SIPPING ON SCHUG



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It's late winter in California and workers are in the vineyards completing the final pruning of the vines, preparing them to bloom in the spring and once again repeat the cycle of providing us with the very root of a drink that has been around for centuries. Like rows of soldiers returning from battle, the vines stand ready to yield the wonderful fruit that will become outstanding wine; this from something as utterly simple as a grape.

"To take what God gives us and not screw it up...we are the caretakers of nature's fruit," replied Master Winemaker Walter Schug of Schug Winery in Sonoma, California when I asked about his philosophy for creating some of the world's finest wines. This approach has been successful for Walter Schug over the years. Schug Winery has produced some of the finest Pinot Noirs in the world. They have received numerous medals and averaged a 91-point rating in over eight different wine surveys. Although Schug produces wonderful Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Sauvignon Blanc, I will focus on Pinot Noir, one of the most difficult grapes to grow and even more difficult to make into wine. It can be a great wine or a dismal failure. It's a jezebel and can be costly to bring in, which is a challenge for winemakers.

Schug Winery is located in the Carneros district of the Sonoma Valley, an area that is blessed with cool nights and fog from time to time. This ideal climate permits an extended growing season, keeping the grapes on the vine longer, allowing the proper sugar and acidity levels to develop. The winery plants its Pinot vines on the

slope behind their charming chateau. The prevailing breeze that flows across the vines controls the temperature allowing a consistent development of the fruit during the season.

Schug's Pinot Noir is produced from 100% Pinot Noir grapes, sourced from 4 different local vineyards. The beginning fermentation is done in stainless steel fermenters for a period of 6 to 8 days. The barrel ageing is done in a combination of new and two-year-old French oak barrels for over 16 months, with a secondary (malolactic) fermentation in large oak casks for 2 months. These large oak casks are similar to the cave cellars in Burgundy, France. The final result is an award-winning wine with flavors reminiscent of cherries, strawberries and spice.

As I sat in the aging "caves" with Walter Schug, tasting all of the great wines he produces, I could not help but be fascinated by the passion this Master Winemaker has for his craft. We spoke of many things such as family, history, and the future. Through it all, I came away with a new perspective on what separates the good from the exceptional.

We spoke of controversial issues such as screw tops for fine wine and the use of different corks. It's interesting to note that the main reason wineries have avoided the move to screw caps is the cost of the equipment. Walter is in favor of it otherwise. He smiled as he quipped, "The faster you can get to the wine the better." Currently, Schug is going through a market acceptance program on synthetic replacements for corks by using them on some releases.



As you've probably read in my other articles, more and more winemakers are producing wines that are drinkable now, but will improve with age. Walter Schug has produced such wines, as you will read in the following review. The 2002 Pinot Noir is released at 3 levels: Sonoma Coast, Carneros, and the 2001 Pinot Noir Heritage Reserve.

The Sonoma Coast is a new designation for Schug Winery. This Pinot Noir is crafted from vineyards located in Carneros and the Russian River Valley. Primarily aged in large, oak casks to minimize the oak extraction and emphasize the varietal character of the fruit. It has a lively finish and will go well with grilled fish or barbecued meat or chicken. It appeared slightly young and I would rate this wine an 86.

The Carneros Pinot Noir is reminiscent of classic Burgundy. The wine's complexity is the result of a process called "clonal diversity". Combining grapes from five different vineyards, allowing each to influence the end result, the wine has a rich bouquet of cherries, berries, and a hint of new oak. The flavors are reminiscent of black cherry, currants and strawberry. The finish is long and spicy. Serve it with grilled fish, duck, or veal. I thoroughly enjoyed this wine and would rate it an 89.

The 2001 Heritage Reserve version of this Pinot comes from the same process as the Carneros bottling. Selections from the finest barrels of the Carneros are made and then set aside for additional ageing, which changes the complexity and results in a more full-bodied wine. The rich flavors that appear are of black cherry and cranberry, with hints of lavender. I would rate it a 92. It's very drinkable now, but you can also select this one for your cellar, as it will mature nicely over the next 8 to 10 years. This is definitely a wine for collectors!

Be sure to try some of Schug's Merlot, Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. These wines may be the unheralded wines out of California. If you can't find these at your local wine store, you can call the winery and have it shipped. They will be glad to assist you.

My sincere thanks to Walter Schug, an extremely gracious and generous host who spent hours with me explaining his philosophy, passion and process for making fine wines. Thanks to Axel Schug, who enthusiastically carries on the family tradition. To Gertrud Schug, whose patience and support Walter credits as a great part of their success, and to Michael Cox, the talented winemaker.



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