Don Blackburn dies

5 May 2009 by Linda Murphy

McDonald 'Don' Blackburn, the Burgundy-trained American Pinot champion who held key winemaking positions at California's Bernardus Winery, Byington Vineyard & Winery, David Bruce Winery and Emeritus Vineyards, died 23 Apr after a battle with cancer although news of his passing, at age 54, was released only yesterday.

Keenly intelligent and delightfully eccentric, Blackburn was a man of many interests, chief among them the production of Pinot Noirs more elegant and less concentrated than many made in California today. The Norwegian-born former ballet dancer was interested in philosophy, resource conservation (his university degree was in resource conservation, with a minor in French), musicology, surfing and sky diving. He was a talented yet under-appreciated winemaker, seemingly lacking an interest in self-promotion, content to let his bosses get the credit.

While at the University of Montana, Blackburn spent a year in France as an exchange student, working a harvest in Burgundy. After completing his degree in Montana, he returned to France for six years, earning a *brevet de technicien superiéur* in viticulture and oenology while working at Comte Lafon, Mongeard-Mugneret and Ch de Monthelie in Burgundy, Chx Cheval Blanc and Giscours in Bordeaux, and Maison Trimbach in Alsace, before relocating in California.

Blackburn worked as production manager at David Bruce Winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains, winemaker at Byington in the same region, and winemaker at Bernardus in Carmel Valley, before joining Brice Jones at Emeritus in the Russian River Valley.

Blackburn was not your typical winemaker, as evidenced by this quote from his biography, which I'm certain he wrote himself:

'Pinot Noir is best described in terms that are holistic rather than analytical. Single descriptive adjectives fail to capture the visceral appeal of Pinot Noir. Charm is a seduction that occurs on a subliminal level. The initial dimension of charm is an attribute of mouthfeel. Tactile charm requires perfection in the sense that nothing is lacking. Textural charm is supple yet with vibrant tannins. Charm is also an aromatic quality that is clean and airy, with aromas that work harmoniously toward creating a complete, well-focused impression that gives the taster an ineffable sense of well-being.'

No marketer could ever have written that.

A celebration of Blackburn's life is planned for noon, 5 Jun, at Emeritus Vineyards in Sebastopol, in western Sonoma County.