French 'Pinot Noir' execs sentenced

18 Feb 2010 by Jancis Robinson

Late extra: *Susan Hensley, Vice President of Public Relations, E & J Gallo Winery would like to add: 'We are deeply disappointed to learn that our supplier Sieur d'Arques has been found guilty of selling falsely labeled French Pinot Noir as recently as March of 2008. Based on the available information of the Pinot Noir that the French courts have investigated, Gallo imported less than 20% of the total and is no longer selling any of this wine to customers. We believe that the only French Pinot Noir that was potentially misrepresented to us would have been the 2006 vintage and prior. We want to assure our consumers that this is not a health and safety issue and that we will continue to work with the appropriate U.S. authorities to determine any next steps required for potentially mislabeled Pinot Noir in the marketplace.' So Gallo lawyers may not go as easy on these guys, methinks, as the French court. But where did the other 80% of the faux Pinot Noir end up, I wonder...?*

The court in Carcassonne charged with handing out justice in the case of 'the Pinot Noir that wasn't' supplied to E & J Gallo in California over two years to 2008 (see News round up) gave its verdict yesterday.

Those implicated, working for both négociant and the Limoux co-op Sieur d'Arques, seem to me to have got off very leniently, with suspended jail sentences of one to six months each and extremely modest fines of between 3,000 and 180,000 euros - a tiny fraction of the reported seven million euros they made by selling enough wine to fill 18 million bottles of Red Bicyclette Pinot Noir Vin de Pays d'Oc. Except that the wine was not Pinot Noir, but was a blend of varieties much cheaper than newly fashionable Pinot Noir - which in any event is very rare in the Languedoc.

However did they think they would get away with it? What was the Gallo buying team thinking of? Did the *Sideways* movie team realise that they would be setting in train a mad, international dash for 'Pinot Noir' - including some American brands sourcing it in, of all places, Corsica?!

What I sincerely hope is that this will not make life even more difficult for the good producers of the Languedoc, who are finding life quite tough enough as it is. They don't deserve more challenges in exporting to the US.

But probably, those buying Red Bicyclette are unlikely to make any close connection between Vin de Pays d'Oc and hand-crafted wines from small estates in the likes of Corbières, Montpeyroux and Minervois. Let's hope so.