Are high alcohol Pinots that bad?

8 Mar 2011 by Jancis Robinson

9 Mar - Moderator Eric Asimov has contacted me to point out that in fact no one in the gathering was asked to identify which of Adam Lee's wines was which, so that no definitive conclusions should be drawn about what was learnt by the exercise described below.

Later that same day *- I have been in email correspondence with Adam Lee of Siduri who played the trick outlined below and here's what he has to say about Raj Parr, pictured here:*

'I must say that Raj is the finest taster that I have had the opportunity to present our wines to (sorry, dangling participle). Some years ago, in Las Vegas, Raj tasted one of our Novy Syrahs and asked me if some of the wine had been barrel fermented or perhaps finished fermentation in barrel. In fact, just a few barrels had completed the last third of fermentation in oak. I asked him how he figured that out, and he mentioned that he tasted a slight salinity in the wine and that he often picked that up on Australian Syrahs that had finished in barrel. It was truly remarkable.'

Thank you, Purple pager David Rapoport of San Francisco, for drawing our attention to a fascinating discussion at this week's World of Pinot Noir conference in California about alcohol levels and balance in California Pinot Noir.

We can all read it on vinography.com thanks to award-winning blogger Alder Yarrow's nimble typing in the audience at this particular session at Wild Horse winery in California's Central Coast. The discussion was chaired by New York Times wine columnist Eric Asimov who has gone on the record in favour of lower alcohol examples of California Pinot Noir and told the attendees that responses to this particular article reached new levels of passion, both pro and anti.

The panel participants, each of whom brought along two examples of their Pinots, were Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat whose wines generally fail to find favour with Robert Parker, Adam Tolmach of Ojai who has undergone a rather public conversion from higher to lower alcohol levels in his wines, Josh Jensen of Calera, sommelier, and now restaurateur and winemaker Rajat Parr of RN74 (pictured), Adam Lee of Siduri and Michael Browne of Kosta Browne who makes some of the most potent California Pinots.

It's worth reading the entire transcript, but if you're short of time, I recommend you go straight to the end of the transcript of the session where Alder describes how Adam Lee grabs the mike and explains that he deliberately switched labels on his 13.7% and 15.2% Pinots and that Raj Parr, who has insisted that all Pinots on the list at his RN74 restaurant in San Francisco should have less than 14% alcohol, has privately asked him if he could have some of the Pinot he thought had lower (but in fact had higher) alcohol for his list.

It seemed like a dirty trick but Adam Lee did effectively prove how easily influenced we are by perception rather than reality (and Raj Parr is a famously fine taster). It's worth scrolling down the comments below the transcript to read that it was Raj who insisted that Adam tell the attendees what happened.

I'd say that all of this reflects extremely creditably on the California wine scene. I just wish we saw a few more top-quality California Pinot Noirs outside the US. My most recent notes on them are at New World Pinot Noir - some of the best, Oregon Pinot v the rest and California Pinot Noirs.