



Robert Parker's Wine Advocate

Reviewed by Robert Parker

October 31, 2011

**(TALLEY VINEYARDS CHARDONNAY ROSEMARY'S VINEYARD)
(TALLEY VINEYARDS PINOT NOIR ROSEMARY'S VINEYARD)
(A VERTICAL TASTING)**

It's hard to believe but the Talley family, led by owner/winemaker Brian Talley, is celebrating the 25th anniversary of Talley Vineyards. This small oasis, essentially a mono-appellation consisting of one winery dedicated to classy, elegant, long-lived Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs, is located in the Arroyo Grande Valley. Ironically, their fame and fortune are probably associated more with avocados and other vegetables, with the closest winery, the outstanding Alban Vineyards, situated about 5 miles to the north. Alban specializes in Rhône Valley varietals (such as Syrah, Mourvèdre, Grenache and Viognier), and other than passionate owners with high standards, the two wineries have nothing else in common.

I sat down with Brian Talley in late September for a remarkable tasting. As long time readers of *The Wine Advocate* are aware, these wines have consistently received terrific reviews since I first visited the property many years ago. However, I have never before followed up with a tasting of older vintages to see how they are aging, even though my instincts suggested there was no reason why they should not age well given the quality of the winemaking, the low yields, and the natural winemaking philosophy employed by Brian Talley. Our tastings concentrated on one vineyard, Rosemary's Vineyard, which is about eight miles east of the Pacific Ocean. As my previous reviews will show, this is not the only top vineyard owned by Talley. They also produce world-class, high-quality Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from the Rincon Vineyard and own several other promising sites such as the Stone Corral and Oliver's vineyards. However, the Rosemary's Vineyard is the one that surrounds the Talley residence, about a mile west of the Rincon Vineyard. It was planted between 1987 and 1995, and the soils are characterized by decomposed/ fragmented sandstone loam (that has a distinctive white character) with some clay in the subsoils. This reasonably steep, well-drained, hillside vineyard is a cool-climate site given its proximity to the Pacific Ocean as well as the prevalence of cool breezes that blow through this region.

Like many of his colleagues, Brian Talley is committed to an artisanal as well as Burgundian approach to Chardonnay and Pinot Noir winemaking. The Chardonnay is whole cluster pressed then settled in tank before it is raked into medium-toasted French oak barrels, largely from the forests of Allier and Vosges. The percentage of new oak utilized (between 25-35%) is relatively small by California standards, and the wine spends an average of 14-16 months in barrel prior to being bottled unfiltered. Two critical factors in the Chardonnay production is that all of the fruit goes through full malolactic, which allows the wines to be bottled unfiltered. Moreover, they are never acidified. As for the Pinot Noir, the general philosophy is to destem although in vintages where there is good stem ripeness (known as *lignification*) as much as 25% whole clusters can be used. The Pinot Noir is also put through a typical Burgundian cold soak of 3 to 5 days in order to extract more color, aroma and flavor. Indigenous yeasts are the catalysts for fermentation, following which the wine is moved to medium to heavily toasted Allier and Vos-



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ges barrels where it spends 15 to 18 months before being bottled unfiltered. The percentage of new oak used for the Pinot Noir averages between 30-40% depending on the vintage character.

The advantage of a tasting such as this is that the total focus is on one *terroir*, the personality of one specific plot of land, in this case the 28-acre Rosemary's Vineyard. The original plantings of Chardonnay came from the Old Wente selections that Brian Talley accessed from Larry Hyde further up in Sonoma and Napa. The original Pinot Noir selections included some of the Mount Eden clones as well as the newer Dijon clones when new sections were planted in 1995.

In terms of viticulture, the Talley philosophy includes long-term sustainability and biodynamically based farming techniques (essentially organic viticulture). The original vineyards include the much wider spacing of the old California system of 12 x 6 feet, and the newer plantings are 6 x 3 feet. Yields range from 2 tons or less of fruit per acre for the Chardonnay Rosemary's Vineyard to an even more draconian 1 to 1.5 tons of fruit per acre for the Rosemary's Pinot Noir. Alcohol levels are moderate (between 14 and 14.5%), although in the ripest years the alcohol levels have occasionally reached 15%. Most of the harvesting takes place at night (when it's very cool), and the 28-acre Rosemary's Vineyard is evenly split between Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

What stood out in this tasting was just how remarkably long-lived these wines are (although that is not often a factor in consumers' wine purchasing decisions these days). While they are gorgeous to drink young, they evolve beautifully, and, like most ageworthy offerings, they lose a lot of their baby fat and youthful exuberance, becoming more subtle and graceful as they age. Several of the finest Chardonnays in the tasting were some of the older ones. The Pinot Noir were more variable, especially those that were the oldest. This is a remarkably consistent viticultural site and the Talleys have been faithful to their overall philosophy of winemaking, *élevage* and bottling since the beginning. Moreover, their pricing strategy makes these wines among the finest values for world-class Chardonnay and Pinot Noir that exist. That in itself should peak consumers' interest in these wines. Of course, the older wines are largely unavailable, and thus the following tasting notes are for academic purposes only. It is still possible to find some vintages of these limited production, high quality wines from 2006 onward.

One of the interesting aspects, whether from Burgundy or California, is that I often find that certain winery's Chardonnays age more slowly and better than their Pinot Noirs. Talley may be one of those wineries. Top vintages of their Chardonnays generally have 15 or more years of cellaring potential, and their Pinot Noirs are usually best consumed before reaching age 15. There will always be exceptions, but the wines of Talley Vineyards merit serious attention. Pricing has always been fair and with prices of approximately \$65 a bottle, they represent reasonable bargains for wines of such aromatic and flavor dimensions. While they are not inexpensive, compared to French white and red Burgundies of similar quality, they are steals.

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Talley Vineyards Rosemary's Chardonnay

2009 Rosemary's Chardonnay	96
2008 Rosemary's Chardonnay	94
2007 Rosemary's Chardonnay	95
2006 Rosemary's Chardonnay	96
2005 Rosemary's Chardonnay	97
2004 Rosemary's Chardonnay	89
2003 Rosemary's Chardonnay	77
2002 Rosemary's Chardonnay	95
2001 Rosemary's Chardonnay	92
2000 Rosemary's Chardonnay	93
1998 Rosemary's Chardonnay	87
1997 Rosemary's Chardonnay	94
1997 Rosemary's Chardonnay in magnum	98
1996 Rosemary's Chardonnay	92
1995 Rosemary's Chardonnay	95
1994 Rosemary's Chardonnay	90

Talley Vineyards Rosemary's Pinot Noir

2009 Rosemary's Pinot Noir	95
2008 Rosemary's Pinot Noir	96
2007 Rosemary's Pinot Noir	97
2006 Rosemary's Pinot Noir	93
2005 Rosemary's Pinot Noir	95
2004 Rosemary's Pinot Noir	93
2003 Rosemary's Pinot Noir	90
2002 Rosemary's Pinot Noir	95
2001 Rosemary's Pinot Noir	88
2000 Rosemary's Pinot Noir	90
1999 Rosemary's Pinot Noir	88
