

On the Trail

California Clarity – Part I

February 15, 2018 David Driscoll



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Pinot noir grapes growing at Pisoni Vineyard

I set numerous career goals for myself at the start of January as I was determined to make 2018 a breakthrough year for my rather stagnant evolution. I've been passionate about wine appreciation since around 2007, but over the last few years I've spent more time fussing over sales numbers and invoices than broadening my horizons and refueling my reserves. That needed to change, I decided; especially if I hoped to remain an enthusiastic ambassador for my customers. My first hope was to completely revamp the K&L wine club and start using the monthly newsletter as a way to educate both customers and myself about some of the industry's best under-the-radar producers. As a former teacher, I can tell you that one of the best ways to learn more about any subject is educating others about the same information. My second ambition was to focus our marketing narrative away from the informationally-obsessed, statistical appreciation of wine and towards the actual drinking of it. I wanted to work closely with producers who talked more about why they enjoyed making

wine and less about which iconic vineyard they sourced their fruit from. The third and perhaps more pressing objective I had in mind this year was to learn more about California wine as a whole. After more than ten years in this business the irony is not lost on me that I'm a veteran of the wine trade, working and living near California wine country, yet with a giant, meteor-sized hole in my awareness of the local market. I wasn't going to buy a book about Golden State winemaking, however. Nor was I planning to spend my mornings pouring through trade magazines or amateur blogs. If I was going to do this right, my knowledge would have to come from first hand experience. Face to face contact, like we used to do before the iPhone was invented. Thus, it was time to hit the road.



If you're wondering just how broad and unshaped my understanding of California was, I'll tell you something embarrassing that I just discovered yesterday: for the last decade I've thought the Santa Lucia Highlands region was just north of Santa Barbara, well south of San Luis Obispo along the Central Coast. It wasn't until I sat down with winemaker Jeff Pisoni yesterday that I realized the Santa Lucia Highlands AVA starts just south of Salinas and extends along the Sierra de Salinas mountains for about fifteen miles into Steinbeck country. Whoops. Jeff is the son of legendary California winemaking pioneer Gary Pisoni, the man who introduced low yields and meticulous vineyard management to the Santa Lucia Highlands back in 1982. While Jeff's father and brother Mark live near Gonzales and continue to care for Garys'

Vineyard and Pisoni Vineyard, Jeff is the family winemaker and has the fruit transported north to Sonoma where the Pisoni winery is now located. Here I was thinking Jeff had to truck all that Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from the southern half of the state, when it's really just an hour south of San Jose. I met Jeff at his Rohnert Park facility yesterday to taste through his entire portfolio and begin the process of correcting my many misconceptions.



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As Jeff was pouring the Pinot, I had him take me through Santa Lucia Highlands 101, which coincidentally starts by heading south on 101 towards Monterey. If you've ever driven to the Central Coast from the Bay Area, the first thing you notice about the area around Salinas is the abundance of lettuce along the freeway. The Salinas Valley is known as "the Salad Bowl" by those who work in agriculture because of its unique climate during the growing season. "There are more sub-70 degree days there during summer than in any other part of the country," Jeff told me as he unfolded a map of the state on the table. You need consistently cool and dry weather to grow lettuce properly, and while the Salinas Valley gets plenty of fog, what it doesn't get is much rain. "It's like a cold desert," Jeff added. These same cool conditions extend into the hills of the Santa Lucia Highlands, a string of vineyard sites located beyond the produce fields to the west of 101, resulting in wines with plenty of aromatics and acidity. Because it never gets too hot, the wines never get too ripe. Tasting through both the Luli and Lucia portfolios with Jeff, there was one underlying consistency through all of the wines: vibrancy.



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In order to understand what makes the Pisoni wines so special, you have to understand a bit more about Jeff's father Gary. Jeff brought out a scrap book his dad made him as a gift one year, showcasing the family legacy through various photos and wine labels. It was one of the most tender and revealing family documents I've ever had the pleasure of looking through, and it did exactly what Jeff had intended: it gave me a better insight into who his father was. The first part of the Pisoni story does not actually begin with Gary, but rather his parents Jane and Eddie who came to the region in 1952. Gary grew up working the land with his father, learning its intricate ecosystems, and developing a love for his family's many acres. After catching the wine bug and developing an obsession with Burgundy, he convinced his parents that they should invest in planting Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vineyards up in the nearby mountains. Everyone thought he was crazy, as is usually the case in these stories. Gary has been described as crazy more than once, however. When you read an article about his winemaking, it generally includes a number of synonyms describing his commitment to quality in the vineyard. While other farmers were growing crops in for maximum volume, Gary was pioneering an entirely new way of thinking as it pertained to California's wine potential. Over thirty years later, his vineyards have become some of the most renowned sites for Pinot Noir in the entire state and today that passion for farming and winemaking extends to both of his sons, Mark and Jeff.



After learning exactly how Gary Pisoni developed these varied pieces of land and what made each spot unique, I was very excited to taste through the **Lucia wines** with Jeff, the Pisoni family label that features numerous single vineyard expressions from the best SLH (that's short for Santa Lucia Highlands) sites. The intensity of both the Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from these individual locations is truly something that anyone interested in California's unique terroir-driven wines should experience. However, returning back to goals one and two, I was here as the K&L wine club director to learn more about **Jeff's Luli project** with sommelier Sara Floyd, a label meant to showcase the brilliance of the SLH appellation as a whole, rather than simply highlight its best plots. None of the fruit used in Jeff's Luli wines is sourced from any of the Pisoni family vineyards, which of course begs the question: then from where did he get it? As Jeff answered that question, I began to fall more and more in love with the wines and the philosophy behind their intent. Because Jeff's family has been farming in the region for over sixty-five years at this point, you can imagine they know a number of other growers nearby. Jeff's brother Mark alone spends hours each day walking through the various vineyards of the Santa Lucia Highlands, so you can also imagine he has a pretty solid insight as to where one might find some pretty good fruit. Thus, the Luli wines are made from the fruits (pun intended) of the Pisoni family's networking labor. Together they reached out to their community and purchased additional grapes from local growers they've known for years, if not decades. The overarching goal with the Lull expressions was to make a more affordable line-up of SLH wines without

sacrificing quality, integrity, or any of the regional characteristics one should expect to find in any higher-end cuvée.

Tasting them side by side with the Lucia wines, I can safely say that goal has been accomplished.

If you're curious as to what constitutes a classic Santa Lucia Highlands profile, I'd highly recommend grabbing a bottle of the **2015 Luli Pinot Noir, because for \$19.99** I'm not sure there's a better California value on the shelf. It's absolutely loaded with red fruits and spice, but it's never overtly sweet or jammy in any way, shape, or form. There's a liveliness to the aromas and the flavors leap across the palate with vivacity; that's what I consider textbook SLH Pinot Noir when successfully realized (I do know what the wines should taste like, even if I've been long confused about where they actually come from!). I ended up polishing off a bottle of the **2015 Luli Chardonnay** last night with my wife for Valentine's Day, savoring the supple fruit and flowery flavors, bolstered by a crisp finish. If you're a K&L wine club member, I'd expect to find a bottle of Luli Syrah in the pool of membership options later this summer. At this point, I'm completely enamored with Jeff's wines, his family's history in California, and the value proposition he's committed to while producing top notch stuff.

Now I just need to find another few hours to tell you about his wife, Bibiana. There's a part two to this charming Pisoni story.

-David Driscoll

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California Clarity – Part II

February 16, 2018 David Driscoll



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Pinot Noir vineyards in Sonoma County

Part two of my California story begins in Sonoma, rather than the Santa Lucia Highlands. To be honest, it actually begins in Medellín, Colombia where winemaker Bibiana González Rave was born and raised before moving to France in search of her wine education. When I say she "moved to France," I mean she packed up a bag, took a flight to Paris, caught a train to Cognac, and sat in the office of the Angoulême School of Viticulture and Enology until the dean agreed to accept her as a student. She had no appointment, no contacts in France, no real grasp of the language, and no previous experience working with wine at that point. She did, however, have a passion, intensity, and tenacity for proclaiming her

intentions, a combination of traits I recognized in her immediately as the head of admissions at Angoulême likely did when he was first confronted with her determination. He had no choice but to let her in at that point because she wasn't going to take no for an answer. After finishing her initial technician diploma, Bibiana followed that up with a degree in Oenology from the University of Bordeaux, working harvests at Château Haut-Brion and other top estates in the area. After picking up additional experience in both Burgundy and the Northern Rhône, alongside a stint in South Africa, she made her way out to California and worked her way up into a head winemaking position at Lynmar Winery in the Russian River region. It was in Sonoma that she finally found her heart's terroir and the ability to make wines that truly expressed her soul's intentions. So she decided to put down roots.



"When I think of Sonoma, I think of farming and how that lifestyle connects the community," Bibiana said to me when I asked why the region spoke to her. While all of Northern California's major wine-growing regions originally began as farming communities, Sonoma has pushed back against some of the moneyed-interests one finds today in Healdsburg, along with the changes those investments have had on both the flavor profiles and price points of Napa's top wines. There's still a desire to make food-friendly, balanced, and climate-driven wines among Sonoma's best winemakers, which brings me back to Bibiana. Not only does she want to make expressive wines from Sonoma County, she wants to make them accessible. Hence, her newly-established label *Alma de Cattleya*, a project focused on sub-\$30 options that exhibit the crisp, cool climate character of Sonoma County fruit with a message geared toward consumption rather than collecting. Virtuoso performances from the world's best vineyards still dominate much of today's terroir-driven fascination in aficionado circles. More and more drinkers are being taught that absolute purity goes hand in hand with quality. Yet, as ambitious producers scramble to collect parcels from the most coveted vineyard zip codes, Bibiana's Alma wines are focused on value and quality as a general expression of Sonoma, rather than capturing the embodiment of site-specific fruit. That's not to say she's not interested in the individuality of California's top vineyards. Her incredible single vineyard wines (made in incredibly small quantities) are part of her higher-end Cattleya label, but what's driving her passion with the Alma portfolio is very similar the story I wrote about yesterday concerning Jeff Pisoni's Luli label: she wants to make wines that speak to the soul of the region as a whole, and that people actually living in Sonoma can afford and enjoy regularly with friends and family.



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There's another fact about Bibiana that I need to mention at this point: she's married to Jeff Pisoni, son of Lucia maverick Gary Pisoni and winemaker for all Pisoni-related projects. Together they make a collaborative label called Shared Notes, but the Cattleya project is her baby (along with the two young children she and Jeff share). Through her relationship with Jeff, along with her own professional contacts throughout Sonoma, Bibiana has forged friendships with growers all across Sonoma and its from those small farmers that she sourced much of the fruit for the Alma de Cattleya wines: a delightful rosé of Pinot Noir, a textural Sauvignon Blanc, an impeccable Chardonnay, and a blistering Pinot Noir. Sourcing affordable, high quality fruit in California today is no easy task, especially with the single vineyard craze at an all-time high. For example, if Bibiana buys fruit from a lesser-known site and the wine she makes from that vineyard gets a great review, it might motivate the grower to raise his price the next time around. It turns out that big scores and glowing critical reviews can lead to higher-priced grapes as well as bottles. "There's a tendency for some growers to think the fruit is all that matters," she explained; "As if the quality of the wine is guaranteed before the wine is even made and the winemaker has no role in that expression." For that reason, long-standing friendships play a big factor in the small Sonoma growing community. In Bibiana's case, it helps that she's well-connected and well-liked. But it's also her capability and potential to make something truly wonderful with their fruit that has growers excited about working with Bibiana these days.



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And here's the other issue: Bibiana's wines are indeed getting big scores and glowing reviews, so keeping her new under-the-radar label a secret for K&L customers won't be easy for long. Her outstanding **2016 Alma de Cattleya Sonoma County Pinot Noir** notched a sold 90 point score from the recent issue of the Wine Spectator (and a 91 from the Enthusiast), while her lone Santa Lucia Highland expression—**the 2014 Cattleya Wines "Soberanes Vineyard" Syrah**—grabbed an incredible 97 point score from Jeb Dunnuck who wrote: "I suspect it's the greatest wine made to date from this site." I tasted both with Bibiana yesterday at her winery office and was completely won over by both their freshness and their quality for the price. Her value-oriented wines were indeed superb values and her entire range of top-shelf wines tasted both expensive and meticulously cared for. I'm hoping to put aside a large chunk of the 2016 Alma de Cattleya Chardonnay for our wine club members in the near future as I thought it was downright brilliant, rich and surprisingly weighty for something that fresh. I'm not only excited to bring her wines to K&L, I'm excited to drink them at home with my wife and family members. Of course, that was Bibiana's intent behind the Alma project in the first place, to get us all fired up about sharing these wines with our loved ones, rather than burying them in our cellars in anticipation of the perfect moment. It's another very Sonoma-esque aspect of her vision: quality without pretense or pageantry. That's exactly what I'm after these days.

-David Driscoll