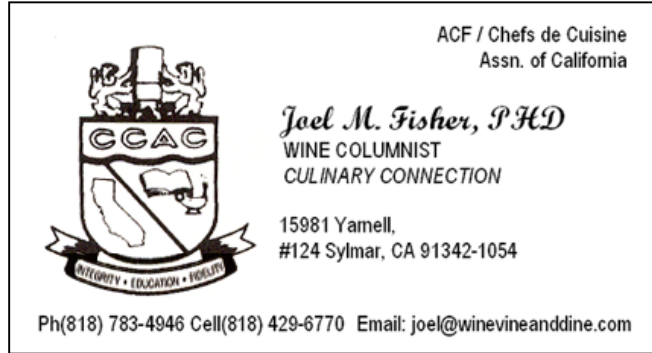
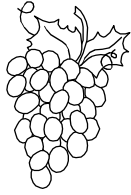


## FROM THE GRAPEVINE

BY [JOEL M. FISHER](#)



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One of the things I enjoy most about having wine expertise is that people sometimes ask for my opinion about whether a bottle of wine they possess is good, valuable, or memorable. As a result, I get privileged glimpses into other people's family histories, special events and celebrations. It's always an honor.

Recently, some wine-loving friends in the Hollywood Hills invited me to join them as they opened a special bottle inherited from an uncle. I arrived at the home of Monique Van Veehren and Tom Cook, knowing nothing more than that and expecting anything.

To my delight, I found myself looking at a **1964 [Chateau Haut Brion](#)**! The bottle, upon inspection, had lost volume and the cork practically crumbled upon eye contact. The wine poured a deep garnet red, a valuable clue that the wine had not yet totally oxidized. When we finally took a sip, I was delighted to find an exceptional wine that hadn't faded. It was jammy, with concentrated good fruit and an earthiness that did not minimize the bottle's smooth yet elegant flavors. I'm going to savor the memory of the wine's finish in my mouth for years to come. As the evening progressed, we snacked on a wonderful quiche Monique made and moved on to a **1964 Bon Mare Burgundy**, which the group thought even better than the first wine. I liked it, but I'm sentimental over great Bordeaux.

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A few days later I trekked up to the Santa Barbara area with a 35-person group of students, chefs, colleagues and alumni from the [Art Institute of California-Los Angeles](#) for the semester's tasting trip. This time we visited [Clos Pepe](#) and [Wes Hagen](#); [Rusack Winery](#) and [John Franconi](#), and [Foley Vineyards](#). We wrapped up the day with dinner at [Mollies](#), near Santa Barbara, where I dined on spicy Italian meatballs and other Italian delicacies. The restaurant has a beautiful, inviting setting that I recommend as well worth the visit.

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That same week I attended a tasting hosted at [Norman's](#) on Sunset, where sommelier Peter Bellingham had asked Wes Hagen – our host at Clos Pepe and one of the most outstanding wine educators in the country – to lead a comparative tasting of chardonnays and pinot noirs from the Santa Rita Hills of the Santa Ynez Valley.

We started with an [Au Bon Climat](#) *Santa Rita Hills Select Chardonnay 2000*, which had a nose of spice, stone, and alcohol. The flavor was a bit austere but had good acidity, while the finish was long but not complicated. Quite different was [Longoria's](#) *Chardonnay 2001*. This wine had a nice light color, lots of fruit on the nose, a sweet aroma, and a sweet flavor with traces of lemon and grapefruit. It faded on the finish.

The [Hitching Post 2](#), Frank Orsini's now-famous restaurant, offered a **Clos Pepe Vineyard** *Chardonnay 1998*, made from the vineyard's first crop of chardonnay grapes. This well-constructed wine had a smooth flavor with vanilla overtones and a touch of mint in the aroma. As the flavor evolved, the deep yellow wine turned into a mineral finish. We continued with **Clos Pepe Estate** "*Homage to Chablis*" *Chardonnay 2003*. Showing a deep golden color, this bottle possessed a flinty aroma softened slightly by lime and spice notes. The flavor was similarly mineral, with a malolactic finish. In counterpoint, we poured a **Coulais** *Chablis 2001* that was a deeper golden color and possessed a rich bouquet of rock, fruit, spice, lime, grapefruit, nut and pepper flavors.

We enjoyed two other chards, but let me move on to the pinot noirs of the afternoon. We started with *Au Bon Climat Mt. Carmel Pinot Noir 2002*. Showing a dark red color, the bottle was filled with spices and cherry-like fruit. It had an alcoholic aroma, but proved to have a long and earthy finish.

Our next bottle was corked, so we moved on to a [Melville Estate](#) *Pinot Noir 2003*, which had a good dark color, strong aromas of fruit and compote, fruit flavors, a hint of dill (honest!), and a long finish. This selection showed more aging potential than some of the others.

Next was the nice [Whitcraft Winery](#) **Melville Vineyards** *Pinot Noir 2002*, which displayed lovely berry aromas, dark colors, elegant fruit flavors, and a smooth, long finish.

We concluded by circling back to Clos Pepe. The ruby-colored *Clos Pepe Estate Pinot Noir 2002* had a nicely energetic finish, spicy flavors and earthy aromas. I found our final wine of the event to be very nice, indeed. The *Pinot Noir 2003* was a great balance of earthiness and fruitiness, spice and flint.

The tasting was extremely interesting. My kudos to Peter. I recommend getting on his mailing list for information on future classes.

And with that, let me remind you to ...

DRINK WHAT YOU LIKE AND LIKE WHAT YOU DRINK!

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