



# PINOT NOIR VIGNETTES

by Anne Krebiehl MW

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he International Pinot Noir Celebration, which takes place every year in McMinnville, Oregon, USA ([www.ipnc.org](http://www.ipnc.org)), is unique: an unashamedly hedonistic, well-orchestrated extravaganza dedicated to incurable Pinot-philia and the simple but profound pleasure of sharing real wine and food in the company of like-minded people. But there is more to it. As wine lovers meet winemakers, as strangers interact—and that is one of the best aspects of IPNC, everyone talks to everyone—ideas emerge.

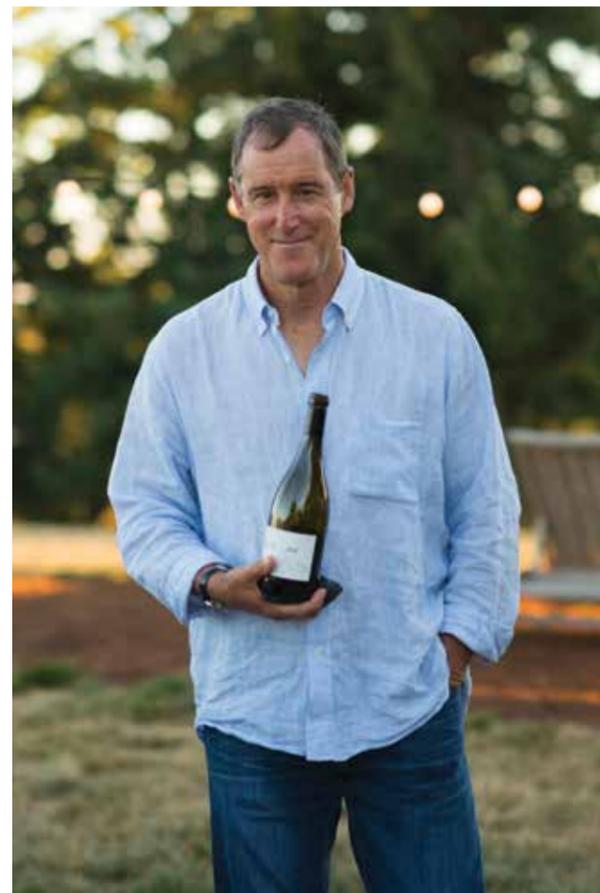
Photography by Jon Wyand

Ideas that go well beyond what is in the glass; ideas that compel these winemakers to dedicate their lives to growing and crafting Pinot Noir that is more than just wine, that is an expression of themselves, of their ideas and convictions. Here, winemakers speak about “maniacal rigor,” about “knowing their own nature,” knowing that they will never fully understand, about the humility of taking creative decisions and work that is “devotional bordering on mystical.”

**Jay Boberg**  
**Domaine Nicolas-Jay, Oregon, USA**

Jay Boberg co-founded Domaine Nicolas-Jay in Oregon together with Jean-Nicolas Méo in 2013. This entertainment-industry executive and music producer, used to working with and nurturing countless artists, is actually hands-on in cellar and vineyard. Have his ideas of the creative process been challenged by making Pinot Noir?

“In the beginning, I made fewer decisions and carried out more tasks. What I observed when I was in the music business was that I was working with the artist,” he explains. “I was not making music. I am a musician myself so understood what it was like to play and create, but in the case of working with an artist, I was really there to coach them, bring out the best in them, and help them, whoever they were, to maximize their potential. In many ways I am doing the same thing with Jean-Nicolas [Méo], who already is a very gifted, talented, and successful winemaker. But the similarities are there: Decisions have to be made; they are either creative or instinctive, or



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more logical or rational, both in the process of making music and in the process of making wine. What I have found is that there are so many places where a decision is made that has an impact on the final product. On the songwriting side, the instrumentation of the song, whether that is played by an acoustic guitar or an orchestra or anything in between. And when you're making wine, the grape-growing is almost like the songwriting: You're in the vineyard, and you're having to make many decisions, whether that's how to manage the canopy, when to pick... And that's a great example of the mix between the technical, logical, practical, and instinctive. You're reading numbers, looking at the technical aspect—but in 2015, we decided to pick even though the numbers were not where they should have been, because we tasted and found a flavor profile. We picked way before other people, and everyone thought we were crazy. That was instinct—I would call it a creative decision.

In the cellar, it's more like the recording studio. There are myriad decisions, and what's interesting is that there is no real wrong way or right way, just like music. With high-quality wines there is great variation, and that is the result of the myriad decisions all the way through. Much like when you hear a song on the radio—the same decisions have been made all the way through. So, to me it's quite comfortable; this all feels right to me, and I am not in any way, shape, or form intimidated by these decisions. I feel comfortable making them. But it also brings a lot of humility; you make these decisions, and because it's all variable, every song is different, every vintage, every vineyard is different. It's not like you can come up with a formula and apply it every time. That makes it very interesting, much like in music. You are dealing with personalities here, too. Given my background, these parallels are fascinating. Imagine you are recording, and you decide the kick drum is not loud enough. But when you raise the kick drum, it has an impact on the perception of all the other elements and the vocals. Moving one element has an impact on all the other elements, so you cannot make a decision in isolation—and the same is true of winemaking.”

But what is it that challenges him? “I think my situation in winemaking is different—I'm the rookie. I don't have the scholastic education. I have lots of experience in drinking wine and working with people who have been making wine, but as for actually doing it, I don't have the technical education. So, when I get into a situation where I am not sure, I have both Jean-Nicolas and [assistant winemaker] Tracy. Because we're a team and I have access to that expertise, I am not just going to wing it.”



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**Tahmiene and Moe Momtazi**  
**Maysara Winery, McMinnville, Oregon, USA**

For Tahmiene Momtazi and her father Moe of Maysara Winery in McMinnville, Oregon, it is their Persian culture, with its Zoroastrian heritage that informs all of their actions and finds natural expression in biodynamic farming. Father and daughter take turns to speak. “Persian culture has always respected wine. In literature, in poetry—like Omar Khayyam, Hafez, and Rumi—they don't at all talk about the aroma and flavor of wine; they mainly speak about the soul and spirit of wine,” explains Moe, who reads Persian poetry in the original language and finds it loses much in translation. “Historically, wine has been important in our culture,” he continues. “When I started digging into biodynamic farming, there was the idea that whatever you take out of nature, you put back. We want to try to prove to people that there are things that are important besides aroma and flavor, and our heritage plays a big role in bringing this element into our winemaking.”

“In ancient times, people believed there was a universal spirit,” Tahmiene says. “The term that comes to my mind is harmony. I think that the ecosystem we have built in the vineyard translates into our building, into our winemaking, into watching our environment. I hate the term ‘natural wine,’ but what we make is natural wine because it is honest. It is spiritual because I have an intuition that things will come together, that harmony will come out. We look to have a really good ecosystem. We have two horses and cattle, so we really maintain that we are not just a vineyard but a farm with different plants on the estate,” she explains, marveling that rare butterfly species just arrive, that nature assembles around her. “Wildlife is not going to happen on its own, you have to put the components together,” adds Moe. “Many people hire falcons during harvest—we have falcons and ospreys that simply live there.”

Tahmiene does not manipulate the wine: “Our wines have no mask or makeup, they are pure, but that's why they take a little longer to evolve.” She continues, “We just carry on taking the family heritage into the winery, just remembering who we are. That's the most important thing. We are Persian, and we are proud of it, and we should not shy away from that because not all Persians are Islamic, and we just need to educate people that there are different cultures that do enjoy wine.” “I am not that religious,” Moe says, but studying his background taught him that “taking care of the environment is not new; the teachings advised carefully not to contaminate water or soil, to respect fire and water, and for each person to know their own nature. These were important things.” Tahmiene says, “It's a religion that's not talked about a lot, but there are three pillars: good thoughts, good deeds, and pure demeanor. They did not care whether you were male or female, and they utilized everything in the environment.”

**Byron Kosuge**  
**B Kosuge Wines, Santa Rosa, California, USA**

Byron Kosuge, the self-confessed thinker and winemaker behind B Kosuge Wines in Santa Rosa, California, is of Japanese extraction. His beautifully pure Pinot Noirs have

Opposite: Jay Boberg, co-founder with Jean-Nicolas Méo of Domaine Nicolas-Jay. Right (top): Tahmiene Momtazi and her father Moe; right (bottom) Byron Kosuge.



something uncluttered that could easily be construed as Japanese. But is it his Japanese culture or his own personality that informs his winemaking more? Quite casually, he replies, “There was a time in my life when I was drawn to difficult things.” Asked to explain, he admits, “I suppose I'm still in that part of my life. But does my Japanese heritage influence the way I approach wine? If you had asked me that question 30, 20, or even ten years ago, I would have answered, ‘Well, not really,

**“Pinot is the variety where perfection is the most elusive. Other people might have a different idea of what perfection is, but to me it’s purity and clarity, a certain kind of expressiveness”**

at least not in any conscious way—partly because Japan does not have a traditional winemaking culture, so the two things just seemed to be separate. But as I have gotten older, I realize that it’s pretty difficult to separate where you come from culturally and ethnically from what you do. I’ve realized over the past ten years that the innate Japanese-ness that I have in me colors almost everything I do. I was not born in Japan, and neither were my parents; I do not speak Japanese, but there’s clearly something in my DNA. I’ve recently been reading on Japanese aesthetics, and there are things I recognize in the way I view those things that I did not even realize came from my Japanese heritage, that I must have absorbed from my parents and relatives, but it was never explicitly talked about. So, the answer to your question now is, yes. For certainly in the second part of my winemaking career, I have very much sought clarity, simplicity, and purity in wine aromas and flavors—not only in attempting to achieve that in the wines I am making but also in the wines I enjoy drinking. The notion of austere beauty or minimalism definitely informs my approach to aging and finishing wine; I eschew as much as I can extraneous flavors like oak and other processing flavors. It’s not that I do nothing, but rather that the finished product needs to be as transparent as possible.”

Kosuge then makes an interesting point about simplicity and perceived effortlessness in recounting scenes from a Japanese film about sushi: “It becomes clear that while many of the preparations seem pristine and pure and simple, in some cases a great deal of work and even a fair number of ingredients go into achieving the result that is simplicity and purity. That really spoke to me in terms of winemaking. It seems like a fairly convoluted process. The steps you go through in making wine are often fairly complicated—or if not complicated, involved. Like sorting grapes, looking at every single cluster—that can seem mind-numbingly dull, but there is no way around it.”

But is there not an almost devotional aspect in these mind-numbing tasks if you have the right attitude? “Yes,” he agrees, “devotional bordering on mystical. There is something trance-like: You sort of go into the zone, and it can be boring. I would submit, though, that the tolerance for the boring nature of some of these things is what separates the wheat from the chaff in your ability and intent about making good wine.” And what about Pinot Noir in particular, since Kosuge also makes Chardonnay and Gamay Noir? “The reason that making Pinot Noir is so consuming to me is because achieving that level of purity and clarity is hard. And it’s especially hard in California—it’s harder to avoid overripeness. Overripeness and overextraction are anathema, but so are underextraction and underripeness. Pinot is the variety



Photography courtesy of (top) Tenuta J Hofstätter, (bottom) Antica Terra

Top: Martin Foradori Hofstätter amid the vines used for his Barthenau Vigna S Urbano. Bottom: Maggie Harrison and guests at Antica Terra: “All the raw materials were there.”

where perfection, however you want to describe it, is the most elusive. Other people might have a different idea of what perfection is, but to me it’s purity and clarity, a certain kind of expressiveness that few other red wines have. It’s relatively easy to make decent, or even good, wine, but it’s incredibly hard to make transcendent wine, I think.”

**Martin Foradori Hofstätter  
Tenuta J Hofstätter, Alto Adige, Italy**

Martin Foradori Hofstätter of Tenuta J Hofstätter in Alto Adige grows and makes Pinot Noir, a French grape, in a borderland of Austrian and Italian confluence. “There is one thing I have to make clear right away,” he states. “Even though Alto Adige used to belong to Austria, it has a long history of French grape varieties that goes back to Archduke Johann of Austria [1782–1859], the emperor’s brother, a man of agriculture. It is thanks to him that we have these French grape varieties in our region. When my grandfather bought the Barthenau estate in 1941, we found that Pinot Noir was already planted there.”

Martin explains further: “Today Pinot Noir, alongside the indigenous Lagrein, is of great importance. Sadly, there is a tendency now to plant it widely, which backfires because Pinot Noir needs a perfect site, soil, and climate. The best zones for Pinot Noir that have crystallized in Alto Adige are all south of Bolzano in the easterly vineyards. The main area is, and will always be, Mazon, where our vineyards are, as well as the area around the village of Montan and the more southerly stretches around Salurn.”

Strangely enough, Hofstätter’s Pinot Noir—especially his Barthenau Vigna S Urbano from old vines grown on a pergola system—always has an incredibly Italian nose: something lifted, that is heady and reminiscent of Amarena cherry and bitter almond, unlike any other Pinot Noir in the world. How come? “I think it’s less to do with borderland culture than with climate. It’s not our intention or something we aim for, but something that is a natural given with our Alpine landscape and its strong Mediterranean influence,” Martin says. He knows the kind of aroma I have tried to describe but is at a loss to explain it. For him, it is just the expression of a vineyard: “I cannot think of anything that we do in order to create it, we just take something from optimal vineyards influenced by this climate; there is no kind of trickery to making the wine in the cellar to make it taste so Italian—on the contrary, the approach is more Teutonic than Italian. Pinot Noir is the most sensitive grape variety, and it has to show its DNA, its true heritage, in order to be good. That’s a curse and a blessing. Pinot Noir is a constant confrontation and a constant inspiration. I always try to understand, to comprehend, even though I also know that I will never quite understand.” He says it’s a fallacy to think that it is all about techniques: “Traveling to Burgundy, something I do at least once a year, I taste, I sniff, I ask questions about technique—but no, you have to immerse yourself completely in this grape variety in order to interpret it.”

**Maggie Harrison  
Antica Terra, Oregon, USA**

Maggie Harrison of Antica Terra, Oregon, used to make Rhône blends for the Krankls at Sine Qua Non in California. But then she was confronted with a Pinot Noir vineyard in Oregon that

made her change her life around. “I don’t think that there is somebody who is serious in their love for wine who is not beguiled by Pinot Noir,” she says.

“Really, it was not that I fell in love with Pinot Noir. I was working with Pinot Noir even when I worked at Sine Qua Non—they made Oregon Pinot Noir from a 5-acre [2ha] plot from the Shea Vineyard from 1996 to 2003—so I had worked with Pinot Noir since the very first day that I stepped into a winery. It wasn’t stepping away from Syrah or Roussanne, or even from Sine Qua Non and that style: I was invited to be part of this vineyard—and the moment I set foot on the vineyard, I saw really clearly that all the raw materials were there. They just did so many things right. It became clear from the minute I stepped out of the car, the minute I stepped on the ground, and it felt so completely different: the angle of the light, the aspect and orientation, and the culture of what was there already. It was just really clear to see that if you worked harder, you leaned in further, you loved it more, then it was probably possible to make something really special there. And I’m kind of competitive. If somebody was going to make something special there, I wanted to have a crack at it.” This resulted in moving her life and her family to Oregon.

What was her vision? “That’s the thing. I’m bad at vision. I am a tactician. I used to think that Sine Qua Non formed me, that I came to their cellar as a lump of clay and emerged as a fully formed person. I realized a lot later that they gave me an invitation to exercise what was already there: that unstoppable, that crazy tenacity, that insane attention to detail, the obsession with the work. It was never that I want Antica Terra to be x; it was that there is work to do in this place, and if I work hard enough and love it enough, there is something here to be revealed. That is my work. This is how I was trained to make wine: Keep your head down, keep your face close to the canvas, and you focus exactly on the one thing that is in front of you, no matter what—pruning a vine, designing a label, selecting a cork, doing a pump-over. Whatever you are doing, you ask, ‘What is the most beautiful thing I can do right now?’ If that is for a sound reason, you actually do it—with fairly maniacal rigor. You do that thing before you move on to the next thing, and you just trust

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that if you’re always focusing on the detail in front of you and you string all of these parts together, you actually will never know where you’re headed, but you can trust that where you end up is in the most lovely place. My hope, above all, for the wines that I’m making—the most important thing—is that they have an emotional transparency. Pinot, Syrah—it doesn’t matter; it’s more that you can feel that there was a human being with a heart behind that wine.” ■