

Jeff Virnig

Winemaker,

Sinskey Vineyards and Winery

6300 Silverado Trail, Yountville

25,000 case production

2006 marks Jeff Virnig's 19th vintage at Sinskey Vineyards and Winery. He came to Sinskey in 1988, when Joe Cafaro was consulting winemaker. Jeff had started in the wine business in 1984 at Mayacamas Vineyards, where Bob and Nonie Travers hired and let him do everything—in the vineyard, as a volunteer cellar rat, at harvest. Jeff is from Palos Verdes and credits his father with teaching him to drink wine—albeit mostly Mateus and Lancers, but occasionally a Charles Krug or Louis M. Martini with cremated steak. Jeff found he really appreciated older well-made wines. It was a 1973 Mayacamas Cabernet Sauvignon that set him “on the road.” Jeff took a degree in agricultural business at Cal Poly and headed for Mayacamas. When it snowed in 1985, Jeff, a Southern California boy, left the mountains for Joseph Phelps Vineyards, where he got a job as a cellar rat for Craig Williams. Phelps was doing Early Harvest and Gewürztraminer, Rieslings, Zinfandel, Cabernet, Chardonnay and Insignia.

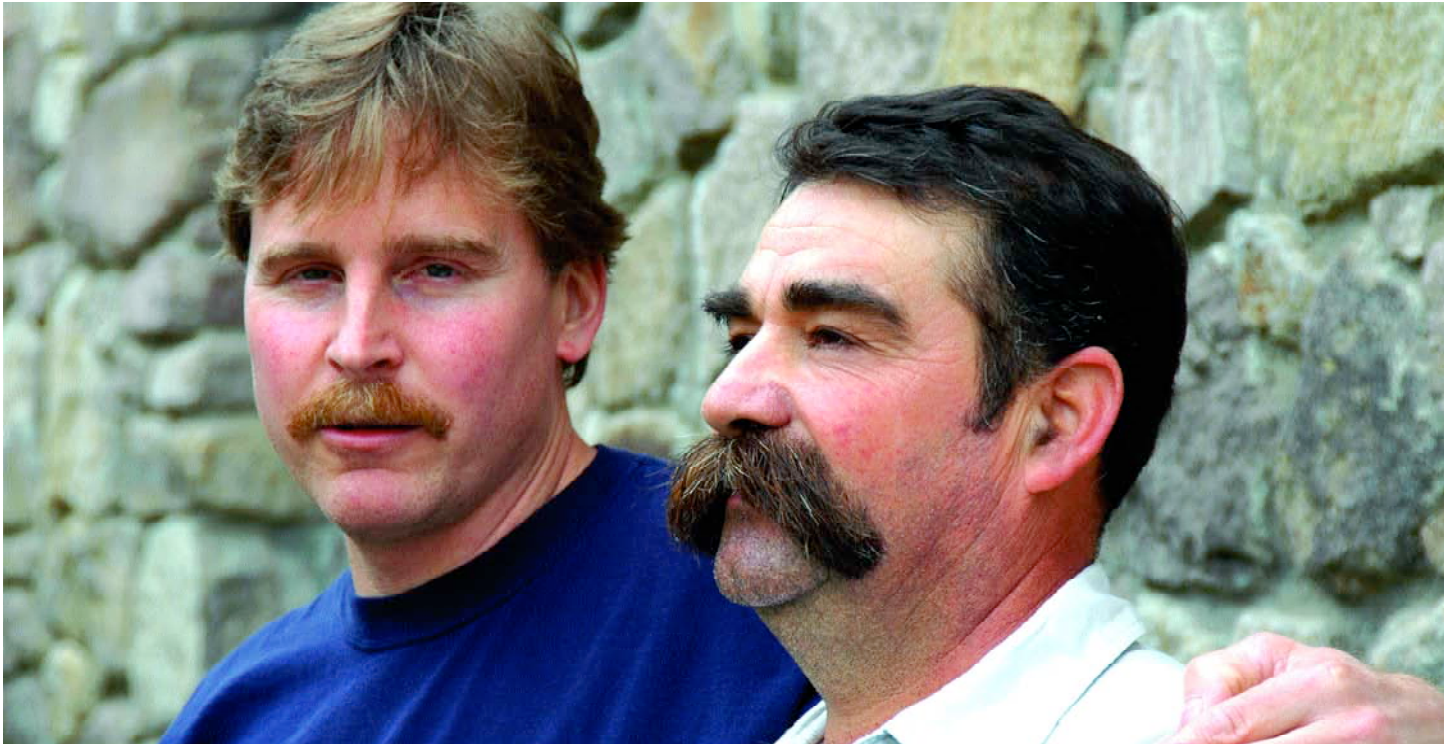
In 1988, Jeff left Phelps for Sinskey, a new winery with all its own vineyards.

Dr. Robert Sinskey had been a part owner of Acacia in the early 1980's as well as a grower, with 35 acres of vineyard in Carneros. His Pinot Noir budwood had come from selections from Napa growers David Iund on Cuttings Wharf Road and Jim St. Clair. Their budwood originally came from Martini via John Daniel's test plot at Inglenook, planted in 1954 (Professor Omo at UC Davis had made sure it was Pinot Noir). Dr. Sinskey, an eye surgeon, had traveled globally introducing his intra-ocular lens to the medical world in the late 1970's. He had already taken note of a changing cuisine, and felt Pinot Noir would eventually catch on. He wanted to be involved with wine that was food-worthy rather than athletic, Côte de Nuits rather than Côtes du Rhone, and established his Carneros Las Amigas vineyard with ten acres of Pinot Noir, ten acres of Chardonnay and fifteen acres of Merlot.

When Acacia was acquired by Chalone, Dr. Sinskey started Robert Sinskey Vineyards and Winery. His Las Amigas Vineyard became the Three Amigos; Stag's Leap District Cabernet and Merlot vineyard blocks were put in next to the winery; and a new Carneros vineyard, Vandal, was planted with Jeff's guidance. Vandal has 11.2 acres of St. Clair Pinot Noir cuttings on AX-RI. Jeff finds balanced crop loads better express its flavors of strawberry and raspberry with

notes of tobacco. There are also seven acres of Pommard that contribute sun-dried cherry and earth flavors. The Pommard came from Francis Mahoney at Carneros Creek. Vandal has six and a half acres of Cabernet Franc, ten of Merlot and ten of Cabernet Sauvignon. A newer nine-acre Capa Vineyard is in Pinot Noir from Dijon clones, Pommard, and budwood from Chalone, Hanzell and Buena Vista. Jeff thinks fruit from its west-facing Dijon vines has an in-your-face kind of flavor. Two other Pinot Noir vineyards, OSR in Napa, in Dijon clones and Pommard, and Scintilla in Sonoma, in ENTAV clones, were planted by Jeff and the vineyard manager, Kirk Grace, who joined Sinskey ten years ago. Jeff considers the southern-most Three Amigos vineyard, with the most maritime influence, to have the brightest fruit. The newest planting in Carneros, Scintilla, is planted to four clones of Pinot Noir and mixed varieties of Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Riesling and Gewürztraminer, from which their Alsatian-style field blend Abraxas is made.

Jeff began pushing for sustainable farming soon after he came to Sinskey. It took several years to make the transition from farming done under contract to in-house vineyard management. Kirk came to Sinskey in 1997. Using William Albrecht's principles as a guide, Kirk and Jeff saw the vineyards of Sinskey certified organically grown in 2001. When it is out of



Jeff Virnig and Rafael Mendoza, long-time winery assistant

whack in a vineyard, Jeff says, since nature abhors a vacuum, there is pestilence—phytophthora and other pathogens can proliferate in anaerobic conditions. However, vintages are consistent if you stay away from synthetics like fertilizers, synthetic nitrogen and herbicides. Jeff likens vineyard soil structure to a three-legged stool, its fertility comprised of biological, chemical and physical elements. The biological plus the chemical shapes

physical aggregate stability—a soil system. Minerals are taken up by biological elements, and a breaking down of organic matter alters and enhances physical structure. In a vineyard in balance, tonnage is consistent, color is good, cell-density is greater. Fruit has more flavor; it can be picked later with no stress, and the more robust leaves have fewer sucking insects (Jeff says Sinskey is pretty much minimalist at leaf-pulling). 400 sheep manage the

cover crops, although there is some tillage with spaders (Jeff contrasts spaders, which break the soil, to discs, which smear it). Carneros is known for difficult soils, mostly clay. The vineyards originally contained far less organic material than they do now. Yields average three tons per acre, when everything is balanced.

Although Dr. Sinskey retired in 1998, his son Rob has carried on the passion for

Pinot Noir. Jeff feels there are plenty of wines made for early drinking. At Sinskey they prefer to make wines with more acid, with more structure for aging. Sinskey produces about 10,000 cases of Pinot Noir. Without acquisition of additional vineyards, Jeff has been able to make selections of fruit from different blocks to balance production. Since 2001, he has made three vineyard-designated Pinot Noirs: Capa, Vandal and Three Amigos and a blend, Four Vineyards, which he considers more masculine in style—it spends more time in barrel in the caves before bottling.

For the Pinot Noir program, Sinskey picks at 22 to 23 1/2 °Brix into half-ton picking bins. Fruit goes to the crusher, destemmer, and through open rollers into open-top stainless fermenters. Sinskey ferments 30 percent whole berry. The first day or two they pump over, and then punch down. On the third or fourth day, yeast may, or may not be added. Jeff prefers no cold maceration, which he feels modifies the sense of place. Fermentation takes ten to fourteen days. They press off at one percent, drain and press the solids—the higher the pH, the “fatter” the Pinot Noir and the more hard press. Some of this is left in and the rest gets separated (not as in their Bordeaux program). Pinot Noir is aged in all French oak barrels, 25-30 percent of which are new. After pressing, the wine settles for

five days, is racked, settles for five days, is racked again, and then barrel-aged in extensive caves dug in 1988 and added to in 1998. After malolactic fermentation is complete, Pinot Noir is racked, and racked again as needed before it is ready to bottle ten to fifteen months later.

During the interview, Sinskey was bottling rosé; their bottling line does 3,000 bottles an hour (50 bottles a minute) and Jeff was keeping a sharp ear out for any change in sound. The rosé is made from Pinot Noir from Los Carneros fruit. They call it Vin Gris of Pinot Noir. The rosé program began as an experiment with fruit from vineyards that were not coloring up. Sinskey made 500 cases of rosé in 1991. Since 1993 they have made it 100 percent whole cluster press—it is definitely not a saignée. They keep vineyard blocks separate for fermentation with added yeasts in stainless tanks at 40° for 72 hours, after which the new rosé is racked, settles, spends a month in stainless tanks at 54-58°F—there is no malolactic fermentation, is blended and bottled. Jeff calls their rosé the perfect springtime wine.

Sinskey makes 300 cases of Zinfandel from a Carneros vineyard planted in 1988 with Storybook Mountain cuttings (most likely clone I). Some years they can do a Late Harvest Zinfandel when conditions are right. There is a full-time crew of five in the winery and fifteen hands in the

vineyards; extra help is added at harvest. They get occasional deer and turkeys at the winery vineyards; in Carneros there are ground squirrels and gophers, which eat a lot of vegetation—the owl boxes are all occupied. Sadly, the as yet unsold 2002 and 2003 vintages from Carneros vineyards were lost in a recent Vallejo warehouse fire.

The mission at Sinskey is to assure a sense of place and balance in American wine-making. They believe wine and food are natural, healthy partners. Rob Sinskey's wife, Maria, recently published her cookbook, *The Vineyard Kitchen*. Jeff thinks the most important aspect of making wine is to convey a sense of place, which they do now, with everything in balance. But, in ten years? Who knows what will be important. At the time the winery was started, the Burgundy model fit better than the others. Jeff has visited Australia and been to France several times. In France, Jeff tasted the wines with the same people who pruned the vines and tilled the fields. He admires the tradition of family winemaking where three barrels is precious and so evocative of that place. And, when you ask, “How long have you been doing this?” in France they answer, “400 years.” Jeff looks forward to the time when American winemakers will be able to give this same reply.