

★ PINNACLE RIDGE ★

Winery

Pennsylvania producer wins accolades and repeat customers

By Richard Leahy, East Coast editor

On the surface, Pinnacle Ridge Winery seems typical of most Pennsylvania wineries. Its production and facilities are small, it serves a diverse crowd in the Pennsylvania Dutch countryside, and its product line ranges from sweet *labrusca* to dry red to sparkling wines.

On closer examination, however, we see a winery that has built a loyal following through consistently fine, *terroir*-driven wines, popular events, attention to customer service and a cleverly segmented product line. We also see a highly successful business relationship between a small winery and a farm vineyard that provides 70%-75% of the grapes for the winery's wines. Critical acclaim and customer loyalty have led to plans for future production and facility expansion. As a small, regional winery, Pinnacle Ridge is a model of success from which others can learn.

After graduating from the University of Wisconsin in 1988 with a Ph.D. in chemistry, Pinnacle Ridge founder and winemaker Brad Knapp came to Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley to pursue a career as a chemist. At the back of his mind, however, was the notion to someday start a winery. Knapp discovered wine in graduate



(L to R) Pinnacle Ridge estate vineyard manager Josh Ellis, contract grower Wayne Luckenbill, marketing director Christy Allen and proprietor/winemaker Brad Knapp. Photo: Kim Stimeling

PINNACLE RIDGE VINEYARDS

- **Founded:** 1990 (winery licensed in 1993)
- **Location:** Kutztown, Pa. (Lehigh Valley AVA)
- **Principals:** Brad Knapp, proprietor/winemaker; Christy Allen, marketing director; Josh Ellis, estate vineyard manager; Wayne Luckenbill, principal contract grower.
- **Production:** Approximately 5,000 cases
- **Main Varieties:** Chambourcin, chardonnay, cayuga, vidal
- **Estate Vineyard:** Pinot noir (1 acre), chardonnay (1 acre), chambourcin, cabernet franc and cabernet sauvignon (1 acre total).

school, and had begun making it as a hobby.

"A friend from the Erie region inherited a home winemaking kit in 1985, and we got juice and grapes from Wollersheim Winery (in Wisconsin)," he recalled. "I found I really enjoyed winemaking."

While working as an analytic chemist, Knapp began searching for a good, affordable site for his future winery. In 1990, he purchased property in Berks County, which came with a large antebellum barn (since restored to traditional Pennsylvania Dutch hex designs), a contemporary farmhouse and a few acres of well-drained soil on a ridge.

Since 3 acres of estate vineyard wasn't enough to supply a commercial winery, Knapp struck up a friendship with Curtis Luckenbill, a colleague at Air Products and Chemicals, whose farm was located 5 miles away. Luckenbill was looking for a more profitable crop than corn or beans, and after Knapp explained the benefits of wine grape cultivation, Luckenbill planted 2 acres of vidal and cayuga in 1991. The vineyard has since been expanded to 15 acres.

Luckenbill's first vines supplied Pinnacle Ridge Winery's initial 1993 vintage, and since then, his fam-

ily's Round Ridge Farms has sold its grapes exclusively to Knapp (see sidebar on page 42).

Knapp kept his day job at Air Products and Chemicals until 1998, when the winery's growth allowed him to reduce his chemist role to that of a part-time consultant. He continued consulting for the company until 2004, when running Pinnacle Ridge became his full-time job.

THE LEHIGH VALLEY

Pinnacle Ridge Winery is located on south-facing benchlands below Blue Mountain, the first ridge of the Allegheny Mountains in the Lehigh Valley. The soil type at both Pinnacle Ridge and Round Ridge Farms is Beddington, a well-drained mix of shale and sandstone. Vintners in the area produce wines similar in style to those of the Finger Lakes region of New York, with bright, fresh fruit and crisp acidity. With more growing degree-days than the Finger Lakes (2,400-3,000), Lehigh Valley red grapes generally achieve greater ripeness than those in New York.

The local star cultivar is the red French hybrid chambourcin (Joannes-Seyve 26-205), which

in normal vintages ripens fully and with moderate tannins, while retaining a fresh cherry crispness reminiscent of gamay. All the wineries on the Lehigh Valley Wine Trail – hailed by members as the closest wine trail to New York City – produce at least one chambourcin, using the variety to brand their collective identity.

The Lehigh Valley was given American Viticultural Area status (AVA) in 2008, and has earned a reputation for quality – eight of the last nine state Governor's Cup awards have gone to wineries in the Lehigh Valley, including Pinnacle Ridge in 2003 (for its 2001 chambourcin) and 2006 (for its 2005 vidal ice wine).

IDEAL VS. REALITY

Despite the regional success of chambourcin, Knapp said he believes in the potential for pinot noir in the Lehigh Valley. "When it's good, it's very good, and it hits heights in this area that other reds don't reach" in terms of Brix levels and quality, he said. However, Knapp acknowledged that the variety is something of a gamble in the East due to the region's climate and relative humidity; pinot noir grapes



Pinnacle Ridge Winery's 3-acre estate vineyard includes pinot noir, chardonnay, chambourcin, cabernet franc and cabernet sauvignon. Photo: Kim Stimeling

often rot on the vines before they ripen. "Financially, a good dry red pinot will only work here in one out of every two or three years."

Knapp initially planted pinot noir – along with chardonnay – at Pinnacle Ridge, with the intention of specializing in sparkling-wine production. Although sparklers helped build the winery's reputation, it has become a small part of the Pinnacle Ridge portfolio.

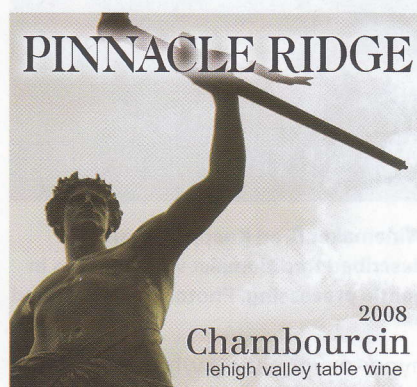
"We quickly realized we'd never sell all our production as sparkling wine, so we moved into table wines," Knapp said. Of the winery's 20 labels (split about 50-50 between dry and sweet styles), only two sparkers remain: the Brut Pinot Noir Rosé and Cayuga Extra Dry. Pinnacle Ridge is best-known today for its dry pinot noir and chambourcin wines. Annual case production is currently at 5,000 cases.

DRY REDS IN A COOL REGION

Despite the legendary difficulty of growing and making fine pinot noir in the East, Knapp has succeeded impressively with both the still red and sparkling rosé wines. The 2007 pinot noir is clean, complex and Burgundian in style, with

bright red and black cherry fruit, firm acidity, autumnal hints and exotic spice reminiscent of Burgundy's Chambolle-Musigny. The brut rosé (two years *en tirage*) has a much darker color than typical for the category, with vibrant cherry flavors and lingering, clean acidity. Pinot noir clones used include gamay, #7 (Frank clone) and Mari-afeld (Knapp said "the jury is still out" on the various Dijon clones available to growers). Pinot meunier is also blended into the still pinot noir.

Pinnacle Ridge produces three different wines from chambourcin:



Pinnacle Ridge Winery makes three different wines from chambourcin, which are among the winery's top sellers.

two dry and one semi-dry. Knapp explained that chambourcin is rot-resistant (due to loose clusters), is more consistent year-to-year than red *vinifera* varieties, and ripens reliably.

Initially, yields average 3.5 tons per acre for both pinot noir and chambourcin, but after cluster thinning mid-season, about half of the potential crop is dropped. "Reducing yields, increasing whole berries and gentle processing make all the difference" for quality in his red wines, Knapp said.

Red wines account for half the production at Pinnacle Ridge; in addition to pinot noir and chambourcin, the lineup includes syrah, merlot, Veritas (a red Bordeaux-style blend only produced in the best vintages), Quaff, a semi-sweet blend of chambourcin and pinot noir, and Trio, a blend of syrah, cabernet franc and merlot, jointly made and sold by Pinnacle Ridge, Manatawny Creek Winery and Allegro Vineyards.

All the Pinnacle Ridge wines reflect the *terroir* of the area, which results in wines that are fresh and fruit-driven in style, combining ripe fruit with well-balanced acidity, and minimal noticeable oak. The most popular wines in the tasting



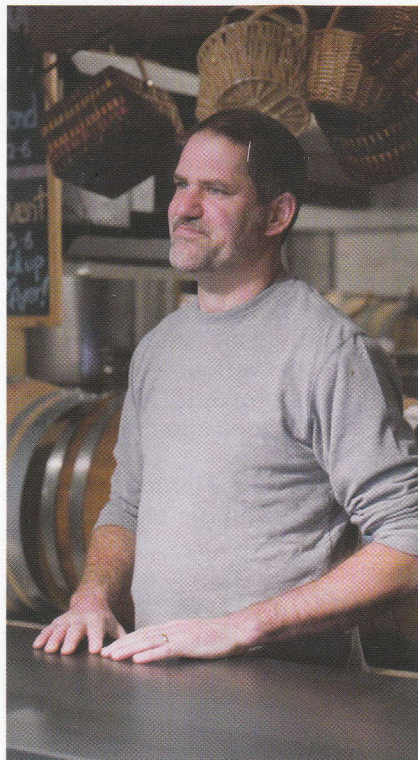
room currently are the Quaff blend, "naked" (unoaked) chardonnay, cayuga, riesling and the dry chambourcins (annual case production for each ranges from 350 to 450 cases).

GENTLE WINEMAKING PHILOSOPHY

Knapp sees himself as having a "traditional" philosophy as a winemaker. The main element in his approach is gentle handling of grapes and wine to preserve fresh fruit character.

In the field, he trains pickers to drop damaged fruit, and uses a delicate E-1 Vaslin Bucher de-stemmer for whites (from KLR Machines), which leaves a lot of whole berries. "One reason I got it was for pinot noir," Knapp said. An automated pre-sorter (Le Trieur by P&L Specialties) removes dirt and MOG pre-crush, and after crush, whites go to a gentle pump with a large hose, then to a Wilmes bladder press, which does multiple cycles at lower pressures to avoid phenolic extraction.

In 2009, Knapp experimented with the Old World technique of



Winemaker Brad Knapp is a self-described traditionalist who believes in gentle processing. Photo: Greg Raymond

hyper-oxygenating white wine juice with gelatin. Gelatin is added to fresh juice and then injected with

air to hyper-oxygenate; the theory is that the solids will cling to the bubbles and the phenols will oxygenate and drop out, while the juice below the gelatin is protected (the juice is removed from the bottom while the gelatin cap floats on the top). This also prevents the need for chilling and settling the juice.

With reds, Knapp is moving toward more gentle processing, with more whole berries in the fermenter. "My first pinots were tannic," he said. "I didn't like them. The pump on the de-stemmer beat them up a lot." He adjusted the de-stemmer to drop more whole berries into bins, and by processing more slowly, he increased whole-berry content in the fermenter by 50%-60%. Knapp does not currently own a crusher, seeking to "keep the wines more elegant," he said. For the 2009 harvest, he took his gentle-handling approach one more step. The de-stemmer left whole berries, which went to the sorting table, and the reds were then dropped straight into bins with no pumping (with the exception of one batch of merlot).

This was a response to a light vintage, without the full ripening

EXCLUSIVE CONTRACT GROWING

Round Ridge Farms is a 15-acre vineyard owned and managed by the Luckenbill family. It sells its grapes exclusively to Pinnacle Ridge.

In the early years, excess vigor and small crop size were issues with VSP training, until Knapp hired viticulturist Richard Smart to evaluate the vineyards in 2002. Smart recommended dividing the canopies (Scott Henry) to solve both issues, which has worked well. Now, cane pruning and divided canopies are standard, with some of the hybrids on a high-wire cordon.

Both parties describe the relationship as a successful partnership. "Our two organizations work well together," said vineyard manager Wayne Luckenbill, the son of founder Curtis Luckenbill.

"While it's financially beneficial for Round Ridge, it's still a gentleman's agreement," explained Knapp. "We'll buy whatever we need from them that they can provide," though Knapp acknowledged that he procures some varieties, such as con-

cord and niagara, from the Erie region, where they are common and inexpensive.

In negotiating prices, "We make a proposal for fruit price, and they usually take it," said Knapp, adding that he tries to pay more than market rate. The 2009 vintage was a hard one for the Lehigh Valley; Luckenbill lost a lot of fruit to both frost and rot. "I know they spent a lot for pickers to sort at harvest, due to rot, so I added a 10% bonus this year," said Knapp. "It's about risk-sharing. This year I ate the loss due to frost, and Wayne took the loss on rot."

Pinot noir and chambourcin are the two most yield-sensitive cultivars Knapp and Luckenbill grow, so since the 2006 vintage, those varieties are contracted on a per-acre basis instead of per-ton. Under this contract, both pinot noir and chambourcin are cluster-thinned to one cluster per shoot. "The focus is on getting the fruit ripe," explained Luckenbill. "We're more than willing to take the risk to get a bit more ripeness." — R.L.

of grapes and the evolution of tannins. Knapp said he would definitely crush the reds more in a vintage like 2007. But this total whole-berry, carbonic approach to reds in a light vintage "can be a valuable tool" for emphasizing delicate fresh fruit and minimizing harsh phenols. He ferments reds in 1.5-ton or 2-ton plastic bins. For the pinot, he likes to get high temperatures early, for maximum extraction, gradually letting the temperature drop. He ferments the wine for 7-10 days, gassing the bins when the cap falls, pumps the wine while transferring solids by bucket, allows for settling for one to three days, then sends the wine to barrel.

Production at Pinnacle Ridge has grown from less than 1,000 gallons in 1993 to 12,000 gallons in 2008. Knapp has plans to expand production and facilities at the winery later this year, adding storage for 3,000-4,000 more gallons, with capacity growth of 30%.

THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE



Pinnacle Ridge marketing director Christy Allen strives to give tasting room visitors a "better-than-average" experience. Photo: Greg Raymond

Aside from the quality of the wines, two main elements account for the success of Pinnacle Ridge Winery: a focus on the customer experience in the tasting room, and

an active destination tourism program.

Christy Allen, Knapp's wife, is a professional fashion designer and has designed Pinnacle Ridge's wine labels since 2003. In 2008, she took over the winery's marketing and administrative duties. "As good as the wine is, if the customer

doesn't have a better-than-average experience, they'll find a friendlier winery," Allen explained. "Our feedback is great on the customer experience here, and word-of-mouth is good."

The Pinnacle Ridge tasting room is charmingly rustic, located in the basement of an 1851 barn. It



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shares the space with the barrel room, separated by a counter. Original hand-hewn timbers support the ceiling, giving a sense of long-standing heritage and tradition.

Allen introduced two notable innovations in the tasting room: a refundable tasting fee with a wine

ing long-term repeat business," explained Knapp. Currently, club sales account for 20% of the winery's total sales.

While the general economy struggles, Knapp and Allen have found that their visitation and revenues are actually increasing.

substantial tourism. Knapp said that spontaneous drop-in traffic brings in a "very diverse crowd" – and he has a wine to please every palate.

Ninety-five percent of Pinnacle Ridge Winery's wine is sold at the winery or at off-site events, with the remaining 5% going to restau-



Nearly all of Pinnacle Ridge's wine sales happen in the tasting room, but the winery is working to increase placements at local restaurants. Photo: Kim Stimeling

purchase (not a common policy at most area wineries) and a six-taste policy. In the interest of responsible consumption, pours are limited to one-half ounce each. "It's also palate fatigue after six wines," Allen said. "This gets customers to focus more on the wines."

Pinnacle Ridge's case club has grown to 1,000 members in just two years. It has no membership fees, no time limits, and the fourth case purchased is discounted 30% instead of the usual 10%. Members are on a separate e-mail list, and are invited to at least one dedicated winery event each year. "The emphasis is on encourag-

Although they do not track the number of visitors that pass through the tasting room each year, wine sales – more than 90% of which take place in the tasting room – increased by 15% in 2009 over 2008. Pinnacle Ridge is a member of two local wine trails (the Lehigh Valley Wine Trail and Berks County Wine Trail) and the winery hosts about five of its own events each year.

The winery's location also plays an important role in attracting visitors. It's just a few minutes off Interstate 78, yet in a rural setting within the Pennsylvania Dutch countryside that generates its own

rants. Knapp said he expects the restaurant percentage to grow as part of its brand positioning as a leader in *terroir*-driven, fine dry local wine. "Local restaurants have been increasingly buying our wines in the last two years," he said.

Knapp noted that he has seen visitors move toward drier wines after attending the winery's food-and-wine-pairing classes. And, he said, fans of drier wines tend to spend more money and become long-term customers. And Knapp is clearly in it for the long haul. ■

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