Wines way out west

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As our thirst for distinctive pinot noir evolves in California, so do the regions in which we grow these wines and the ways in which they taste increasingly relevant.

The West Sonoma Coast Vintners are capturing a specific set of circumstances within a subset of the vast Sonoma Coast and Russian River Valley AVAs (American Viticultural Area), what they like to call "California's Côte d'Or," or Gold Coast.

Everything about the West Sonoma Coast ties back to the Pacific Ocean, which provides a maritime climate of relatively cool daytime temperatures with relatively warm nighttime temperatures. Wind, fog and humidity are balanced; rainfall is above the norm but not typically an issue during the growing season.

The coolness allows the grapes to ripen longer on the vine, slowly accumulating sugars, a helpful scenario for gaining aromatics, bright cherry and raspberry flavors and buoyant natural acidity over brooding power.

Want to find out for yourself? The vintners are hosting the West of West Festival the first weekend of August in Sebastopol. It's a chance to learn about and taste through an incredible line-up of wines.

Still in the early stages of examination, the West Sonoma Coast includes several small sub-regions: Annapolis, at the northern reaches of the Sonoma Coast AVA; Fort Ross-Seaview, newly recognized as its own AVA; Occidental; Freestone; Green Valley, also an AVA of its own; and the Sebastopol Hills.

Here's a look:

Annapolis lies 4 miles from the ocean and is high up, reaching elevations of between 700 and 1,000 feet, so the vineyards fall within a cool inversion layer. The soils are Goldridge predominantly and the growing sites often surrounded by redwood trees.

The wineries here include Peay, and the pinot noirs are usually described as "Catherine Deneuve," marked by tart red and black fruit, earth, Asian spice, tea and forest floor.

The vineyards in and around Occidental are elevated and at or below the fog line but farther from the coast than Freestone or Sebastopol Hills, so the fog tends to break up earlier in the day. Extreme temperatures are rare. The wines are often quite herbal and more black cherry than red.

Charles Heintz farms his sought-after chardonnay, syrah and pinot noir here. The grapes go to Littorai, Migration, Patz & Hall, Landmark, Ceritas, DuMol, Williams Selyem and many others, including the Charles Heintz wines themselves, made by Hugh Chappelle.

A stone's throw from his site is Hillcrest Estate Vineyard, the source of pinot noir for Senses Wines, a new project run by three friends, all of whom grew up in Occidental – Christopher Strieter, Max Thieriot and Myles Lawrence-Briggs, whose parents own Hillcrest.

Senses also makes pinot from nearby Tanuda Ridge Vineyard and B.A. Thieriot Vineyard, Max Thieriot's family vineyard, made famous by the likes of Littorai, Williams Selyem, Neyers and Rivers-Marie.

Carroll Kemp of Red Car Wine also is developing vineyards near to here, atop bluffs overlooking the ocean. Small Vines Wines has its MK Vineyard also here, planted in 1999 on a bluff 800 feet high, about 10 miles from the coast.

In Freestone, closer to the coast, filtered sunlight contributes subtle tannins and high acidity and what's known as Freestone spice, a zingy complexity akin to clove, cinnamon or cardamom. The pinot is accented by pomegranate and pine needles.

Joseph Phelps Vineyards established an outpost here years ago to make cool-climate pinot noir and chardonnay and it runs a popular tasting room along the Bodega Highway at the intersection with the Bohemian Highway.

Overlooking the highway and the ocean are two important vineyards: the Platt Vineyard, which sells grapes to Ramey Wine Cellars, Littorai, Scherrer, Radio-Coteau and Red Car; and de Coelo, Benziger Family Winery's coolest pinot noir site, also used by Radio-Coteau.

Green Valley fog and Goldridge soils combine for a taste of bright cherry and cranberry compote and again, that cool-climate spice, as well as an earthiness, soft tannins and layers of black tea.

Many wineries buy grapes from the preponderance of growers in Green Valley, with Iron Horse Vineyards among the winery estates making pinot noir, chardonnay and, of course, sparkling wines here. Martinelli makes its Bondi Home Ranch Pinot Noir from the Water Trough Vineyard in Green Valley, while Kosta Browne is among those who source from the valley's well-known Keefer Ranch.

In the Sebastopol Hills, inland slightly from Freestone and, depending on one's perspective, overlapping slightly with the Petaluma Gap, there is lower rainfall than Occidental or Fort Ross, plenty of Goldridge loam and vineyards largely within or below the marine layer.

This was the epicenter of Gravenstein apple growing at one point. The pinot here is characterized by floral aromatics, including lavender, and nuanced cranberry. Littorai and Martinelli are based here.

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