Wine Ink: Notes from the Coast

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Just as the late May snows here is Aspen were dissipating, word came on the west wind that, after an 11-year quest, the vintners of the West Sonoma Coast had finally been granted approval for their American Viticulture Area (AVA) designation. From now on, the wines that are made in the 50 or so vineyards that are located in the new AVA are free to show on their label that they are products of the West Sonoma Coast AVA.

The first thought was “Bravo!” for the growers and producers who have long toiled to convince the Alcohol and Tax and Trade Bureau, the arm of the U.S. Treasury Department responsible for approval of the now 262 AVAs across America, that their region deserved special recognition for

being unique and specific in the world of wine. Prior to this designation, those who made wines in these rugged coastal mountains were part of the broader Sonoma Coast AVA, a region that includes a much larger area and one that is considerably less exact in terms of its identity.

But now that producers in the West Sonoma Coast AVA can label their wines with a more accurate and defined geographic distinction, they can begin the process of educating wine consumers about why wines from this place are indeed special and unique. And, perhaps most importantly, why they are deserving of perhaps higher prices than some other wines produced from similar grapes grown in other regions that do not share the geographic character of the West Sonoma Coast AVA.

This may seem like "inside baseball" to general wine consumers. But if you love the elegance of Pinot Noir wines made from producers like Hirsch Vineyards and Peay Vineyards and you treasure the acidity and subtlety found in Chardonnay made by wineries like Flowers and Ted Lemon's Littorai, then this designation is something that you should be pleased to hear as well.

In wine location, and terroir (the French word defining the effect the actual, specific environment has on a given wine) are everything. There is a reason why a Cabernet Sauvignon grown in the Rutherford AVA of the Napa Valley sells for three figures while one grown in a less well-known location garners half that. Being able to explain, through a designation on a label, where a wine is from, allows for the beginning of a discussion about how the West Sonoma Coast differentiates its wines from those grown in other viticultural regions.

Anyone who has ever driven up Highway 1 knows that this stretch of coastline running from just south of Bodega Bay to Gualala at the Mendocino/ Sonoma County line in the north is amongst the most rugged and dramatically picturesque landscapes in all of America. The Pacific roils below the cliffs and the mountains climb out of the sea to as high as 1,800 feet. The vegetation is vivid green close to the Pacific as it is bathed in deep dense fog. The wind blows consistently and the daytime temperatures on the Coast average a good 10 degrees below those found farther inland. At night, the coastal influence keeps the region a touch warmer as well so there is a bit more consistency in temperatures allowing grapes to ripen a touch slower.



Needless to say, the work involved in growing grapes in this environment is not for the faint of heart. The roads are narrow, and it is still blissfully lonely out on the West Sonoma Coast. But for those who endeavor to make wines there, this is a rewarding designation.

Earlier this year I tasted wines here in Aspen from one who does just that. Chris Strieter is a member of the board of the West Sonoma Coast Vintners Association and his winery, called Senses, is based in Occidental, California which lies within the boundaries of the new West Sonoma Coast appellation. The wines were delicious, and the story of the winery was equally robust.

In 2011, three local guys in their early 20s who had known each other since they were in grade school in Occidental (go Harmony Dragons!) but had gone on to different lives, got together and decided they should make some wine. Christopher Strieter, Max Thieriot and Myles Lawrence-Briggs had all grown up around vines and Max's family owned prestigious vineyards and sold grapes to some significant producers. But at the time they had no significant business experience in the wine world.



With few resources, they determined that they should focus on the fruit – and location,- for their first vintages. Their first releases in 2011 were 112 cases of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from the esteemed Dutton Ranch vineyards. A good choice. Early on they developed a relationship with Thomas Rivers Brown who had an established a reputation as one of the most sought after winemakers in the business. A trade of fruit for winemaking led to a partnership and they were on their way.

Today they sell virtually all of their 4,000-plus case production with a majority going to their members. There are two Estate wines including a Chardonnay for the original B.A Thieriot vineyard which is just a few miles from the ocean and a Pinot Noir called from Day One from the

Hillcrest vineyard in the Green Valley. Both have received stunning reviews. They also produce a number of other single vineyard and appellation wines under the Sonoma Coast and Russian River Valley designations.

Each of the three brings something unique to the partnership. Max Thieriot, who grew up on the B.A. Thieriot vineyard is responsible for branding, marketing and communications when he is not off on a film set. An actor and director, he starred as Navy SEAL Clay Spenser in the CBS/Paramount + series "SEAL Team." A vintner who acts or an actor who makes wine? You decide.

For his part, Myles Lawrence-Briggs is the point guy in the vineyards which puts him on the backroads of Sonoma during harvest working with Thomas Rivers Brown to coordinate all facets of the various vineyards. As a boy Myles spent time in the vineyards for harvest with his family before he made his way to Boulder. There he received a degree in English Literature at the University of Colorado, not the usual line of study for a vintner.

The third wheel is Christopher Strieter, who brought his wines to Aspen for the tasting I attended. The tall and intense Streiter took his talents from Occidental to Harvey Mudd and then the Claremont McKenna College where he received his master's in Finance. Naturally he runs the business aspect of the Senses wines.

This trio has made their mark in the West Sonoma Coast in just over a decade by committing to a very Burgundian model of trusting the land as their North star and focusing on producing wines that speak of their place of origin. Now that place has an official designation and Senses will play a role as the West Sonoma Coast becomes even better known for the Pinot Noir and Chardonnay wines of substance it can produce. "We are so proud to grow grapes in this, the place where we grew up in and it's just an honor to be a part of this growth in the region." Strieter says of the new appellation that Senses is a part of.

Unfortunately, the subtitle of this piece also mentions a passing. Last week in Bolinas, Calif., just a few miles south of the West Sonoma Coast, in Marin County, a great winemaker and personality named Sean Thackrey passed away. Thackrey, who named his wines after the stars (Orion, Pleiades and the like) was an unabashed original who made wines in a ramshackle barn on his property overlooking the art and hippie enclave that is Bolinas.



“Some people expect it to be polished but it’s just a big f-ing mess,” he said in a charming 2012 YouTube piece titled “Meanwhile, the Bolinas winemaker,” which features hand drawn interpretations of his home and work created by artist Wendy MacNaughton.

Originally smitten with Pinot Noir and the wines of Burgundy, he began to experiment with making wine in 1979 and gravitated toward Rhône varieties such as Syrah. His philosophy was “Put the wine in and see what happens” and he was an inspiration and a creative force for many up-and-coming winemakers who are guided by his eclectic influences.

RIP Sean. Good luck Senses. Welcome West Sonoma Coast.

