California's West Sonoma Coast Earns Its Own AVA

Wine Enthusiast · Virginie Boone · September 2, 2022

https://www.wineenthusiast.com/culture/wine/californias-west-sonoma-coast-ava/

The West Sonoma Coast is a wonderland of cool-climate Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and small pockets of Syrah—wines of great intensity and concentration yet fresh and balanced in alcohol; difficult to grow but exquisite to drink. And in May of this year, it became recognized as its own American Viticultural Area (AVA).

Why it took so long to define a region so distinct that no one who drinks wine could deny its uniqueness is anybody's guess: Politics? Effort? Lack of vision? Maybe bureaucracy, because every other piece—people, sense of place and persistence—has long been present.

Never in question was the push and pull of the Pacific Ocean on these coastal vineyards. Every aspect of the West Sonoma Coast's character and quality can be traced back to the 76 miles of steep, jagged coastline that borders Sonoma County's western side. The closer you get to the ocean, the more challenging it is to farm. For those willing to take it on, the achievement includes Pinot Noirs, Chardonnays and Syrahs of elegance and intensity with great balance. For grape growers and winemakers of a particular breed, such a landscape can't be resisted.

The most persistent and focused of that breed joined together more than a decade ago to fight for their cause and make the case that coastal wines are not the same as other wines.

"We advocate for wines with a clear identity that evoke the complexity of our region and authenticity of our community, wines with balance, integrity, character and nuance," Littorai winemaker Ted Lemon said in the early days of the newly formed West Sonoma Coast Vintners. This is cool-climate viticulture on the edge, where grapes struggle to ripen on the margin of viability. "These are wines of a place," notes Jamie Kutch of Kutch Wines, who works with several sites within the West Sonoma Coast. "The region is still youthful—it's the future."

Depends on How You Define “Coast”

The broader Sonoma Coast was designated as an official AVA in 1987, but is often derided as a huge, nonsensical 750 square miles stretching from Carneros through parts of Bennett and Sonoma valleys and up to the Mendocino border.

Not only is it the largest AVA in Sonoma, but it also encompasses most of the Russian River Valley AVA. That it was formed primarily to allow certain wineries to include all of their major vineyards within one boundary and use “estate bottled” on their wine labels didn’t sit well with many.

The backlash eventually led to the formation of the West Sonoma Coast Vintners and the increasing use of the term “true” Sonoma Coast to emphasize and distinguish the growing areas that lie truly within reach of the coast, a distinctly unique universe from sites in Windsor or Petaluma. This alliance banded together a set of sites 5 to 8 miles from the ocean along a collection of coastal ridgetops from northern-reaching Annapolis south to Freestone and Occidental. Here, cold marine air and heavy fog create challenging conditions and help to moderate temperatures, with daytime highs typically cooler and nighttime temps warmer than even a few miles inland.

At the highest elevations in the middle is Fort Ross-Seaview, where many now-established names first planted wine grapes. Some of these pioneers, including David Hirsch, carved 27,500 acres (less than 600 of them planted) out of the larger Sonoma Coast into the Fort Ross-Seaview AVA in 2012.

That left Annapolis, Occidental and Freestone hanging. The first petition to create an official West Sonoma Coast AVA to include all of these areas in one was submitted in 2015.

In 2022 it finally became real—141,846 acres within the established Sonoma Coast that also contains the entirety of Fort Ross-Seaview. Of those, only 1,028 acres are planted to 47 commercial vineyards.

Higher Ground

At the northernmost reach of the West Sonoma Coast, Annapolis is the least traveled and developed. Andy and Nick Peay and Vanessa Wong were among those who took the first step, finding a site to plant in the mid-1990s and releasing the first Peay wines in 2001. Campbell Ranch is another Annapolis name to know. Kutch, Alma Fria, AldenAlli, Anthill Farms and Davis Family are among those that source grapes from the area.

The wines from this wild, high-elevation pocket are full of intensity and spice, yet remain light and balanced in style, similar to their counterparts in Fort Ross-Seaview.

Within Fort Ross-Seaview, Flowers' Sea View Ridge Vineyard rises to 1,875 feet. Hirsch is 1,500 feet high with a wide mélange of thin soils along the San Andreas Fault. Carlo Mondavi's RAEN (Research in Agriculture and Enology Naturally) Winery exists at 1,025 to 1,270 feet in iron-rich sandstone. Slopes can be steep, with eroded soils that are typically thin and high in sand content, allowing for good drainage.

"Proximity to the ocean feeds into so many things—the area is super unique, the vineyards have their own identity," notes Chantal Forthun, winemaker at Flowers Vineyard and Winery and a longtime West Sonoma Coast Vintners board member. "Soil is not the defining factor of the West Sonoma Coast, because of the chaos of the San Andreas Fault—neither is elevation."

Pockets of ranches have survived within these ridges and hilltops for generations (with the occasional illegal marijuana grow best kept out of sight), but it wasn't until the 1970s when curious iconoclasts like George Bohan (Bohan Vineyard), Daniel Schoenfeld (Wild Hog Vineyard) and David Hirsch (Hirsch Vineyard) thought to plant wine grapes here.

Many followed, including Joan and Walt Flowers of Flowers Vine yards and Winery; Helen Turley and John Wetlaufer of Marcassin Vineyard; Lester and Linda Schwartz of Fort Ross Vineyard and Winery; and Jayson Pahlmeyer of Wayfarer Vineyard.

The Three Sisters Vineyard is another name for Charles Ranch, an early outpost of the Charles family, originally settled in 1860. George Charles started planting wine grapes in 1982. His daughter Carolyn married Lee Martinelli Sr. from another Sonoma County family with deep roots in grape growing and winemaking.

McDougall and Hellenthal are prominent vineyards that sell grapes to other producers, including Kutch, Dutton-Goldfield and MacRostie. Carlo and Dante Mondavi's RAEN Winery, founded in 2013, has established a high-elevation vineyard in Fort Ross-Seaview, and sources from Charles Ranch as well.

"Instead of being concentrated by the winemaker's hand, wines are concentrated naturally and more balanced in the vineyard is my take," says Kutch. "They age well, too, because of that inky concentration."

Where the Ocean Meets the Forest



South of Fort Ross-Seaview and north of Petaluma Gap, Occidental and Freestone are on the outskirts of the Russian River Valley, on the way to Bodega Bay and the state's famous Highway 1, which traces the Pacific Coastline.

"It's cool-climate, coastal," says winemaker Kurt Beitler of Bohème Wines. Beitler helped develop and sources Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Syrah from the English Hill, Occidental Hills, Stuller and Taylor Ridge vineyards in Occidental. His first vintage was 2004. "You get the benefits of longer ripening time without extreme ripeness," he adds. "There's a greater depth of complexity at still modest alcohol, with beautiful acidity and freshness."

Summa Vineyard was planted in 1979 on a ridgetop on Taylor Lane and soon drew the notice of Burt Williams of Williams Selyem. Charles Heintz took over his family apple ranch and started planting grapes in 1984.

Littorai was the first to vineyard-designate a Heintz Chardonnay and has one of the longest running contracts with Hirsch, as well as another site, The Haven, planted at 1,200-feet elevation on a ridge above Occidental. Steve Kistler started developing the first of several vineyards in Occidental in 1995.

In 1989, Warren Dutton planted the first section of the B.A. Thieriot Vineyard just down the road, another Littorai favorite, the same year the Cobb family began planting Coastlands. Second-generation Thieriot, Max Thieriot, who grew up in Occidental, founded Senses Wines with childhood friends, Christopher Strieter and Myles Lawrence-Briggs in 2011 and are making exquisite coastal Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

RAEN also has a vineyard here, near the vineyards planted in 2000 by Joseph Phelps for its Freestone Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Calling it Bodega Vineyard, RAEN associate winemaker and winegrower Melanie McIntyre farms the 4×4-meter-spaced vineyard by hand, describing the region as, "where the ocean meets the forest."

Just north of Occidental on the way to the coast at Jenner, above the town of Duncans Mills, winemaker Seth Cripe of Lola Wines has planted Clos de Sequoya, a monopole at 1,000-feet elevation planted to Pinot Noir surrounded by 10,000 acres of nature preserve, another ocean-meets-forest site.

"The maritime climate means more rain, more general moisture in the air and in the soils," Flowers' Forthun explains. "You need that kind of humidity to thrive and with the Pacific bringing weather in and out, it is keeping everything cooler. As climate is evolving with dryness and drought and changing rapidly, the grapevines benefit from that."

Bringing all these sites and winemakers together under one roof is a now a legally defined region highlighting proximity to the Pacific. This proximity is poised to take on increasing significance for growers, winemakers and consumers alike—especially in our ever-warming world.

This article originally appeared in the October 2022 issue of Wine Enthusiast magazine.

Bottles to Try



Emeritus 2018 Pinot Hill West Estate Grown Pinot Noir (Sonoma Coast); $65, 95 Points. From a dry-farmed estate site, this showcases the beauty and wonder of the Sebastopol Hills area—a spicy, earthy and intensely perfumed expression of the grape. Juicy and supple on the palate, it delivers a depth of dark red fruit, blueberry, nutmeg and a hint of citrus that brightens the richness. —*V.B.*

Flowers 2019 Sea View Ridge Pinot Noir (Sonoma Coast); $95, 95 Points. From an extreme coastal site at 1,875-feet elevation, this wine offers substantial underlying power within a context of elegance and refinement. Tension and grip persist in its youth, allowing nuanced layers of ash, mountain berry and earthy forest tones to build over time. —*V.B.*

Hirsch 2019 Block 8 Pinot Noir (Sonoma Coast); $105, 97 Points. From a part of the estate planted in 1993 in iron-rich soils, this wine is powerfully graceful, delicate and complex. White pepper, stem and strong tannin structure provide a savory seriousness that is lifted and lengthened by intensively focused acidity and mineral-like wisps of stone and sea. —*V.B.*

Kutch 2017 McDougall Vineyard Pinot Noir (Sonoma Coast);$60, 93 Points. Perfumed in rose and lavender, this is an earthy, balanced and brightly light vineyard-designate that shows savory earthiness and lifted acidity. Wild strawberry and rhubarb give it a touch of fruit. —*V.B.*

Senses 2019 Day One Hillcrest Pinot Noir (Sonoma Coast); $135, 95 Points. This wine is made from the producer's Hillcrest Vineyard, which went into the very first vintage in 2013. Delicately layered, it is floral on the nose and crisp in red fruit on the lengthy palate and offers a tremendous amount of structure, balance and grace. —*V.B.*

West Pole 2018 Pinot Noir (Sonoma Coast); $30, 94 Points. An estate-grown wine given 30% whole-cluster fermentation, this is a fleshy and lively red wine, broad in appeal and funky earthiness. Forest, black tea and spicy white pepper dominate a lighthearted palate of silky texture and elegance. —*V.B.*