The Wine Independent

"West Sonoma Coast AVA"

Written by Lisa Perotti-Brown MW

Published July 27th, 2023

"We have been working on this new AVA for over seven years. So, to see its approval is a bit surreal."
- Christopher Strieter of Senses Wines

Cold Soul

Last year, the West Sonoma Coast AVA was approved and can be applied to the labels from the 2021 vintage onwards. It's within/cleaved off the larger Sonoma Coast AVA, aiming to highlight those seriously cool climate areas that hug the Pacific coast-line. Sonoma Coast AVA currently covers around 500,000 acres (4700+ devoted to vines), whereas the new West Sonoma Coast AVA is just over 140,000 acres (1000 of it planted) with about 47 commercial wineries. It's worth noting that this new West Sonoma Coast AVA encompasses all the Fort Ross-Seaview AVA, which is now an AVA within an AVA, and within an AVA (Sonoma Coast), a situation permitted in the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau rules. Wineries within the new West Sonoma Coast boundaries can therefore choose to continue to use Sonoma Coast or West Sonoma Coast on their labels, or, if within the Fort Ross-Seaview boundaries, they can continue to use this AVA. Only a few have started using the AVA, although many of the winemakers I spoke to who qualify for the new AVA intend to use it on their labels.

"The distinguishing features of the proposed West Sonoma Coast AVA include its topography, geology, and climate," states a published document on the US Government's Federal Register. "The topography of the proposed West Sonoma Coast AVA is characterized by the steep, rugged mountains and ridgelines that form the Coastal Ranges. The summits of these coastal mountains can exceed 1,000 feet. The high elevations of the Coastal Ranges provide areas for vineyards that are above the fog layer. The ridgelines also create areas at lower elevations that are sheltered from the heaviest marine fogs, where viticulture may take place successfully within the fog line."

The document highlights the distinct marine-based sedimentary rock geology make-up of the West Sonoma Coast and, critically, the premise that its climate is more influenced by marine winds and fog than the more inland regions of Sonoma County. "Daytime temperatures are generally cooler and nighttime temperatures are generally warmer than in the more inland regions," the successful petition asserted. The petitioning vintners concluded that the impact of the elevation, fog, and proximity to the ocean means that areas of West Sonoma Coast are often 10 degrees Fahrenheit cooler than parts of the Sonoma Coast AVA that are further east. In short, these conditions benefit the slow, even ripening of high-quality Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

This new AVA is excellent news for consumers seeking true cool climate Pinots and Chardonnays.

Yes, at no less than nineteen different Sonoma AVAs now, so many different viticultural boundaries and names can be confusing. But for engaged consumers who have a clear idea of thestyles of wines they love, the West Sonoma Coast name on the label can be a very useful guidepost. Before the journey to gain approval for the new AVA even began, a group of like-minded wineries banded together to form the West Sonoma Coast Vintners association to help educate consumers and trade. There are currently 28 winery members, including high-profile names such as DuMOL, Joseph Phelps, Littorai, Occidental, Senses, and Wayfarer.

In May this year, Christopher Strieter from Senses Wines helped to organize a tasting for me of a collection of the West Sonoma Coast Vintners' new releases. Note that the Senses wines were not included in this tasting since I already tasted them earlier in the year. Likewise, DuMOL, Littorai, and Occidental are reviewed separately in feature articles. During these tastings, I had the opportunity to sit with most of the West Sonoma Coast winemakers and/or winery owners to learn a little more about their vineyards and stories.