WINE ADVOCATE

"California, Sonoma County: New Bottlings from Senses Wines"

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Since its beginning in 2011, Senses has earned a reputation as a top producer of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in Sonoma County. The brand and its celebrity winemaker, Thomas Rivers Brown, who works with dozens of brands across Napa and Sonoma, is widely recognized. Outside the winery, what truly makes Senses special is its proprietors' access to some of Sonoma's best vineyard sites, particularly in the Russian River Valley and on the western Sonoma Coast. In 2023, Senses expanded its portfolio with three new bottlings: a West Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir and two cuvées composed of fruit from the Dutton-Bodega Vineyard, a spectacular new site planted to Pinot Noir by the Dutton family.

Senses was founded by Christopher Strieter, Max Thieriot and Myles Lawrence-Briggs, three childhood friends who grew up in Sonoma County. Along with three estate vineyards (B.A. Thieriot, Hillcrest and Bodega Thieriot), Senses sources fruit from eight different growers, including Charles Heintz and the Valdez and Kanzler families. This winter, I drove out to Occidental to meet with Christopher to taste the recently bottled 2023s and visit the new Dutton-Bodega site. Planted in 2018, the first fruit—offered to a select few clients, including Senses—is just coming online. (I also visited Steve Dutton to learn more about the new vineyard.)



Although it's only a five-minute drive from Senses' B.A. Thieriot Vineyard in Occidental, the Dutton-Bodega Vineyard feels especially remote. Access to the site cuts through private property, and the 18-acre vineyard is tucked inside a redwood forest. It sits at 900 feet in elevation in view of the Pacific Ocean less than six miles to the west. It immediately strikes me as a grand cru site with its influence from both the ocean and the dense forests, a quality unique to Sonoma County and one that is perceptible in the Senses wines, particularly the Pinot Noirs. "The Duttons made this their crowning achievement," Strieter said.

The Dutton family secured a long-term lease for the former apple orchard and developed the vineyard from scratch. Swan and Calera clones were planted on 1616C rootstock, selected to combat nematodes, which are a typical problem in old apple orchards, Steve Dutton told me. The soils are fine, sandy Goldridge loam. The Duttons hired experts to help plan the vineyard, dig soil pits, install a pond and build infrastructure for rainwater drainage. "There's a lot to consider," Steve explained. "It's a huge investment. You start planning two years before you put a vine in the ground." The Duttons farm 1,200 acres of wine grapes for over 80 wineries, but the Dutton-Bodega Vineyard feels singular. "As soon as I walked onto the property, I knew it would be a great place for a vineyard," Steve continued. "We designed it to be a showstopper."

The Senses lineup of 2023s is impressive. The Pinot Noirs are elegantly structured, although both varieties excelled in this vintage. The wines have pure, expressive aromas and flavors, and the long, cool growing season resulted in vibrant acidity and a strong sense of place. With their concentration and energy, they are also wines to consider cellaring over the next decade or more.