SENSES: IN THE HEART OF WEST SONOMA COAST

A trio of childhood friends are making outstanding Pinots from top vineyards

By James Molesworth



Dutton Bodega Vineyard amid the site's towering redwood trees

On the label of a Senses bottle, the second "e" in Senses is rendered with a "3" as an homage to its three founding partners: Christopher Strieter, Max Thieriot and Myles Lawrence-Briggs.

It's also probably no coincidence that if you drew a radius on a map that encircled the three Northern California towns of Occidental, Freestone and Bodega, all of Senses' vineyard sources would fall within it. The area around these towns is now the epicenter for the qualitative surge of Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir—and three is the magic number.

This surge has drawn in plenty of outside interest and investment, including with the purchase of Platt Vineyard by AXA Millésimes in 2022. But this project from a trio of childhood friends is a decidedly local story. They were all born in the same year, 1988, and grew up together in Occidental.

"Having joint birthday parties happened more than once," Thieriot says. "Remember the laser tag in town?" he adds with a head nod toward Strieter.

Although games of laser tag were top of mind at that age, the friends were already starting to catch the winemaking bug. Lawrence-Briggs and Thieriot grew up in grapegrowing families, while Strieter started off in the wine industry early, spending a few years outside the Occidental area working with Jess Jackson. By the time they hit their early 20s, the three decided to establish their own wine project. They started by buying a vineyard from Lawrence-Briggs' family in 2011.

Called Hillcrest, the vineyard was the first site in Occidental planted to wine grapes, in 1974, originally to Grey Riesling vines. Those were grafted over to Chardonnay in 1984, likely a result of the success that neighboring Charles Heintz Vineyard was having with the varietal. In 1994, Littorai owner and winemaker Ted Lemon made a Chardonnay from the site, among the first labeled as Occidental. A full replant occurred in 2005, this time to Pinot Noir, and today the 2.5-acre site is broken into 4 parcels, with Swan, Calera, 828 and 777 clonal selections each getting their own block. The Senses Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Day One 2023 (93 points, $135)—named for being the trio's first single-vineyard bottling—offers plump black cherry fruit with a hint of chocolate nibs, backed by notes of black tea and singed anise and carried by fresh acidity.

Hillcrest stands as a piece of local viticultural history that the Senses team is rightfully proud to have in its stable. But after the relatively easy first step of buying it, the learning curve got steep.

"I grew up on my dad's tractor and spent plenty of time suckering vines, catching gophers, whatever," Thieriot says. "It was fun. But looking back it was obvious we had no idea how much work was involved with a vineyard. After we bought the Hillcrest site, it took the three of us a month and a half to prune it. We realized very quickly that we needed help."

Senses' debut 2011 vintage yielded 100 cases, using purchased fruit under the hand of Sonoma-Cutrer winemaker Terry Adams. The 2012 vintage was the first to use the Hillcrest fruit, this time with Carroll Kemp handling the winemaking.

During this period, the friends were being pulled in different directions. Thieriot was trying to get as much time as he

ALINA TYULYU


Christopher Strieter (left) and Max Thieriot at the B.A. Thieriot property

could in the vineyards while juggling his work in television as an actor and writer. Lawrence-Briggs was pursuing a career as a lawyer on the East Coast. Strieter went all in on Senses, parlaying his business experience with Jackson and other wineries into managing the day-to-day operations. As the label was growing, getting a permanent winemaker was next on the to-do list.

"Those guys are really into it. They grew up out there, They're Sonoma Coast through and through."

—Thomas Rivers Brown

As it turned out, Thomas Rivers Brown was buying fruit from the Thieriot family's vineyards at the time for his Rivers-Marie label. "I had no idea who he was at that point," Thieriot says. "But he seemed cool as I got to know him a bit through the family connection. We were talking vineyards one day and suddenly it was a handshake deal on the spot."

"Max's mom lives across the street from Summa, and I had been buying that fruit since 2007 for Rivers-Marie," Brown says, referring to his own Summa vineyard. "It's a very congenial relationship. We handle the farming and give some fruit back to Senses." Brown has been handling the winemaking for Senses since 2013.

Among the other vineyards the winery now sources, the Bodega Thieriot vineyard sits prominently on the ridgeline shared with Occidental and Platt Vineyard. The rootstocks were planted in 2016 and top-grafted to Pinot Noir in 2019, the benefit being a well-established root zone to produce higher quality sooner. The vineyard came on line with the 2021 vintage, so '23 marks only its third vintage, but with an 8-year-old root system. Older, deeper roots are critical here, since dry farming is the preferred method. (All of the farming is handled by the Valdez family.)

Featuring the area's typical Goldridge sandy loam, the site encompasses 8.7 acres of vines that are all Calera clonal material. The Pinot Noir West Sonoma Coast Bodega Thieriot Vineyard 2023 (94, $135) embraces a flattering display of boysenberry, mulberry and black cherry compote flavors enlivened by a succulent energy through the finish, picking up warmed fruitcake, singed anise and mesquite notes.

Another recently developed vineyard is the Dutton Bodega site, planted in 2018. Under long-term lease by the Dutton family, the 19-acre site sits at nearly 900 feet of elevation. The partners worked out a deal to source some fruit from it starting in 2023, good timing as the vintage looks to be a potential benchmark for Pinot Noir in California.

The Pinot Noir West Sonoma Coast Dutton Bodega Vineyard 2023 (94, $105) is the showiest of the three bottlings, brimming with kirsch and boysenberry pâte de fruit notes that are almost explosive, supported by succulent energy as iris, violet and anise notes fill in on the toasty, generous finish. Backed by a solid tannic spine, the wine should age well for a decade.

In general, the Senses profile is fruit-driven, with the wines being a shade riper and darker than those of Rivers-Marie, despite the two labels sharing the same winemaker and a few of the same fruit sources.

"It's all done with open-top fermenters, with little to no whole cluster," Brown says. "It's all pretty much the same in terms of vinification and *élevage*. It's really the blocks that make


Myles Lawrence-Briggs in Hillcrest

the differences. At Bodega Thieriot, for example, they take the lower blocks and I take the upper for Rivers-Marie. It's all picked at the same time, but those lower blocks are a little riper."

Today, the label totals 4,500 cases annually, with a 60-40 split in volume between Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, totaling nearly a dozen different bottlings. The partners don't rule out a little more growth, up to around 8,000 cases. "If you get a chance at a great vineyard, you can't say 'no,'" Strieter says.

So far, the Senses team has been mostly saying "yes," parlaying their local roots and knowledge into relationships with many of the leading growers in the area, whose prized vineyards include the likes of Kanzler, Dutton Ranch, Silver Eagle and Terra de Promissio.

"Those guys are really into it," Brown says. "Plus, they grew up out there. They're Sonoma Coast through and through, and it's exciting to watch because they're going to be doing it for a long time."

It's been a seemingly quick 14 vintages, but there's already some wistful hindsight as to how far they've taken their project. "When we started, we didn't know where we were going," Strieter says. "But we knew we were going somewhere." □

JAK WONDERLY

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