

Elaine Chukan Brown

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Jasmine Hirsch takes the lead

For the first time, wines from this famous Sonoma Coast estate have been made by a member of the Hirsch family. Elaine is treated to a preview of the results.

Hirsch Vineyards has begun to release the Pinots from their 2019 vintage and in January I met with Jasmine Hirsch and consultant winemaker Michael Cruse to discuss and taste through the wines.

The vintage is significant in that for the first time, second-generation vintner Jasmine Hirsch made the wines, representing an increased connection between the people leading the farming and the person making the wine. During the growing season, Jasmine guides the site's viticulture in collaboration with her father David and long-time vineyard manager Everardo Robledo. Previously, the vineyard team managed the site separately from the work done in the winery. It's a change in Hirsch wines that bodes well for the future.

'I want the vineyards to keep getting better' – healthier, more expressive, with even finer balance – 'and to show me through the wines what is happening in the vines', says Jasmine. 'I am a farmer's daughter. I have always been biased to the farming, and felt it was very important. But now I understand better the importance of the winemaking.'

Hirsch Vineyards has long been considered a leader in California Pinot Noir, as well as farming in the more extreme conditions of the northern California coast. Though founder David Hirsch did not launch his own winery until 2002, the site became recognised as a pre-eminent source of Pinot Noir thanks to winemakers such as Burt Williams of Williams Selyem, Steve Kistler through his eponymous winery, and Ted Lemon of Littorai. Each released vineyard-designated Pinots from the site that were received with fanfare. Williams Selyem and Littorai continue to make wine from Hirsch, as does Ehren Jordan of Failla. Previously, Peay made Hirsch Chardonnay, and Under the Wire made sparkling Pinot. With its location, quality and

the attention it has brought to farming in coastal extremes, it isn't too much to say Hirsch has helped shift California wine history.

Fort Ross-Seaview

The first vines went into the Hirsch property in what is now known as the Fort Ross-Seaview AVA in 1980. David, pictured above, purchased the site at the end of the 1970s to find a more back-to-the-land existence, a trend not uncommon in the United States at the time. The area was painfully remote and populated by only a few other families also wishing to find some privacy.

Russian explorers supported by Unangan and Sugpiaq peoples of coastal Alaska were the first to plant vines in this far Sonoma Coast in the early 1800s. They established a trading outpost, a small village and Fort Ross, and with it a small vineyard planted to a now-lost cultivar gathered from cuttings off a vineyard in Peru. The Russian settlement waned by the second half of the 19th century and the vineyard with it. A few other sites appeared in the coastal mountains of the area prior to Prohibition but for the most part the mountains of the Sonoma Coast were devoted to sheep and not much else. But in the 1970s sheep farming became a less reliable income source and the region began to change.

The Bohan family planted the first modern vineyard of the area beginning in 1972, establishing Zinfandel, then over the next few years also Riesling, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. First fruit from the site was harvested in 1978. The health of the Bohan vineyard stood as a successful test case and a few other families began to make plans. But when David planted his first Pinot, there were not even a handful of vineyards in the area.

Even today these mountains are remote. The ruggedness of the country means it will never be easily accessible. When I drove out to Hirsch in the fall of 2021, I hit a pothole so deep I thought I had left half my car behind on the road. Thankfully I was wrong as cellphone service is non-existent here. Even so, interest in wine from the region has only grown. Fort Ross-Seaview was recognised federally as a certified American Viticultural Area in 2012. David Hirsch helped write the successful petition. It includes 27,500 total acres (11,130 ha) but less than 600 (243 ha) are planted to vines as most of the land is too steep. Instead, vineyards grow between 920 to 1,800 ft (280–550 m) elevation on ridgetops, some in view of the ocean. The slopes are covered in mixed conifer and pine forest, providing an aromatic signature and moderating influence.

At Hirsch less than 10% of the property is planted to vines. In large sections, the slopes are too steep to plant but David has also worked to preserve the forest and the team grows various

steep to plant, but David has also worked to preserve the forest and the team grows various gardens. The Hirsch site sits at 1,500 ft (460 m), usually well above the fog line, and from the higher portions you can see the ocean a mere three miles (5 km) west.

Growing the second generation

Growing up in an area so remote was a mixed blessing. It wasn't always clear Jasmine would return to be part of the Hirsch venture. Her undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia was in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, with a concentration in Japanese. In her career, she focused on business, working in Prague, Amsterdam and New York before deciding she was ready to return to Hirsch.

In 2008, she came back to California to begin working alongside her dad as director of sales and marketing. Much of her time was spent on the road working as a sort of brand ambassador while also managing accounts.

On the coast, David oversaw Hirsch as a whole, leading the business while working with the winemaker who oversaw cellar choices, and with Robledo as vineyard manager. Robledo began at Hirsch in 1989, living on-site and raising four kids there. David and he have worked together for more than 30 years now, bringing an intimacy to farming the vineyard not always common in California.

The winemaking side was a little less consistent. Though David is not a winemaker, he was always involved in the winery. In 2002, Vanessa Wong, who was previously with Peter Michael and is now at her family winery Peay a bit further north on the far Sonoma Coast, became Hirsch's first winemaker. Mark Doherty followed, initially working alongside Wong, then taking over winemaking until 2009. Ross Cobb, now at his family winery Coastlands (also on the extreme Sonoma Coast a bit further south), stepped in the following year, bringing with him relevant experience from his tenure at Flowers, also in Fort-Ross Seaview, and his own family's vineyard also planted in 1980. For two years, from 2016 to 2018, Anthony Filiberti led winemaking at Hirsch before leaving to make wine at Anthill Farms full-time. His departure raised the question of how best to move forward in winemaking. But changes in the family's approach created a new opportunity.

In 2011, Ted Lemon asked David if he'd consider farming the Littorai block of Pinot Noir at Hirsch organically. Like much of California at the time, the site had been farmed by conventional means. David agreed to trial it for a year. Then, by the end of that growing season, he became so convinced of the long-term power of abandoning conventional farming, he began converting the entire property not just to organics but to biodynamics. David and Robledo

converting the entire property not just to organics but to biodynamics. David and Robledo solved the particular needs of biodynamically farming Pinot Noir on a high-elevation, coastal site and by 2014 all of Hirsch was farmed biodynamically.

In adapting the property to biodynamic practices, David's love for the vineyard intensified. He realised he wanted to devote more of his time there. Jasmine had become familiar with the business and market response to the wines, so David began increasing her involvement in the winery and business side of Hirsch. The wines would continue to be made by their winemaker, but Jasmine would be more engaged in that part of the business to allow David to devote his attention to the winegrowing. Then in 2014 things changed.

While working on the property, David was injured in a tractor accident that led to more than a year of recovery and long-term mobility issues. Suddenly, the transition was urgently needed. Jasmine stepped into an interim position of managing all of the business, while Robledo continued to manage the vineyard. In 2015, when David returned to living on-site he also returned to operational oversight of the vineyard but made Jasmine officially general manager of Hirsch. The family was able to have an all-terrain wheelchair made, allowing David to continue his vineyard work hands-on. To ensure a balance between David's health and the vineyard's, he, Jasmine and Robledo developed a three-person approach to overseeing the farming together.

By 2018, when a new winemaker was needed, Jasmine was already intimate with not only the business but also the vineyard. Consulting winemaker Michael Cruse, of Ultramarine and Cruse Wine Co, encouraged Jasmine to lead the winemaking as well, even though she had not made wine before.

From site to winemaking

'The hardest part of winemaking', Cruse told me, 'is knowing the vineyard. Having that connection helps know what the wines should taste like. It's not just the most important thing; for a site as complex as Hirsch, it is *the* thing.'

Cruse argued that Jasmine's work with her father and Robledo means she sees first-hand key factors such as where soil depth impacts vigour or yield, which blocks ripen faster or less evenly, when clusters consistently have a lower skin-to-juice ratio and so also higher flavour or tannin impact. Any winemaker can learn to adjust to the fruit character of a site as it comes into the cellar, but when there is a stronger connection between vineyard and winery, such responses can begin with the farming and synchronise all the way through the cellar. It means more

harmony in the overall process and, often, less intervention.

Even with winemaker changes at Hirsch, certain characteristics consistently show themselves. The site naturally delivers plenty of tannin, for example. Most of the vineyard leans towards red-fruit notes harmonised with resinous forest elements and savoury undertones.

It is an attribute of a strongly expressive site that its innate personality dominates that of the winemaker. But even so, the difference between making good versus great wines from a vineyard of strong character can come down to the intimacy of the winemaker with the site.

Thanks to the position of Hirsch along an active geological fault line, the parent material and resulting soil types, as well as soil depth and drainage, vary significantly. That same active fault line also creates undulations in the slopes that result in very diverse aspects. And though the vineyard sits a mere three miles from the ocean, autumn weather sometimes brings unexpected heat spikes that at higher elevation also mean profound sun exposure. The combination means the tone of that red fruit, the concentration and texture of tannin, and how quickly the grapes ripen, all vary by block and season to season. Working with Robledo and her father, Jasmine is deepening her knowledge of these variations. And as David has explained previously, the more in tune the winemaking is, the easier it becomes to recognise farming needs as the wines reveal what is happening for the vines. More-transparent winemaking improves farming over time.

Stepping into the role of lead winemaker, Jasmine finished blending the 2018 wines started by Filiberti. Then in 2019 she led the entire process, working with Robledo and her father in the vineyard, guiding picking decisions, then making the wines with consulting assistance from Cruse. In some ways, she was also assisted by the character of the vintage.

Tasting the wines

‘The 2019 vintage was warm and generous, but not too hot’, said Jasmine. The weather on this part of the coast can vary significantly from what happens further inland. ‘There is a lot of intensity from the fruit, but the wines are not super-concentrated.’

Responding to vintage conditions, Jasmine shifted the winemaking slightly, with Cruse helping her hone her winemaking choices. She wanted to respect the phenolics of the site while avoiding the risk of bitterness or hard tannin. So the Pinots were made with more of an infusion approach, shifting away from more aggressive manual extraction, with the aim of integrating tannin rather than avoiding it.

When it comes to a more phenolic site, Cruse explained, ‘it is not about simple tannin

extraction but instead tannin management so that you keep it proportional to what the vineyard is giving'. A more tannic site can still produce elegant wines even with elevated phenolics when the fruit is worked with this in mind. Producers are rethinking extraction in

Pinot Noir in regions around the world. 'It is not about simple extraction but how it is handled', according to Cruse.

Jasmine also slightly reduced the levels of both whole clusters and new oak. Texture and tension in the final wines became an important focus. She wanted to capture mouth-watering freshness with no sacrifice of flavour.

We opened the complete line-up of nine Pinot Noirs. These included the Bohan-Dillon, which is the only wine that is not entirely estate fruit as it includes Pinot Noir from the neighbouring Hellenthal vineyard, which David also helped plant. Two wines represent an overall perspective of the Hirsch vineyard as they are made from a blend of barrel selections from across the site: the (comparatively) higher-volume San Andreas Fault bottling and the more focused and longer-ageing one labelled Reserve. Hirsch vineyard is planted across two forks of a ridgetop and thus there are two bottlings that each represent a different side of the property, the West Ridge and the East Ridge. Raschen Ridge and Block 8 are each bottled from specific block selections of the vineyard. We also tasted two mailing-list-only wines, The Family Blend and the block-specific (and new) Maritime bottling.

After our tasting I took the bottles home and tasted through them again that evening, and then each of the next two days. I wanted to get a sense of how the wines might age. Several of them just got better with even more air.

Tasting through the wines I am enthused for the direction Hirsch is headed. The 2019 line-up felt as though it delivered more transparency to site, a certain finesse and a better balance of concentration, structure and flavour than other recent vintages. The 2018 wines, for example, in comparison felt under-fruited, as though a bit more extraction would have better showcased the distinctions of the site. Checking in on more recent vintages, Jasmine feels positive about how the wines are showing so far from her third year as winemaker, 2021. Fruit quality was good though yields were lower.

In 2020, the highest portions of the vineyard were exposed to smoke coming in on the ocean from the autumn fires that dominated so much of the west coast. However, the lower portions of the vineyard are more protected by surrounding forest and entirely different air currents. They were not exposed to smoke and are expected to deliver wines.

With the 2019 Pinots, the wines delivered a level of finesse, juiciness and energy I find compelling. But several of them also taste as though they simply couldn't have been grown anywhere else. There was overall an incredibly subtle winemaker's imprint. When I

commented on it to Jasmine, she was quiet for a moment then admitted, 'I never expected to become a winemaker. I am my father's daughter. I was focused on the vineyard.'

Hirsch also makes estate Chardonnay but, keeping the focus on Pinot Noir, I did not include it in the tasting described below.

UK importers Flint/Stannary Wine expect to take delivery of the 2019s in mid 2022.

The nine wines below are presented in the order they were tasted.

Hirsch, Bohan-Dillon Pinot Noir 2019 Sonoma Coast

16.5

In 2019, the Bohan-Dillon was the highest volume of the Hirsch wines made. It is a blend of Hirsch and its neighbour Hellenthal vineyards, and as such is the only wine from the Hirsch portfolio that is not entirely estate fruit and is not biodynamically farmed. 5% whole cluster. 10 months' ageing with 34% new oak.

Aromatics of sour cherry and a light accent of green tea. Nicely mouth-watering and lengthy. The palate opens into more complexity, that sort of unrolls over the length of the palate. Nice sapidity and palate stimulation. It offers a constellation of primarily red fruits with savoury elements that bring interest. The wine feels simultaneously light and still with plenty of palate presence. Lots of length here. There is a nice focus on acidity and freshness, still with ample flavour and texture through the palate. I like how fine the extraction is without losing palate presence. There is a finesse and transparency that feels like it is elevated in the 2019 compared with previous vintages. I quite like this cuvée while admittedly it is not as serious as the estate wines. (ECB)
13.1%

Drink 2022 – 2027

\$38 producer's website

Hirsch, Family Blend Pinot Noir 2019 Sonoma Coast

16 +

Made entirely from estate fruit and biodynamically farmed. This is sold through the mailing list only. 7% whole cluster. Aged 10 months, with 20% new oak.

At the start this wine feels more pert and a bit more punchy than the Bohan-Dillon

Pinot Noir. The tannin is a bit more tactile and firmer in comparison as well. There is also a greater range of fruit notes alongside a resinous element characteristic of the region – some sour cherry, some pine, some evergreen, and a sea-fresh lift, all carried by a savoury frame that provides depth from nose through finish. It has perhaps a bit less finesse than the Bohan-Dillon, but it also has more complexity and depth. Enjoy now allowing it plenty of air or wait a year for a bit more evolution. Will do well alongside a meal. (ECB) 13.1%

Drink 2022 – 2028

\$48 RRP

Hirsch, San Andreas Fault Pinot Noir 2019 Sonoma Coast

17

The San Andreas Fault Pinot Noir is often the highest-volume wine from the Hirsch portfolio, though in the 2019 vintage there was slightly more of the Bohan-Dillon blend. The San Andreas Pinot is made as a blend of selections from throughout the Hirsch vineyard and is meant to represent the property as a whole. The geological phenomenon known as the San Andreas Fault created the Sonoma Coastal Mountains in which Hirsch is grown, and runs through the property itself, thus the cuvée name. Made entirely from estate fruit and biodynamically farmed. 12% whole cluster. 38% new oak with 10 months' oak ageing.

There is nice nuance here and a complex of red fruits, savoury notes, resinous forest elements, and a powdered-sugar accent – the flavour without the sweetness. The wine has more tactile tannin presence and a ton of length compared with the Bohan-Dillon or the Family Blend. Nice focus on freshness and acidity. A sense of transparency to site. Tactile tannin though approachable – palate-cleansing. Again, this feels like a lighter focus in terms of extraction compared with what I have seen in the past from Hirsch but still with plenty of structure. It feels like it respects the wildness of its mountain origins while bringing enough refinement to the table. This will do well with a meal. (ECB) 13%

Drink 2022 – 2029

\$60 producer's website

Hirsch, West Ridge Pinot Noir 2019 Sonoma Coast

17.5 +

Made entirely from estate fruit and biodynamically farmed. This wine comes from

fruit entirely on the western side of the property and is thus closer to the ocean and a bit cooler as well. 30% whole cluster. 31% new oak with 17 months' ageing.

The West Ridge Pinot Noir brings subtler aromatics than the San Andreas Fault but still plenty of presence. It is quite subtle on the palate currently too. This wine continues with the feeling of freshness and transparency found in the other cuvées yet is distinctive from the other Pinots as well. The aromatic and flavour profiles bring a wash of red fruits and cedar accents, still showing the savoury undercurrent but additional notes that feel unique. The wine is sanguine with something almost like iodine. It feels very site-specific, like it could not be grown just anywhere. The West Ridge offers plenty of tannin, but it is also almost powdery while still ample, with palate stimulation and a lot of persistence. This wine will do well with a meal. I like the bright, fresh, subtlety of this particular cuvée. (ECB) 12.4%

Drink 2022 – 2030

\$95 RRP

Hirsch, Raschen Ridge Pinot Noir 2019 Sonoma Coast

17 +

Made entirely from estate fruit and biodynamically farmed. Raschen Ridge is a specific block on the property bottled separately since 2014. 15% whole cluster. 34% new oak and 16 months' ageing.

The Raschen Ridge immediately showcases a broader nose and palate, deeper tones and more amplitude. This is the wine to reach for when wanting comparatively more impact. Though it should be said there is still restraint here – the intensity of the wine feels innate rather than imposed. It simply carries confidence. The flavours are more woody (not woody), more savoury and showcase the darker side of the red-fruit spectrum with a few black berries mixed in. The tannin profile is fine-grained and lengthy. It is a bit riper, a bit burlier compared with the West Ridge, while more comparable in size (though differing in character) to the Maritime, Reserve and East Ridge. (ECB) 13.4%

Drink 2022 – 2030

\$85 RRP

Hirsch, Maritime Pinot Noir 2019 Sonoma Coast

16 ++

Made entirely from estate fruit and biodynamically farmed. This is a bottling from a

specific block of the vineyard that is higher elevation and more directly exposed to ocean influence. This section of the vineyard was replanted previously due to phylloxera, so the vines are younger relative to other sections of the site. The 2019 is the first vintage that this section of the vineyard has been bottled separately since establishing the newer planting. Prior to the replant, Burt Williams of William Selyem was a fan and advocate for this section of the site. Available via mailing list only. No whole cluster. 35% new oak and 16 months' ageing.

The Maritime is also broader and darker in comparison with the West Ridge or San Andreas Fault Pinots, more similar in size to the Raschen Ridge while carrying a markedly different character. Where the Raschen Ridge feels more assertive and confident, the Maritime is perhaps still finding its feet. In terms of aromatic and flavour profile, the Maritime is more woodsy (not woody), and quite savoury, while retaining the red-fruit backdrop of the site. There is less finesse here, while still plenty of restraint. This is the one wine in the portfolio where I noticed the alcohol – it is not severe by any means but does show itself. There is a sandstone-like texture – like rubbing across the surface of the rock. Enjoying this wine with time for it to open and alongside food would serve it well. (ECB) 13.8%

Drink 2022 – 2028

\$75 RRP

Hirsch, Reserve Pinot Noir 2019 Sonoma Coast

18

Made entirely with estate fruit and biodynamically farmed. The Reserve Pinot Noir brings together the top selections of the site for its vintage and includes portions from throughout the vineyard. 18% whole cluster. 43% new oak and 17 months' ageing.

This wine offers fuller, though not bigger, aromatics with plenty of complexity. This wine definitely wants air to open. It carries plenty of structural focus in good balance with its overall flavour, texture and size. There is an impressive freshness built into its seriousness and a mouth-watering savoury persistence throughout. The Reserve wine carries the greatest complexity and overall completeness of the 2019 portfolio – savoury qualities, hints of floral notes, a stoniness throughout, a bit of iodine, and a mineral crunch emerges with air as well. There is nice palate stimulation and lots of length, and a sophistication that feels innate to the wine. I am impressed by the overall delivery. Nicely done. (ECB) 13.2%

Drink 2022 – 2032

\$95 RRP

Hirsch, East Ridge Pinot Noir 2019 Sonoma Coast

17.5 ++

Made entirely from estate fruit and biodynamically farmed. This wine is made entirely from blocks on the eastern side of the property, which is slightly warmer than the western side as it is slightly more protected from the ocean. 19% whole cluster. 31% new oak and 17 months' ageing.

Darker-toned aromatics compared with the previous regional expressions. But it also greener than any of the other wines. It carries a bit of fiddlehead fern (this might be too native to Alaska or northern climes, but there it is most often sautéed developing a distinctly green, while lightly caramelised-from-cooking note that is quite satisfying) that opens into pine-forest notes. Here the fruit character is still red but moves more to the richer, lusher aspects of red plum compared with the red-cherry blossom of West Ridge and the red cherry of San Andreas Fault, Bohan-Dillon and the Family Blend. There is plenty of subtlety here and distinctive aromatics, while the palate has more impact compared with the subtlety of the nose. There is a bit of a herbal liqueur element that emerges here and is distinct from any of the other wines in the vintage, bringing in dried orange and even a light grapefruit-pith accent. Allow the East Ridge Pinot to get plenty of air. It is a serious wine, almost brooding, with lots of intensity and impact without being overwrought or overdone. The tannin has a lot of persistence and while drinkable now will certainly open, revealing more complexity and easier tannin with age. (ECB) 13.2%

Drink 2022 – 2032

\$95 RRP

Hirsch, Block 8 Pinot Noir 2019 Sonoma Coast

17 ++

Made entirely from estate fruit and biodynamically farmed. This is a block-specific bottling from a portion of the vineyard that has consistently shown a strong, recognisable signature since its founding. 28% whole cluster. 30% new oak with 16 months' ageing.

This is the most overtly, typically California Pinot in the Hirsch line up. With the other cuvées I would smell the wine and be hit by a range of aromatics and be intrigued by that distinctive note. With the Block 8 I put my nose in the glass and immediately thought, *oh that smells exactly of California Pinot*. It is perhaps less

complex or nuanced than the other block-specific wines from Hirsch, but it is also exactly what we want from California Pinot Noir – there is plenty of tannin but not too much, the wine focuses on red fruit with an accent of cola, forest notes denote the region, and a sprinkle of spice tells a bit of the ageing regime. Most of all it is pleasantly textural, lengthy and mouth-watering – a pleasing California Pinot. (ECB)

13.7%

Drink 2022 – 2030

\$105 RRP

Elaine Chukan Brown

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