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PINOT NOIR TREASURES FROM THE SONOMA COAST



WHITE BURGUNDY 2018
BARREL-PROOF BOURBONS
RETROSPECTIVE: VINTAGE PORT 2000

An aerial photograph of a vineyard in a forested valley. The vineyard is a large, rectangular field with rows of grapevines, situated on a hillside. It is surrounded by dense evergreen forests. In the background, a body of water (the ocean) is visible, with a few small islands or headlands. The sky is a soft, hazy orange, suggesting sunset or sunrise. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

*Photograph by
Adrian Gaut*

Flowers winery's
Sea View Ridge
Vineyard, in the Fort
Ross-Seaview AVA,
rises 1,900 feet
above the pounding
Pacific surf.

PINOT'S *Magical Kingdom*

MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS BY THE SEA IN
NORTHERN SONOMA COUNTY

By Kim Marcus





From left: Courtney Wagoner, Juliana Martinelli, Lee Martinelli Sr. and Tessa Gorsuch of Martinelli winery, a pioneer on the Sonoma Coast.

One of California's last, great winemaking frontiers lies in a region little known, understood or traveled. There are no charming wine country villages, gourmet restaurants or luxury hotels. In fact, it's hard even to get there. GPS and cell phone service are spotty once you find the place. The one thing it does have, though, is outstanding wines, especially Pinot Noirs, with boundless aspirations repeated by its vintners and winemakers.

This is California's Northern Sonoma Coast, centered on a small and obscure appellation called Fort Ross-Seaview, created in 2011. It's one of the most unique wine districts in the world, producing Pinot Noirs that are helping to set a new standard for quality—and expanding the stylistic boundaries—in the Golden State. It's a big land full of big egos and long-held dreams that have yet to be fully realized, though amazing strides have been made.



Littorai's Ted Lemon relies on coastal-grown fruit to make what he describes as wines with "a lovely combination of firm tannic backbone, spice components and the ability to age."

Producers such as Flowers, Marcassin, Martinelli and Hirsch call it home and make memorable wines. And leading vintners from nearby, including Steve Kistler, Ted Lemon and Burt Williams, among others, rely on its grapes to make their own pathbreaking bottlings. "I find the wines from Fort Ross have a lovely combination of firm tannic backbone, spice components and ability to age," says Lemon, who has championed coastal wines at his winery, Littorai. "It's not the sexy fruit appeal of the Russian River Valley. The wines of Fort Ross have wonderful Asian spice quality, excellent acidity and long palates."

Other top producers from Fort-Ross Seaview in my tastings include Peter Michael, Wayfarer, Red Car and Fort Ross Vineyard. As in Burgundy, Chardonnay can also be a star here, but fewer of those are made overall. And in another mark of its remoteness, many vintners prefer the broader and more prestigious Sonoma Coast appellation for their wines.

The determining factor here is topography, shaped by California's infamous San Andreas fault. Known mostly for great earthquakes, like the one that devastated San Francisco in 1906, it also helps to create magnificent landscapes, many of which are home to stellar vineyards rooted in rocks and soils formed over the eons by massive tectonic forces.

On this rugged coast north of the mouth of the Russian River, the San Andreas almost exactly parallels the shoreline, and above

it rises a series of dramatic, forest-clad ridges that open up into a magical realm of grapegrowing at the continent's edge. Of the 27,500 acres included in the Fort Ross–Seaview appellation's boundaries, there are only around 550 acres under vine. The only winery with any notable visitor facilities is Fort Ross Vineyards, located up a narrow, winding road known as Meyers Grade, which provides a western access route to the area.

"This is wild. You get the wildness of the forest in every single wine," says Chantal Forthun, winemaker for Flowers. "The expression of nature in a place like this is almost unique in the world. Plus, the elevation factor is completely unique—so close to the coast but with a mountain feeling."

"This is really farming in the country. We get extreme conditions, from torrential rain to heat and wind. The elements here are quite severe," says Lee Martinnelli, the patriarch of his family's winery in the Russian River Valley. "One time, the farm advisor said, 'You can't plant a vineyard here because it's too cold and damp.'"

That opinion would have been widely accepted when it was given. The Pacific Coast lies only 2 to 4 miles away from many of the top vineyard sites, with its usually frigid waters producing dense maritime fogs that can blanket the coast for weeks at a time in summer.

But the first ridge that the San Andreas has thrust up, to more than 1,500 feet within sight and sound of the pounding surf, can block much of the fog in the growing season, allowing grapes to thrive. Still, it was only around 1980 that grapes really began to take root here. Before, this was home mostly to huge sheep ranches, orchards of apples and pears and tracts of huge old-growth redwoods, many of which were logged to help rebuild San Francisco following the 1906 quake. Some of the original ranches were homesteaded just after the Civil War, and their owners eked out a living before succumbing to modern market pressures. A quick depopulation occurred during the Depression and post–World War II era, leaving open land ready to be transformed.

Today, the uplands of the Northern Sonoma Coast are reaching for a new equilibrium powered by a patchwork of prime vineyards that are thriving amid a complex mosaic of microclimates, exposures and soil strata—as well as the human element that ties them together in the quest to make world-class wines.

Unearthing Secrets in the Soil

The 29-acre Camp Meeting Ridge vineyard (11 of which are planted to Pinot and the rest with Chardonnay) lies only 2.5 miles from the ocean and is one of the two estate sites of Flowers. Founded in 1990 by Walt and Joan Flowers, the winery quickly established a reputation for big, dense Pinot Noirs. In 2009, the Napa Valley-based Huneeus Vintners purchased it. Since then, the goal has been to revitalize the vineyards through sustainable methods,



Above and left: Flowers winemaker Chantal Forthun works with viticulturist Rodrigo Soto on a long-term project to micro-analyze the underlying soil strata of their sites with an eye to making the best Pinots the complex geology can provide.



including biodynamics; the winery itself moved to a site near Healdsburg in 2017. Most producers here make their wine at more easily accessed inland locations.

The focus now in the vineyard is to micro-analyze the underlying soil strata to precision-farm it and the neighboring estate parcel, Sea View Ridge. This process includes digging pits to discover what lies underneath the soil structure and how the vine roots interact with it, and to measure the electro-conductivity (EC) of the soils. Both methods are common in South America, and which Huneeus, with roots in Chile, has brought north.

"For me, the goal is to dissect the entire property down to the smallest characteristic and see how it relates to quality," says wine-

maker Forthun. She has been working with Chile-born viticulturist Rodrigo Soto since 2019 to unlock what makes the Flowers vineyards tick, plant by plant and bloc by bloc. "We believe the wines can be so much better," Soto says. "We were blown away by the diversity of the ridge."

That diversity is the product of a complex geology driven not only by the San Andreas but also by chunks of land that have accreted to

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Rodrigo Soto

the continental margin from across the vast Pacific basin and have helped build the present-day California coast. Camp Meeting Ridge, which sits at about 1,300 feet on the eastern backside of the first rise in from the ocean, features a spectrum of red-colored clays and rock, with small sections of loam, whereas the 43-acre Sea View Ridge vineyard (planted almost entirely to Pinot Noir), which tops out at 1,900 feet, features black clays, as well as sandy deposits and red-fractured rocks rich with iron.

Knowing the precise composition of the land helps Soto design bespoke plans for each site, including irrigation regimens, the type of rootstocks to use, trellising techniques, harvesting strategies, soil enrichment and pest and viral controls for the vines, all in a bid

to get the best fruit possible to Forthun. “What we’re doing with EC is measuring clays because they are carriers of fertility,” Soto says. “And with the pits, you see where the roots are growing and what to expect with tannin structures, for example.”

Another factor in the analysis is the role climate plays, which varies from ridge to ridge and slope to slope. And because of the coastal influence and topography, the normal expectation that the greater the elevation, the cooler the temperature is reversed, in an atmospheric condition known as inversion. “This is mountainside farming next to the Pacific Ocean, and it kind of flips the script—the higher you get, the warmer you get above the fog line,” Forthun says. In fact, the appellation boundaries of Fort Ross-Seaview were set at 920 feet to reflect the fog line; nothing below that altitude qualifies.

The ultimate aim is to redesign the entire property and highlight the differences within it through a series of new site-specific Pinot Noir bottlings from Seaview Ridge that will push the evolution of Flowers to a new level.

In Pursuit of Perfection

On the next ridge to the east is the fabled Marcassin estate, founded by Helen Turley and John Wetlaufer, the first portion of which they purchased in 1990. Turley is known as one of the most influential winemakers in California. She has worked with elite cult brands such as Peter Michael, Colgin and Bryant, to name just a few, and brooked little dissent in her pursuit of perfection. Wetlaufer’s passion has been for the vineyards, and he continues to realize his dream in shaping Marcassin (which means “wild boar” in French, for the beasts that wander the surrounding countryside). Today, Marcassin is the couple’s sole focus.

The soils here are dominated by uplifted marine volcanics known as the Boomer formation. There are also intrusions of the Franciscan mélange, the origins of which lie in ancient seabeds. The vineyard is incredibly well-drained, Wetlaufer says, providing pathways for deep root structures that provide resilience for the vines in Northern California’s long, dry summers.

Although 60 to 80 inches of rain is the annual average in Fort Ross-Seaview, almost all of it falls in the winter months. And with drought in the 2020 and 2021 vintages (only a third of normal rainfall fell this season), those deep roots are even more critical. “I’ve worked with a lot of sites and seen the mistakes that were made, and this is a privileged site,” Wetlaufer says. “This is state-of-the-art, and I wouldn’t trade it for DRC,” he adds, in reference to Burgundy’s famed Domaine de la Romanée-Conti.

The couple’s pursuit of Burgundian-style Pinot Noirs, and also Chardonnays, has been a driving passion from the moment they tasted their first Pinot Noir from the area in 1982. “It wasn’t a great wine, but it was very different,” Wetlaufer says. It was made from the Sea Ridge vineyard owned by the Bohan family, who were the

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Grapes from Marcassin vineyard are harvested at night to preserve freshness and acidity. Picking dates are not prescribed, instead determined by the taste of the grapes.

first to plant grapes in the region, in 1973. The Marcassin vineyard has been developed in two phases, the first beginning in 1992 and the second in 2002. It covers a total of 20 acres, planted 55% to Pinot Noir and 45% to Chardonnay, with a mix of California heritage and Dijon clones divided into 20 blocs of about 1 acre each.

Wetlaufer says he made adjustments from Phase One to Phase Two, most notably by pursuing tighter spacing and different rootstocks, minimizing the ripping of the soil for planting to avoid pulverizing it into dust and to maintain slope integrity. And that’s important because the site slopes up to 25% to 30%, though there are level blocs as well. The vines are essentially dry-farmed, except for the youngest plants.

Wetlaufer keeps a laser-eye on controlling vine vigor to allow the plants’ energy to go into developing and ripening the fruit. It’s a labor-intensive process, with vine growth tipped at about 6 feet in the spring. Leaves are also pulled by hand to allow sunlight to fully ripen the grape clusters. “We want something that’s not vigorous, so it doesn’t produce much vegetative growth and doesn’t need water,” Wetlaufer says.

The grapes are harvested at night to preserve freshness and acidity before being transported to the Marcassin winery in the town of Windsor, about two hours to the east. There’s no set formula regarding when to pick; the grapes are harvested according to taste, Wetlaufer says, and he usually expects about 50 to 60 tons from a normal harvest, with a production of about 3,000 cases a year.

Wetlaufer estimates that another 4 to 5 acres could be planted at the site, but he's not really interested in expanding because, he says, the Marcassin size is optimal for the couple to manage while still preserving personal autonomy over the site. Turley agrees. "We're debt-free, and we own the vineyard and the winery," she says. "This is a one-of-a-kind vineyard, and all efforts are put into making it something special. P.R. we ain't got."

Islands in the Fog

Down the hill from Marcassin is the 6-acre Blue Slide Ridge vineyard, owned by the Martinelli family. Turley consulted for the Martinellis for 18 years, until 2010, and she and Wetlaufer helped develop the Blue Slide Ridge site beginning in 1995. "I bought the property to hunt, and then got the bug to plant," Lee Martinelli says (among his prey were wild boar).

It was the Charleses, the family of his wife, Carolyn, who homesteaded in the region in 1866. The Martinelli family settled in Sebastopol in the Russian River Valley in 1885, where today they make a bevy of outstanding Pinot Noirs as well. In Fort Ross-Seaview, they have 1,800 acres of land with only 52 acres of vineyards, 80% planted to Pinot Noir. In addition to Blue Slide Ridge, they have a vineyard named Three Sisters (one of whom was Carolyn) to the south and two other tracts: Wild Thyme and Charles Ranch. "We're so fortunate to keep this land since the 1860s and have a product to grow," Juliana Martinelli, Lee's eldest daughter, says. "Our goal is to save the land for the next generation." Blue Slide Ridge, named for the blue clay found at the site, and Three Sisters share many characteristic soils and exposures. Lee calls them islands in the fog. And both are steep, with Blue Slide Ridge approaching vertiginous.

"The Martinellis don't like to plant anything on flat ground pretty much," says Courtney Wagoner, the family's winemaker since 2017. Both sites can also share deposits of the magnesium-rich mineral serpentine, which is toxic to grapevines but can be managed somewhat with the appropriate rootstocks and rigorous cultivation techniques. It's a hazard they share with many of the neighboring growers.

At the edge of Blue Slide there is a grove of redwoods where the darkness and coolness of the air stand in marked contrast to the intense sunshine and warmth of the vineyard. Indeed, the density of the surrounding forest is an echo of what covered the land before it was settled. The early pioneers had to clear the forest to make it agriculturally viable, and today trees mostly can't be removed for vineyard development, limiting future growth. Yet the forest heritage lives in the wines for many vintners. "Our Pinot Noirs kind of taste like the forest. They all have the common denominator of baking spice and Christmas cake," Juliana says.

A Lighter Side of Pinot

To varying degrees, the wines of Flowers, Marcassin and Martinelli are bold expressions of Pinot, the best versions filled with rich fruit flavors, suave tannins and acidity, supple textures and engaging aromatics. Another expression of the grape is found at Hirsch Vineyards, which lies a couple of miles north of the Marcassin and Blue

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Slide Ridge vineyards. The wines here are fashioned much differently, harvested earlier and featuring lower alcohol levels, and they are crisp, direct and mineral-driven, with rich savoriness and acidity as a result.

David Hirsch bought a 1,000-acre former sheep ranch in 1978, and in 1980 began planting grapes. He eventually sold to more than 30 different wineries. The winery operations began in 2002, and the vineyards today cover 72 acres, with grapes still sold to top producers such as Williams Selyem, Littorai and Failla. (Hirsch makes on average about 7,000 cases of its own wine annually, with nine separate Pinot Noir bottlings.)

Hirsch has followed an organic, sustainable path from the start, and since 2011 has farmed biodynamically. In 2014, Hirsch was injured in a tractor accident at the estate, which left him paralyzed. His daughter Jasmine, who had worked for the winery since 2008, became general manager, and then winemaker in 2018. In 2011, she helped found the In Pursuit of Balance movement, which promoted lower ripeness and alcohol levels in California wines; the group disbanded five years later, saying it had made its point.

"The ripeness should be dictated by the vineyard. The style of the wine should be in service to our intention, and our intention is to make wines of place," Jasmine says. "I do personally like lighter wines, and we thought we could show a different type of Pinot," she adds. Most of Hirsch's wines are around 12% alcohol or so, whereas the majority of the Fort Ross-Seaview Pinots are in the 13% to 14%, or higher, range.

Many of Hirsch's vines are rooted in sandstone-based soils along with the Boomer formation, and its vineyards top out at 1,600 feet. The Hirsches have divided their vineyards into 60 different blocs to customize the cultivation of the vines amid the complex soil profiles. "Hirsch is like a village in Burgundy—not a single vineyard. It is its own thing, and because of the San Andreas fault and soils, it's many little vineyards," Jasmine says.

One of those vineyards is East Ridge, which is own-rooted, meaning it's susceptible to the destructive phylloxera root louse, which does indeed lessen the productivity of the vines as the growing season proceeds; yields here are only 1 ton per acre. "Farming this vineyard is an intellectual challenge, but it makes amazing wines," explains Jasmine.

Small but Mighty

On the drive up from Highway 1 from the coast to the ridgetops, wildfire scars are clearly visible on the redwood and oak trees. They are reminders of a common challenge that all the region's growers faced in the past year. In some cases locals took matters into their own hands to battle the blazes, using tractors to put in firebreaks.

Because of the smoke damage, both Hirsch and Martinelli are forgoing bottling Pinot Noir from the appellation in 2020; Flowers and Marcassin will bottle less wine than normal. For Hirsch, the impact of the smoke taint is slight, but still too much. "The smoke taint is really quite minor, but our tolerance is zero," says Jasmine Hirsch.

She also notes that smoke from fires to the north in 2008 were



Martinelli's Blue Slide Ridge and adjacent vineyards lie nearby to densely forested land that mitigates heat.



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Jasmine Hirsch has worked at the namesake winery founded by her father, David, since 2008, becoming winemaker in 2018. She describes the biodynamically farmed estate as "like a village in Burgundy—not a single vineyard." Because of the San Andreas Fault and its various soils, it's many little vineyards, she says.

much more damaging to her wines, and that in 2015 inclement weather during the critical flower season destroyed 75% of the potential crop. Overall, cold and unseasonable rain used to be much more detrimental in affecting vintage quality, but those impacts have lessened as winter rains have come later and later in the season and then ended earlier. Even the coastal fog banks have waned a bit in intensity over the past few years with warmer ocean temperatures. The impacts have yet to be fully measured but are a growing and existential concern. "Climate change is a reality. It's a warning for all regions," Wetlaufer says succinctly.

Fort Ross–Seaview was established after a decade-long effort, to better separate its identity from that of the massive Sonoma Coast appellation. The AVA takes its name partly from the old Russian fur-trading post and garrison that lies over the first ridge on the coast. It was the southern extension of the Russian Empire in the early decades of the 19th century but ultimately it failed because of its remoteness and the great cost to the czar to keep it going.

The latest pioneers of Fort Ross–Seaview have been successful in establishing it as a land where a Burgundian vision is being realized in a remarkable setting. Destruction and creation are visible in its geological and cultural history, and the ecological balance sits on a razor's edge. What the next chapter holds has as much to say about where the forces of nature are headed as how these vintners can continue to adapt, strive and ultimately thrive.

RECENT RELEASES FROM PROFILED PRODUCERS

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
FLOWERS Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Camp Meeting Ridge 2019	93	\$90
Vibrantly fresh, with focused black currant, dark cherry and plum tart flavors. Slate and Asian spice notes linger on the crunchy finish.		
FLOWERS Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Sea View Ridge 2019	91	\$80
Fresh and focused, with lots of cedary accents to the dried berry and cherry flavors, with hints of juniper. Notes of licorice fill the juicy finish.		
HIRSCH Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast East Ridge 2018	95	\$85
Powerfully fresh and crunchy, with minerally dried cherry and berry flavors. Cedary notes and hints of juniper berry on the lithe finish.		
HIRSCH Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast San Andreas Fault 2018	94	\$60
Powerful and refined, with spiced cherry, currant and dried berry flavors, crisp acidity and firm tannins. Mineral and savory finish.		
MARCASSIN Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Marcassin Vineyard 2014	95	\$150
Elegant and spiced, with fine-grained dried cherry and berry flavors, hints of beef and hot stone. Minerally finish has forest floor notes.		
MARTINELLI Pinot Noir Fort Ross-Seaview Blue Slide Ridge Vineyard 2019	94	\$98
Rich and lusciously spiced, with lively minerality to cherry tart and raspberry flavors. Ends with cocoa powder accents on the fresh finish.		
MARTINELLI Pinot Noir Fort Ross-Seaview 2018	93	\$62
Big and fruity, with cherry, raspberry and red currant flavors. Forest bark and loam accents midpalate, with ripe spiciness on the finish.		

MICHAEL CRUISE

RECLAIMING THE *True Sonoma Coast*

Not all wines from Fort Ross-Seaview carry the appellation on their front label. Producers such as Marcassin and Hirsch, for example, use the more well-known and prestigious Sonoma Coast appellation to market their wines. There may soon be a third option, pending final government approval after a 10-year quest: West Sonoma Coast. Some of the area's vintners, including Cleo Pahlmeyer of Wayfarer, have spearheaded efforts to establish the new appellation to further define

to the villages of Occidental and Freestone.

"The defining principle of the West Sonoma Coast is the Pacific Ocean," says Andy Peay of Peay Vineyards in Annapolis, a leader in trying to establish the appellation. "It used to be that Russian River was the premium [AVA], and five to 10 years ago it switched to Sonoma Coast as a premium because collectors saw something different and special in the wines," he explains. And, Peay adds, sommeliers liked the acidity, elegance and aromatics that the coastal wines can offer.

Some vintners are opposed to or undecided about using the West Sonoma Coast name. The federal government's Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) might approve it potentially as soon as the end of this year. "We're concentrated on Fort Ross-Seaview and probably won't be using West Sonoma Coast. We think it might confuse customers," says Lee Martinelli, who nonetheless scoffs at the boundaries of Sonoma Coast appellation, calling them ridiculous.

Even those instrumental in the movement for the West Sonoma Coast are on the fence, including Ted Lemon of Litorrai, who is based near the southern city of Sebastopol



Historic Fort Ross trading post



Cleo Pahlmeyer of Wayfarer

what they consider the "true Sonoma Coast." "The goal is to reclaim the Sonoma Coast as coastal," Pahlmeyer says.

When the vast Sonoma Coast appellation was formed in 1987—it covers more than 500,000 acres (almost half of the total land area of Sonoma County)—it extended to inland districts far from pronounced coastal influence, such as Chalk Hill and to the edge of Sonoma Valley. American Viticultural Areas (AVAs), as they are formally known, carry no qualitative criteria, as in France. They are granted designations based on the historical significance of particular boundaries, as mostly defined by the vintners who research, promote and lobby for them. Such was the case when the Sonoma Coast was formed; its outline was generously based on the desires of producers such as Sonoma-Cutrer, which wanted prime inland vineyards included for marketing purposes.

The current proposal for West Sonoma Coast would include not only Fort Ross-Seaview but also the even more remote Annapolis district to the north and would extend south along the length of the immediate coastal hills and valleys

and makes a bevy of fine wines from the coast.

"We're a young country without a lot of viticultural experience, and the boundaries [of many AVAs] are not drawn where they should be," Lemon says. Because appellations can no longer overlap boundaries, Lemon also says some vineyards that should be in the West Sonoma Coast were left out because they're located in extant districts, such as Green Valley or Russian River Valley. Still, Lemon is supportive of efforts to more accurately define the true coast, however flawed at the margins.

"It's admittedly awkward. The greater question is, how it will be used, and that will be up to the individual wineries," Lemon says. "What I see is a general recognition that what we are talking about is important and distinctive. It may not be perfect, and it may be constrained by bureaucracy, but it's better than nothing," he concludes.

—K.M.

