



Freeman Vineyard entrance (left);
Bob Cabral, winemaker at Williams Selyem

The Extreme Sonoma Coast

California's New Hope for Great Pinot Noir

BY ED McCARTHY

California, with Napa Valley leading the way, has done a great job in its relatively short history producing some world-class Cabernet Sauvignons and Cabernet-based blends. But until recently, I have not generally seen the same high quality for Pinot Noir.

In addition to the fact that the grape is an exceedingly difficult variety to work with, California has experienced two problems with its Pinot Noirs: Much of it has been grown in climates too warm for the variety, and winemakers have been guilty of producing Pinot Noirs that are too ripe, too big and too high in alcohol for this delicate variety. Pinot Noir is not about power; it's about subtlety and finesse.

Most—even the Pinot Noir purists who maintain that great Pinot Noir wines hail exclusively from its original home, Burgundy, France—will concede that California can make some good Pinot Noirs from Sonoma's Russian River Valley, Santa Barbara, Carneros and Anderson Valley in Mendocino County.

However, until I discovered the Pinots of the Extreme Sonoma Coast, I have never tasted a Pinot Noir outside of Burgundy that I thought was really outstanding—or in the modern parlance, a 95 to 100 point wine.

Two years ago, I traveled to the Sonoma Coast explicitly to taste Pinot Noirs. Three situations prompted my journey: I had been reading about the great 2007 vintage in Sonoma, particularly for Pinot Noirs, and I decided to visit old friends, such as Bob Cabral, winemaker at Williams Selyem, and Don Hartford, who helms Hartford Court (aka Hartford Family Wines), to taste through their 2007 Pinot Noirs; secondly, I had recently discovered a Littorai Pinot Noir in a

New York restaurant, was amazed with its quality and decided to visit Littorai's winery; and thirdly, I had just tasted a sample of another previously unknown Pinot Noir, a 2006 Willowbrook Cellars (made from Marin County grapes, along the coast just south of Sonoma), and was astounded by how much I liked the wine. These two Pinot Noirs had delicacy, balance, fragrance and finesse, words I had seldom used to describe California Pinot Noirs.

To Taste is to Believe

Suffice it to say that this momentous trip changed my entire perspective. I discovered that Pinot Noirs in the style that I enjoyed were being made from grapes grown primarily along the westernmost part of the Sonoma Coast, about two to twelve miles inland. That area is now being referred to as the West Sonoma Coast by many of the vintners (yet others, including myself, prefer the term "Extreme Coast") to distinguish it from the huge area that makes up the Sonoma Coast AVA.

The Sonoma Coast AVA is an umbrella appellation that includes roughly the entire western half of Sonoma County, from the Mendocino border in the north to Marin County, Carneros, and San Pablo Bay in the south (including the prestigious Russian River Valley region). This means that any producer making a Pinot Noir within this huge territory, even, say, 40 miles from the Pacific Coast, can label his wine “Sonoma Coast.” The handful of producers (most of them small, family-owned operations) making Pinot Noirs close to the coast began calling their area the West Sonoma Coast.

The cool, windy climate of this area creates an entirely different *terroir*. As I was driving towards the Pacific Coast in the spring of 2009, I noticed a precipitous drop in temperature (about 15°F in fifteen minutes) by the time I reached the coast, accompanied by strong winds. Most West Coast vineyards are located on the hillsides high up in the Sonoma Mountains to catch the sun and avoid all-day coastal fog, and the Petaluma Gap, a 15-mile virtual wind tunnel, allows ocean breezes to whip through which brings cool winds in mid-afternoon that follow protective morning fog (so that vineyards don’t suffer too much from summer heat)—even if all of them are not strictly coastal vineyards.

Syrah, Zinfandel and Chardonnay—also cool-climate-loving varieties—grow in this part of Sonoma, but Pinot Noir is the star. Up until my discovery of West Sonoma Coast Pinot Noirs, I had been somewhat of a fan of the more-established Pinot Noirs of the Russian River Valley. For example, I have been visiting and tasting Williams Selyem Pinot Noirs at the winery in the RRV since the early 1990s, when co-founder/winemaker Burt Williams was still there. I had noticed even then that I usually preferred his Pinot Noirs from the Coast (Summa Vineyard, Hirsch Vineyard and Coast-

THE COOL, WINDY CLIMATE OF THE WEST SONOMA COAST CREATES A *TERROIR* THAT LENDS ITSELF WELL TO BEAUTIFUL PINOT NOIR.

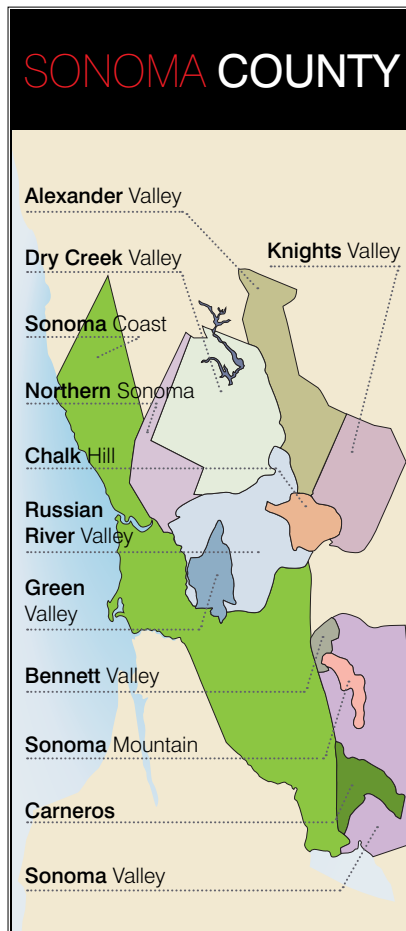
lands Vineyard). The coastal Pinot Noirs were made in a more elegant, delicately fruity style. They generally were lighter in color and body than Russian River Valley Pinots. This was confirmed for me two years ago, when I tasted 2007 Williams Selyem Pinot Noirs with current winemaker Bob Cabral.

A Transforming Landscape

Meeting owner/winemaker Ted Lemon of Littorai for the first time turned out to be an education in Pinot Noir for me. Again, my clear favorite wine was Littorai’s 2007 Hirsch Vineyard, from the True Coast. I never got to meet winemaker Joe Otos of Willowbrook Cellars, but I did speak to him on the phone, and he sent me a few samples of other 2006s (Willowbrook’s first vintage). One, the 2006 Willowbrook Cellars DuNah Vineyard from the True Coast, was outstanding.

Growing season temperatures along the West Sonoma Coast are almost as low as possible for grapes to ripen, averaging in the low 70s in the daytime, and dropping to the 40s at night, both because of the effect of cool winds. The growing season is extremely long; most of the grapes are harvested from late October to early November (really late for California). Vineyards have thin, shallow, very rocky soil—an asset for growing Pinot. Growers must contend with cold spring seasons, along with very small crops and the threat of autumn rains, and the stressed vines produce small, concentrated grapes, which result in wines of greater complexity. Consequently, West Sonoma Coast Pinots sometimes need two or three years’ longer bottle aging than other California Pinot Noirs, and they also tend to age longer.

Thirty years ago, the main activity along the hillsides of the West Sonoma



Coast was sheep grazing. The climate was considered just too inhospitable for growing grapes. Remember, vineyards in California were primarily in warm growing areas at that time. In 1977, Daniel and Marion Schoenfeld planted Wild Hog Vineyard five miles in from the Pacific, east of the town of Fort Ross. They have been making wines since 1977 and were certified organic in 1981—specializing in Pinot Noir and Zinfandel. The Schoenfelds opened their own winery in 1990. Wild Hog makes about 1,000 cases of Pinot Noir annually.

Another who helped put the West Sonoma Coast on the map has been David Hirsch. He planted his own vineyards in 1980 on a mountain range a few miles from the Pacific and Fort Ross. Back then, Hirsch was just a grape grower, supplying some of the top Russian River wineries such as Williams Selyem and Littorai. In 2002, Hirsch founded his own winery, and so now you can buy Hirsch Vineyards Pinot Noir. Its new winemaker is Ross Cobb, who also has his own family winery.

In the late 1980s, Flowers Winery and Winery came to the West Sonoma Coast, followed by the Cobb family, with its renowned Coastlands Vineyard. Coastlands also started as grape growers but now make their own wine from its vineyard. Peay Vineyards arrived later, and the rush was on. Today, about 50 growers have vineyards on the coast,

many with their own wineries, and another 60 or more wineries outside the coast source their grapes here.

Last year, I met Jasmine Hirsch, sales and marketing director of Hirsch Vineyards and daughter of David Hirsch. I proposed conducting a West Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir tasting in New York in 2011, and Jasmine agreed to help me gather samples from coast producers, most of whom she knew personally. In early March of this year, the Wine Media Guild, a group of New York-based wine writers, hosted a luncheon that included 21 West Sonoma Coast Pinot Noirs from 17 of the best wineries making Pinot Noirs on there. I tried to obtain Pinots from only the exceptional 2007 vintage, but this proved impossible because of the limited availability of the vintage now, and so we included five 2009s and four 2008s along with twelve 2007s. In retrospect I'm happy we included the other vintages; 2009 seems to be another great vintage for Pinot Noir on the West Sonoma Coast. In contrast to the '07 and '09, 2008 seemed to be of average quality, with one notable exception.

Getting to Know Pinot

Our three guest speakers from the Coast were Ross Cobb of Cobb Wines, the son of David Cobb (founder of Coastland Vineyard); Jason Jardine, winemaker of Flowers Winery; and Jasmine Hirsch. For most of the writers, these wines—with the exception of the better-known names such as Flowers, Hartford Court and Williams Selyem—were an introduction to West Sonoma Coast Pinot Noirs.

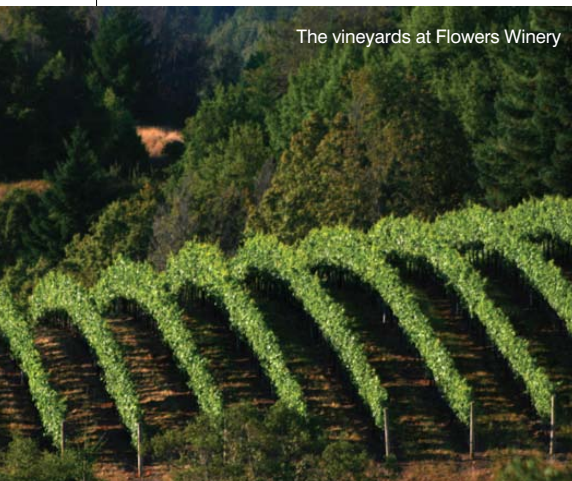
As I expected, the tasting was a revelation for most of the group, who had come to expect fuller-bodied, heavier Pinot Noirs from California. I purposely excluded a few expensive Pinot Noirs, such as Kistler, Aubert and Marcassin (the last two retail for \$200 and up per bottle) because of their price and their

21 True Coast Pinot Noirs

In the order of tasting, here are the 21 True Coast Pinot Noirs we tasted; prices are approximate retail, per bottle:

- **2009 Hirsch Vineyards,** "The Bohan Dillon" (\$30)
- **2009 Red Car,** Sonoma Coast (\$30)
- **2009 Peay Vineyards,** Pomarium Estate (\$52)
- **2009 Failla,** Hirsch Vineyard (\$65)
- **2009 Lioco,** Hirsch Vineyard (\$60)
- **2008 Red Car,** Platt Vineyard "Dreamland" (\$60)
- **2008 Freeman Vineyard,** Sonoma Coast (\$40)
- **2008 Pfendler Vineyards,** Sonoma Coast (\$45)
- **2008 Cobb Wines,** Coastland Vineyard (\$78)
- **2007 Freestone Vineyard,** Sonoma Coast (\$40)
- **2007 Flowers Winery,** Frances Thompson Vineyard (\$65)
- **2007 Evening Land,** Occidental Ridge Vineyard (\$45)
- **2007 Williams Selyem,** Hirsch Vineyard (\$120)
- **2007 Wild Hog Vineyard,** Estate, Sonoma Coast (\$30)
- **2007 B. Kosuge,** Hirsch Vineyard (\$50)
- **2007 Flowers Winery,** Camp Meeting Ridge Vineyard (\$68)
- **2007 Hirsch Vineyards,** "San Andreas" (\$60)
- **2007 Drew Family Estate,** McDougall Vineyard (\$45)
- **2007 Cobb Wines,** Emmaline Vineyard (\$68)
- **2007 Littorai,** The Haven Vineyard (\$75)
- **2007 Hartford Family Winery,** Far Coast Vineyard (\$70)

The vineyards at Flowers Winery





Always the original.



1 oz. Bernheim Original Wheat Whiskey
2 oz. fresh Sweet & Sour
1/2 oz. fresh Orange Juice
Shake all ingredients with ice; pour over
rocks in a double old-fashioned glass and
garnish with an orange slice.

Bernheim Cooler

2 oz. Bernheim Original Wheat Whiskey
Ginger Ale
Pour Bernheim Original Wheat Whiskey
over ice. Fill with ginger ale.

Bernheim & Ginger

Turn your idea of
a whiskey cocktail
on its head.

SONOMA COAST

TODAY, ABOUT 50 GROWERS HAVE VINEYARDS ON THE COAST, MANY WITH THEIR OWN WINERIES, AND ANOTHER 60 OR MORE WINERIES OUTSIDE THE COAST SOURCE THEIR GRAPES HERE.

scarcity. Retail prices for the wines ranged from \$30 to \$78 for all but one (William Selyem's Hirsch Vineyard was \$120).

Very few of the above wines were less than good; many were exceptional. What surprised me is that two of my favorites are among the least expensive: Hirsch Vineyards "the Bohan Dillon" 2009 and Wild Hog Estate 2007, both retailing for \$30.

Hirsch's '09 "the Bohan Dillon," made from younger vines of Hirsch Vineyard and purchased grapes from neighboring vineyards, is exuberant, precocious and charming; totally delicious right now, and an indication of the promise of the 2009 vintage. The 2007 Wild Hog Estate was the most delightful 2007 Pinot Noir to drink now. The other 2009 Pinot Noir that I admired was Failla's Hirsch Vineyard.

The one 2008 which shined was Cobb's Coastland Vineyard. Unlike the other 2008s, Coastland was substantial and vibrant, with a potential for aging. Ross Cobb, a young man barely 40, is winemaker of his own Cobb Wines, which includes his family Coastlands Vineyard and other vineyards. Ross had previously worked as assistant winemaker/oenologist at Williams Selyem and as winemaker at Flowers Winery. He is now also the winemaker at Hirsch Vineyards.

The 2007 West Sonoma Coast Pinot Noirs lived up to the reputation of the vintage. All of the wines ranged from very good to superb. In addition to the "Best Buy" Wild Hog Estate Vineyard I mentioned earlier, Williams Selyem Hirsch Vineyard stood out for its depth and potential longevity; Flowers Camp Meeting Ridge Vineyard, typically its best Pinot Noir, was excellent, an exciting



Littoral Wines in western Sonoma County; Littoral winemakers Ted and Heidi Lemon



Bernheim Original Kentucky Straight Wheat Whiskey, Distilled in Kentucky, Bottled by Bernheim Distillery, Bardstow, KY 40004 48% Alc./Vol. © 2011

WHY WEST IS BEST

One Man's Journey to West Sonoma Coast

BY KRISTEN BIELER

Carroll Kemp was a movie producer when he and his business partner, Mark Estrin, made 50 cases of wine in his L.A. garage back in 2000. Produced from a single ton of grapes, and named Red Car in tribute to the red electric trolley cars that ran throughout Los Angeles until the early 1960s, the duo's small-batch bottlings soon earned some impressively high scores and started getting attention.

The secret obviously wasn't in a superior winemaking facility or even winemaker expertise (Kemp and Estrin had never made wine before). It was, Kemp was convinced, the source of his grapes—the West Sonoma Coast. "Climate is the single most influential factor determining the potential quality of fruit and the West Sonoma Coast climate is ideal: cool and temperate, with a long, cool and dry growing season," he says.

Kemp soon quit his job and moved his family north in 2004 where he purchased land atop a coastal mountain range on the West Sonoma Coast. The 2009 vintage is Red Car's first full harvest from the estate vineyard, and today Red Car has three tiers in its portfolio: Boxcar, Trolley and a Reserve tier of single-vineyard wines.



The West Sonoma Coast "is truly cool climate viticulture, literally on the edge—grapes struggle to ripen here, on the margin of viability," says Kemp, an outspoken member of the West Sonoma Coast Vintners (see box). "Our Platt Vineyard is so marginal that we have yet to get even one ton per acre from it. But the long, cool and dry growing season allows grapes to ripen slowly. It gives us the ability to develop flavor without high sugar." Kemp does his part—his winery is 100% gravity flow, he uses entirely native yeasts for fermentation, works only with heritage clones and doesn't think his leaf canopies ("When you restrain the fruit character, you allow other complexities to emerge," he says)—but he is a true believer in the West Sonoma Coast as a "game changer" for California Pinot Noir.

WEST Sonoma Coast Vintners

West Sonoma Coast Vintners is a brand-new association of wineries and growers on the coastline of Sonoma County, that is getting more active in advocating the distinctiveness of its region (www.westsonomacoast.com).

Current members of the WSCV are: Benovia Winery, Benziger Family Winery, Boheme Wines, Ceritas Wines, Chasseur Wines, Cobb Wines, Evening Land Vineyards, FAILLA Wines, Flowers Vineyard & Winery, Fort Ross Vineyard & Winery, Freeman Vineyard & Winery, Freestone Vineyards, Hawk Hill Vineyard,

Hirsch Vineyards, LIOCO, Littorai Wines, Martinelli Winery, Patz & Hall Wine Company, Peay Vineyards, Ramey Wine Cellars, Red Car Wine Company, Small Vines and Whetstone Wine Cellars.

The first weekend in August, the West Sonoma Coast Vintners will host the WOW (West of West) Wine Festival (www.westofwestwine.com) to draw attention to the region and its wines. Held one hour north of San Francisco in the coastal hamlet of Occidental, the festival will showcase 30 producers including many of the region's stars.

wine with a brilliant future; Hirsch Vineyards "San Andreas," its flagship wine, showed depth and complexity; winemaker-owner Ted Lemon's Littorai The Haven Vineyard was smashing. Many critics consider Ted Lemon the premier winemaker of Pinot Noir in the U.S., and I will not dispute that. Hartford Family Winery's Far Coast Vineyard, near Annapolis in the north, needs time; it will be long-lived, and is destined to be one of Hartford Court's greatest wines.

The Burgundy Alternative

My favorite Pinot Noir of the tasting was Cobb Wines' 2007 Emmaline Vineyard. This is my style of Pinot Noir: very aromatic, delicately flavored and complex. By the way, the '07 Emmaline contains only 12.9% alcohol; the '06 Cobb Emmaline has 12.8%. When is the last time you've seen a California wine with less than 13% alcohol?

Three other West Sonoma Coast Pinot Noirs that I've tasted previously rival Cobb's 2007 Emmaline Vineyard in greatness. Littorai's 2007 Hirsch Vineyard, which I tasted at the winery in 2009 but which was not available for our tasting, is one of them; this monumental, complex wine is Littorai's standout 2007, in my opinion. Another is Willowbrook Cellars' 2006 DuNah Vineyard, made in the delicate style of a True Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir. A pleasant note is that all Willowbrook Cellars Pinot Noirs, still little-known, are outstanding values. The third is Hirsch Vineyards 2007 Estate Block 7 Pinot Noir; it's such a thrilling wine to taste, clearly for me Hirsch's best Pinot Noir.

For lovers of Pinot Noir, West Sonoma Coast Pinot Noirs are wines to seek out. I urge you to try some of the wines I've mentioned in this column. For my palate, they are the best Pinot Noir wines being made outside of Burgundy today. ■