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1 of 12
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2 of 12
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3 of 12
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Redefining Sonoma

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By Jay McInerney

Attending various wine events in Manhattan in the last couple of weeks, I've run into some wine makers and grape growers who have got me thinking about the Sonoma Coast appellation.

Some of the very best California pinot noirs and Chardonnays come from this particular AVA. The problem is, it's so large and climactically heterogeneous as to be almost meaningless. If you look at the AVA on a map, it resembles a gerrymandered electoral district drawn by politicians to preserve a congressional seat. Should the word "coast" really be applicable to vineyards an hour's drive from the water?

"That the appellation is so huge and covers areas with 20 degree temp variances and very different soils makes a farce out of the idea behind appellations," says Andy Peay, whose vineyards are in the very northwestern corner of the appellation on marine soils some two miles from the Pacific. For the last decade, Peay has produced superb crisp Sonoma Coast pinots from this relatively cool area.

Many informed observers have started speaking of the true Sonoma Coast, or a west Sonoma Coast. Early pioneers such as Flowers, Marcassin and Hirsch sought out the cooler westernmost areas of the coast in the early nineties, recognizing the potential for great pinots and chards. Matt Liklider, who is making some excellent pinots and chards under the LIOCO labels, says, "I think the AVA is ripe for multiple secessions." He's one of many who would like to see a West Sonoma Coast AVA with the boundary defined by Highway 116.

"Any vineyards west of there, we consider to be The Western Sonoma Coast. Wines grown on the true coast possess an undeniable link to their maritime origins—a link wines growing further inland lack."

Recently Peay and some of his neighbors (Failla, Freeman, Littorai, Freestone, Red Car) formed the West Sonoma Coast Vintners, which now has 35 members. The group is hosting something called the [West of the West Wine Festival](#) on August 6th in Occidental, which will feature seminars and a pig roast.

Nights, and sometimes days, can be cool here even in August—one reason the chardonnays and pinots are so good—so bring a sweater or two.

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2:43



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2:48