

Headin' Out West

THE BIRTH OF THE WEST SONOMA COAST VINTNERS

by Christopher Sawyer

All ends lead to the ocean. Or at least that's the spirited philosophy of the West Sonoma Coast Vintners (WSCV), a new association of wineries and growers who are passionate about farming wine grapes on the coastline of Sonoma County.

Like the famous villages in Burgundy's Côte de Nuits, the coastal region of West Sonoma Coast contains many distinct growing areas where Pinot Noir is king, including Fort Ross/Seaview, Annapolis, Occidental, Freestone, Green Valley and the Sebastopol Hills. Of the more than 30 wineries that currently belong to the association, each is dedicated to preserving and protecting the history and landscape of the region and producing world-class wines with complex flavor profiles, high acidity and balanced tannins.

PHOTO: AMANDA LANE/CAMERA LOCAVORA



Bob Cabral and Jeff Manganas of William-Selyem at the "Taste the Coast in Context" seminar at West of West 2011.



Empty Pinot Noir glasses on the porch at Peay Vineyards.

PHOTO: ANDY PEAY

In early August, the association held its inaugural coming-out party, the West of West Wine Festival, an invigorating three-day series of tasting events, seminars and winemaker dinners in the charming town of Occidental. At the grand tasting event, wine blogger Joe Roberts of www.1winedude.com was candid about his feelings for the wines from the region. "This event represents a rare chance to taste so many quality wines in one setting," he said. "I'm very impressed by the styles that this diverse group of producers has to offer."

With cool daytime temperatures, warm nights due to the close proximity to the ocean and a long growing season, the key to capturing these intensive flavors relies on pin-point farming practices that favor balanced vines over yields.

"The key is no dogmatism in what we are doing," says grower Paul Sloan of Small Vines Wines, a winery that produces flavorful and expressive wines made with meticulously farmed fruit from high-density vineyards averaging two to three pounds of grape clusters per vine.

"To us, it's a mixture of art and science. Our goal is to be as pure as possible in the vineyard. And when the fruit tastes good is when we start sending samples to the lab!"

Of course, WSCV is not a one-trick pony. Beyond Pinot Noir, many of the producers work with world-class Chardonnay and Syrah grapes. Among the specialists working with all three varietals is Peay Vineyards, a small family-owned winery that planted its first vines only four miles from the ocean, near the tiny town of Annapolis, in 1998.

Nick Peay, who founded the winery with his brother Andy, says it's been a hands-off approach from day one. "I wanted grapes that were going to make themselves into a great wine. But at that point, there was nothing going on up in these hills, so

it was all a risk," he acknowledges.

Today, the eleven different clones on the property produce yearly releases of elegant, mineral-driven wines that are worlds apart from the more macho, ripe fruit-driven wines from hotter regions further inland.

Carroll Kemp, proprietor/winemaker of Red Car Wines and a one of the co-founders of the WSCV association, says he expects the level of quality of the wines to only get better over time. "Like other Sonoma Coast producers, I'm trying to make food wines, not cocktails," he said. "As a new organization, we are not bound by the laws of tradition; instead, we are making these delicious statements now."

For more information, visit www.westofwestwine.com. ■



Andy Peay of Peay Vineyards showcases the unique soils of the micro-region of Annapolis in northwest Sonoma County.



Christopher Barefoot of Flowers Vineyard and Winery greets guests at the WOW 2011 Grand Tasting.



Regina Martinelli of Martinelli Winery at the Terroir of West Sonoma Coast seminar.



Williams-Selyem co-founder Bert Williams at the WOW 2011 Winemaker's Studio event.

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