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Drawing new lines for wine on the Sonoma Coast

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Craig Lee / SFC
For Pinot Noir, Joseph Phelps winery banked on Freestone, outside Sebastopol, which could become a new appellation.

When is the coast not necessarily the coast? When it's marked on a bottle of Sonoma wine, apparently.

In wine terms, the Sonoma Coast appellation has been a mess since its approval in 1987. It stretches over 750 square miles, from the eastern end of San Pablo Bay, on Napa's edge, to the far northern reaches of Sonoma's actual coast, near the hamlets of Annapolis

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and Gualala. Along the way it engulfs most of Russian River Valley, Green Valley, the Sonoma portion of Carneros and nearly half of Sonoma County.

The original motives of the appellation are draped in the sort of politics that attend so many American Viticultural Areas, or AVAs. The original intent, as always, was to delineate a growing region with unique character. But the map for this particular sprawl of an appellation was largely sketched to include the vineyards of Sonoma-Cutrer, which needed an area

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that encompassed its winery and farther-flung vineyards for the "coastal" Chardonnay it promoted in the 1980s. "It's big," says Brice Jones, Sonoma-Cutrer's founder, of the Sonoma Coast, "but it's true to the purpose of having appellations."

In subsequent years, every logical twist has been applied to explain this draw-outside-the-lines appellation: the predominance of certain soils, the impact of ocean wind through the gap in the coastal range near Petaluma (the Petaluma Gap is now pushing for its own appellation, of course), the presumptive cool climate.

"We felt the Sonoma Coast appellation was beginning to be used on wines for marketing purposes, and wasn't being used on wines that showed the natural style of the area," says Carroll Kemp of Red Car, which has vineyards in remote Fort Ross. "In that sense, it is deceptive."

So there's what has come to be called the "true" Sonoma coast - vineyards within a few miles of the Pacific coastline that, as it happens, are defining spots for some of the country's top Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. This includes names like Hirsch, Peay, Flowers and Marcassin, along with wineries like Littorai, Williams Selyem, Kistler and Freestone - all together a litany of California outperformers.

At long last, many have had it with the funny geography. Last month they unveiled a new organization, the West Sonoma Coast Vintners (see more at westsonomacoast.com), with two dozen members and its own festival to be held in August in Occidental.

This is hardly the first attempt to bring order to the gerrymandered blob of the Sonoma Coast. Around 2002, several of the group's founding members submitted a proposal for a Fort Ross-Seaview appellation that included coastal ridges from Cazadero to Annapolis. That effort was shot down after concerns were raised by Jones, some of whose vineyards were excluded, along with Fort Ross Vineyards, who saw its brand name imperiled, and Hartford Family Winery, who similarly had vineyards outside the dotted line.

There are hopes that Fort Ross-Seaview will rise again. Efforts for Freestone-Occidental, an appellation south of the Russian River, are coming along, as are plans for an Annapolis appellation to the north, a Sebastopol Hills area south of the Bodega Highway (see sfg.ly/dRRaxo) and the Petaluma Gap.

But for now, the new group's creators have moved to other tasks. They would rather promote the common culture of West County than start marking up maps once again. So

they have devised a large, and unofficial, "West Sonoma Coast" area, with Highway 116 as a dividing line that cuts northwest through Sebastopol and Forestville.

Their hope is that rather than mire themselves in more bureaucracy, they can take their case directly to their customers.

"Looking at it from my point of view and some of my neighbors, we don't really care anymore," says David Hirsch of Hirsch Vineyards, who spearheaded the original Fort Ross-Seaview effort.

"There's been a learning curve around the real Sonoma Coast versus the generic, so I'm not sure how much interest there'll be in putting these AVAs on the label."

Hirsch's point is salient: When you look at the roster of the West Sonoma Coast posse, most names are easily recognizable. And you realize the repercussions of this bureaucratic mess: Vintners who couldn't get brand leverage with an appellation simply built their own reputation. People might seek out a Hirsch or Peay or Flowers, but probably not because it says "Sonoma Coast" on the label.

Still, there are good reasons to begin the subdivision. While there is some similarity among the jumble of soil types, the moderating influence of the ocean and relative elevation of these various areas make the biggest difference in style.

According to Patrick Shabram, the geographer who wrote both the Fort Ross-Seaview and Freestone-Occidental proposals, a major divide exists between Fort Ross' ridgetops, generally above 1,000 feet, and lower-elevation vineyards in Annapolis. Most Fort Ross sites, including Hirsch, Flowers and the eponymous Fort Ross Vineyards, receive full days of sunlight, while lower sites are often stuck in the fog.

"You can think of it a little bit like the Napa Valley," Shabram says. "Everybody realizes that there is the Napa Valley, which is this great wine-growing region, but there are differences between Carneros and Calistoga."

The Coasters have taken a key lesson from Napa's own geographic wars, plus the battle between the east and west sides of Paso Robles. Napa's subdivision largely by town boundaries left the feds skeptical about the abuse of the appellation process. So the West Sonoma Coast has opted to step back and sort out its business before getting mired in another tangle of red tape.

Which is why last week Kemp and Andy Peay of Peay Vineyards found themselves traversing another coast - the East Coast - with a road show about the new game plan for what previously was dubbed the "true Sonoma Coast."

The new group's informal boundaries have their own arbitrary issues, but to Peay there's a more crucial definition of the West Sonoma Coast - the inability to make cheaper, large-scale wine out in the far coastal reaches, in part because of farming costs and perennially

low crop yields prevent it, and in part because land regulations in former timber areas limit possible new plantings. Most wineries in these parts are actual estates willing to take financial risks for high-dollar wines.

As you've probably deduced, the fight for the coast is hardly over. New appellation filings haven't exactly been frozen, but first the association's founders would rather try to really comprehend what makes each slice of the far coast unique. They want to compare their wines, share farming notes and - crucially - finally convince people who live farther afield that "Sonoma Coast" doesn't actually mean that much at all.

"We're at the exploratory stage of this. We're at the beginning," Peay says. "I'm not sure why our wines are the way they are. We're learning."

After the years of bureaucratic battles, perhaps that's the smartest way forward for the true Sonoma coast.

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