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Wine way out west



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FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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The Sonoma Coast is one of the biggest and wildest appellations in California, a sprawling 750 square miles along a series of coastal highlands from the Mendocino border to San Pablo Bay.

WEST OF WEST WINE FESTIVAL

The West Sonoma Coast Vintners will hold its first ever WOW Wine Festival this August 5-7 in Occidental.

Aug. 5 — Welcome Dinners at Failla, Freeman Winery, Freestone Vineyards, Littorai, Peay Vineyards and Red Car.

Aug. 6 — Seminars, Grand Tasting and Whole Hog Feast.

Seminars include the Winemakers Studio, an interview by Ted Lemon of Littorai of Burt Williams, Williams-Selyem's founding winemaker, about the early history of West Sonoma Coast vineyards and winemaking. A Taste of West Sonoma Coast, wherein six member wineries share their wines and talk about the region. And Terroir: A Blind Tasting of West Sonoma Coast, Russian River Valley and Oregon Pinot Noirs, wherein 9-12 wines will be tasted blind and discussed.

The Whole Hog Feast will be held at the Union Hotel and prepared by Duskie Estes and John Stewart of Zazu.

Aug. 7 — Barrel tasting and open house at participating wineries.

Tickets \$125-\$375,
www.westofwestwine.com.

There's never really been any contention about its length. It's the width that confounds people. Are grapes being grown east of Highway 101 in Santa Rosa really under the same conditions as those growing 1,000 feet high above Annapolis?

Adding to the confusion is the appellation's overlap into five other American Viticultural Areas, or AVAs, including Sonoma Valley, part of Chalk Hill and most of the Russian River Valley.

Attempts to slice it up in different ways over the years have met mostly with bureaucratic entropy. And with only a tiny percentage (about 7,000 acres) of the entire land mass planted, there's been no momentum or consensus toward forming any official sub-appellations.

Now, groups of growers and vintners are taking matters into their own hands.

Enter the West Sonoma Coast Vintners Group, an association of wineries and growers who describe themselves as advocates of wines with balance, integrity, character and nuance, who aim to develop a clear identity evocative of the region and the West County community.

"As we band together, the concept just has more heft," said winemaker Carroll Kemp of Red Car Wine, also a founding member and current president of the group. "Twenty-five wineries together can get national attention. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts."

Members include such fairly established brands as Flowers Vineyard & Winery, Failla Wines, Freestone Vineyards, Cobb Wines, Littorai, Martinelli, Patz & Hall, Peay Vineyards, and Ramey and Hirsch, as well as up-and-comers like Benovia, Boheme, Ceritas, Freeman, Red Car and Evening Land Vineyards.

"People are saying, about time, why hasn't this happened before," said Ken Freeman of Freeman Winery. "The market is so competitive and confusing and we have such a unique story to tell."

There have been attempts in the past to differentiate parts of the Sonoma Coast as "true" Sonoma Coast, with a focus on three particular coastal areas: the northernmost area around Annapolis, where ridges reach 1,000 feet elevation and growing areas sit five or six miles in (where Peay is); the area just south of that, still north of the Russian River and up 2,000 feet, where Flowers, Hirsch and Martinelli can be found; and south of the Russian River

around the towns of Freestone and Occidental, where Freestone Vineyards, Freeman, Hawk Hill Vineyard, Coastlands and others are found.

But Kemp doesn't want to get into what's "true" or not.

"We want to state what we are," he explained, "not say anything about anyone else."

West Sonoma Coast then is defined as the growing areas west of Highway 116 to the coast, including Annapolis, Fort Ross/Seaview, Occidental, Freestone, Green Valley and the Sebastopol Hills.

Pinot noir is predominant here, with David Hirsch among the first to boldly plant the variety on an old sheep ranch in 1978 under these extreme conditions. So are chardonnay and syrah.

Most of the wineries are roughly the same size and age, having, with the exception of Flowers and Hirsch, started their businesses within the last 10 years. They're young but already well-respected within the wine world.

"If you look at the founder group, it's very successful brands with strong followings," Freeman said. "It's helped with the credibility of the group. We're all serious about what we do."

In addition to promoting its wines, the group says it wants to preserve and protect the history, landscape and culture of the West Sonoma Coast.

"It's not purely viticulture," said Kemp. "If you live in the area, there is a lifestyle in the West County that's different than Santa Rosa or Petaluma, a little bit more free-spirited, focused on the earth and the land. There's a little more of an outsider perspective."

He feels this applies to the group's members as well.

"Especially people that went out on the Sonoma Coast like Hirsch," he added. "He's a pioneer. It continues to define us, that stubbornness, an independent streak to create an identity for a region."

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