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A celebration of Pinot on the edge

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Littorai's Ted Lemon was among the Pinot talents to organize this new wine festival. (Photo: Lacy Atkins/The Chronicle, 2010)

Seeing how unwieldy most wine festivals have become, it was a pleasure to see the small scope of the [West of West Festival](#) held the weekend of August 5.

This inaugural event of the new West Sonoma Coast Vintners was held in Occidental, itself a bit of a feat. If you've ever traveled through this tiny, 1,100-person West County hamlet, you'll know it doesn't have the infrastructure for a big wine 'do — even versus Paso Robles or McMinnville, Ore.

That was precisely the point, I suspect. This portion of the Sonoma Coast appellation is a long way from civilization; nearby Sebastopol is its metropolis. If that meant a longer drive and few hotel rooms (kind of a prerequisite for the coast) it was also an object course in why the Sonoma Coast is the very opposite of Napa's grandeur.

I went to do a panel blind Pinot tasting between three regions: Oregon, Russian River Valley and the west Sonoma Coast, which consists of vineyards west of Highway 116, or what some like to call the “true” coast. (Much more on that dividing line, and the new organization, [here](#).) I wish I could say that any of us were perfectly accurate that day, but when Oregon comes across as notably ripe and a wine like Peay’s Scallop Shelf Pinot Noir is all citrus zest and mineral, lines are blurry.

Despite a presentation on the different signatures of the area’s subregions, it’s hard to nail down an exact Sonoma Coast signature, aside from what I termed “more intensity” in all the bottles. (I expect a call soon from the “Lost In Translation” producers.) That might be why the vintners were careful to talk about areas like the Sebastopol Hills that they want to “explore,” rather than **appellations they want officially codified**. Any which way, between the inhospitable climate and inaccessibility, growing grapes out there is an exercise in nerves and extremes.

Far easier to recognize was the caliber of names. Just 25 wineries were there, but consider some of the lineup: Littorai, Cobb, Freestone, Anthill Farms, Flowers, Failla, Evening Land, Martinelli, Red Car. When you toss in the Williams Selyem wines poured at the seminars (the 1996 Coastlands Ranch Pinot was a perfect snapshot of the subtlety that made the label such a darling) you find a dramatic cross-section of the best of California Pinot Noir. In fact, considering the prestige of those names, it’s almost surprising this event didn’t happen before now.

So there was an embarrassment of great wines. The 2001 Littorai Hirsch Vineyard (from magnum) was no slouch, but then neither was the 2009 Cobb Emmaline Ann Vineyard or the 2009 Freeman Keefer Ranch, which played double duty by also representing a cold slice of Russian River Valley.

But my wine of the day came from an unexpected name: Freestone, the Joseph Phelps project out on the coast. Winemaker Theresa Heredia showed a bottle of her 2009 Pastorale Vineyard Pinot Noir. She said it was her “intellectual” wine — made from mostly Calera selection vines grown in the project’s best vineyard, with a high percentage of whole grape clusters. Intensely spicy and forest-driven, its flavors never quite seemed to touch the ground. If this is her unedited view of the Sonoma Coast, Heredia really ought to be given *carte blanche* to follow it.

A visit from Burt Williams

All that Pinot framed a rare appearance by Burt Williams, former pressman for the S.F. Newspaper Agency (which included *The Chronicle*) and half of the duo that founded Williams Selyem.

Williams, interviewed by Littorai’s Ted Lemon, offered a reminder that even Pinot — even *his* Pinot — begins with humility. Born in San Francisco and raised in Sonoma County, Williams was exposed to wine as a child by his uncle. Having bought a house near the Russian River in 1962, Williams was a home winemaker starting in the late ’60s and, as he put it, “being from Sonoma County,” he initially focused on Zinfandel.

By 1979, he had met Ed Selyem and was turning to Pinot. The duo sold bottles to local winemakers, which caught the attention of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. An agent saw their bottles sitting in other wineries, and in late 1980 gave them a friendly call.

“He said we should get bonded before we got arrested,” Williams recalled. “We got bonded.”

Williams recalled the original Pinot Noirs that inspired him, including a 1972 from Iron Horse (made by Dick Arrowood) that was so light as to be “almost pink”; also the Carneros Creek wines of 1976 and ’77; and a 1976 from Sanford & Benedict in Santa Barbara.

“But ‘d always wonder, what happened the following year?” Williams said. “I surmised that what they were doing, they were doing it right by accident one time.”

It was a taste of a Fenton Acres bottle from Rochioli that led him to believe he found someone serious about Pinot. He convinced Joe Rochioli, who was mostly selling to Korbel for sparkling wine, to sell some Pinot grapes, Williams Selyem was on its way.

Humility, you say? For all the eventual acclaim, Selyem and Williams kept their day jobs for at least a decade; neither took money out of the winery until 1989 or 1990.

But back to the Sonoma Coast ... Williams recalled a 1987 visit to the Summa vineyard outside Occidental. He tried a

