

# PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinot Noir

## The Magic of Marin

The Marin County appellation has a long history of grape growing. In pre-prohibition times there were extensive plantings in the region and Mission San Rafael had 100 acres of vineyards in the 1850's (large then for Northern California). At the time, San Franciscans often traveled to the Escalle Winery in Larkspur, established by Frenchman Jean Escalle, in the 1890's. Escalle's Marin County wine production exceeded 9,000 cases per year from his 23-acre hillside vineyard and was delivered "just like a milk route" by a horse named 'Pedro'. Long-time Marin resident Helen Wilson recalled, "Escalles was a wonderful place. The French and Italians came here in droves on weekends to enjoy themselves. They brought their children and ate lunch. You could hear them singing all over town!" During Prohibition, the area turned to cattle ranching, dairy farming and various agricultural pursuits and after completion of the Golden Gate Bridge, the more southerly portion of the county developed into a highly-coveted residential community. Today, Marin County is the most expensive real estate in the country (median home price over \$1 million). The number of dairy farms has dwindled from several hundred to only forty today and much of the land is owned by wealthy ranchers who made small fortunes in diverse fields such as real estate development (Tom Stubbs), publishing (McElvoy), and films (George Lucas). Currently, available property is scarce and what is for sell is in large parcels, much too expensive for grape growers to exploit. Serious winegrowers have resorted to leasing plots of land on the large ranches.

Marin County borders Sonoma and the climate is similar to the Sonoma Coast. It is no surprise, then, that the area has sparked interest for Pinot Noir fanciers. The climate is influenced by two bodies of water— the Pacific Ocean along Marin's western coast and the San Pablo Bay along the eastern border. The extremely mild and long growing season is conducive to Pinot Noir. The area is warmer than either Napa or Sonoma in the winter so bud break is early. Rain in the spring is common, however, so yields are low. The risk of rain and fungus at the end of the long growing season can also severely reduce yields. The soils are generally decomposed sandstone that provides superb drainage and high mineral content. In western Marin county, when nature cooperates, the resultant Pinot Noir grapes can be magical with plentiful acid, lower alcohol, and very small berries yielding wild and concentrated flavors.

**Pinot Noir:  
Discover the  
Velvet**

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California Agricultural Statistics Service reported 86 acres of grapes (33 acres of Pinot Noir) planted in Marin County in 2002. Currently there are at least 125 acres of vineyards with 75 acres planted to Pinot Noir. This amount is minuscule in comparison to Sonoma County which has over 6,500 acres of vineyards, but there is excitement building for this region. Pinot Noir aficionados are always searching for that unique terroir which will give them a different taste, a remarkable kick, that only their beloved grape can offer. John Haeger's recent book, *North American Pinot Noir*, has no mention of Marin County as an emerging Pinot Noir appellation, but you can bet that the revised and updated future version will.

Recently I had the special opportunity to spend the day with three exuberant and passionate Pinot Noir winegrowers in Marin County. If you really want to understand the soul of Pinot Noir, you need to follow a grape farmer as he makes his rounds. Only then can you realize the sweat, the dedication, and the myriad of decisions that go into growing this most difficult of varieties. Vineyards are a romantic pose, but they represent a tremendous amount of attention to small detail. Where to plant the vines, how to trellis the vines, how to or not to irrigate, how to manage cover crops, how to deal with insects, gophers, birds and other pests, cane pruning, repositioning and thinning the buds, removing laterals, trimming cluster wings, fruit thinning, green harvesting, managing guide wires, and on and on. The fact is it's damn hard work that takes considerable skill and knowledge combined with practical sense and mechanical ingenuity. It is a thankless job since invariably the credit for great wines is bestowed on the winemaker. The picture below shows the 'Three Marin Musketeers' who led me on a Pinot vineyard tour of Marin (Mark Pasternak on the left, Jonathan Pey in the middle, and Stewart Johnson on the right pictured in the McNeil Vineyard)



Mark Pasternak grew up in Southern California but always dreamed of escaping the city and becoming a farmer. He purchased the Devil's Gulch Ranch in Marin in 1971 and through years of diligence and hard work has become the most respected grower of Pinot Noir in Marin County. In 1980 he planted 3 acres of Pinot Noir (Martini clone) and 4 acres of Chardonnay on the Devil's Gulch Ranch. He sold his grapes to Schrams-

berg and Kalin for several years. The 1987 and 1988 sparkling roses made by Kalin have become legendary among wine enthusiasts. By 1991 he felt his Pinot Noir grapes were of the quality to make a great Pinot Noir still wine. Unfortunately there was no interest initially even though he offered to give any takers a ton of grapes free. Finally, Dan Goldfield, the winemaker at La Crema, accepted the offer and included the grapes in the Pinot Noirs from that winery. Later in the 1990s Goldfield left La Crema to create the Hartford Court label for Kendall Jackson and in 1997 released the first Pinot Noir with a Marin County appellation on the label and a Devils' Gulch Ranch designation. In 1998, Pasternak planted 14 more acres to Pinot Noir on a terraced hillside using Dijon clones 114, 115, 667, and 777 in even amounts. His Pinot Noir grapes are now included in the Dutton-Goldfield and Sean Thackrey Adromedia Devil's Gulch Ranch Pinot Noirs. These wines have an impressive pedigree and over time may well surpass the reputation of Marin's beloved Grateful Dead.

The major Pinot Noir vineyards of Marin County include the following:

**McNeil Vineyard**– This scenic vineyard is part of the Redding Ranch and leased to Chalone. It is located up a treacherous winding dirt road on a ridge at 1,100 feet above “downtown” Nicasio whose only significant building is the Rancho Nicasio bar, restaurant, general store, and post office (between Novato and the Pacific Ocean). 20 acres were planted to Pinot Noir in 2001 with primarily Dijon clones 115, 777, and 828 and some 667 and Pommard. This vineyard is to be the showcase vineyard for Chalone and plans are to produce 3,000 cases a year of Pinot Noir. The picture below shows the vineyard and its pastoral vistas which are so commonplace in Marin County. The vineyard was planted by and is farmed by Mark Pasternak. The winemaker will be Dan Goldfield.



**Stubbs Vineyard**– Tom Stubbs was a very successful real estate developer in San Francisco who bought a 600 acre ranch for a weekend escape and finally moved here for good in 1996. The vineyard was planted to Pinot Noir, clone 115, in 1998. Organic certification is expected in June of this year. Mark Pasternak and Tom Stubbs farm the vineyard. The first vintage of Stubbs Vineyard Pinot Noir was 2002. The winemaker is Dan Goldfield.

**Corda Vineyard** –This vineyard is part of the Chileno Valley Ranch owned by the Corda family. 11 acres of Pinot Noir were planted in 1990-1991. There are a mixture of clones. The Pinot Noir grapes are used by Pey-Marin and Vision Cellars (since 1997). This vineyard also has small plantings of Merlot (sold to Jonathan Pey and bottled under the Mount Tamalpais Vineyards label), Cabernet Franc, and Riesling. Pey is testing the potential of the region to produce fine Riesling by grafting over 2 acres of Merlot to a German Riesling clone.

**Skywalker Ranch– Niebaum-Coppola**– this project is rather secretive. Mark Pasternak consults on the Pinot Noir plantings here and the first Pinot Noir should be released this year.

**Kendrick Johnson Vineyard**– This primarily Pinot Noir vineyard is meticulously farmed by Stewart Johnson who also farms family vineyards in Amador County. Johnson is also the winemaker. This picturesque vineyard is shown below.



**Devil's Gulch Ranch Vineyard**– This vineyard is owned and farmed by Mark Pasternak and was detailed previously (pages 2 and 3). In addition to the vineyard, Devil's Gulch is a 75 acre diversified working ranch. Chickens are released in the vineyard to reduce the cover crop. Sheep graze nearby. Rabbits and organic produce like asparagus are raised and sold to high-end restaurants in the Bay area. Agriculturally oriented summer day camps for kids ages 6-17 are held each summer. The camps allow city-raised youngsters to explore nature, toil in the garden, work with animals, learn skills from the past, and get plenty dirty.

While gathered at the McNeil Vineyard we held an extensive tasting of Marin County Pinot Noirs along with a picnic lunch. The tasting included: **2002 and 2003 Stubbs Vineyard Pinot Noir** (\$30), **2002 Vision Cellars Chileno Valley Pinot Noir** (\$36), **2002 Pey-Marin Pinot Noir** (grapes from Stubbs Vineyard and Corda Vineyard, \$33), **2001** (unreleased) and **2002 Sean Thackery Andromedia Devil's Gulch Ranch Pinot Noir** (\$60), **2002 and 2003 Dutton-Goldfield Devil's Gulch Ranch Pinot Noir** (\$40) and **2002 Kendrick Vineyards Pinot Noir** (unreleased).



Sitting outdoors on a beautiful sunny day the Pinots felt just right. All of the wines were characterized by luscious and plump wild berry fruits framed by ample acidity. The 2003 vintages show great promise.

The day ended with a magnificent dinner at Mark Pasternak's Devil's Gulch Ranch. The leftovers of the wines listed above were finished off along with **1997, 1998, and 1999 Hartford Court Marin County Devil's Gulch Ranch Pinot Noir**, and several **The Estate Bartley Pinot Noirs** made by home winemaker Dale Bartley using Devil's Gulch Ranch grapes. All of this glorious Pinot was accompanied by a feast featuring Devil's Gulch Ranch venison, goat, lamb, rabbit, salmon and asparagus. Mark's French-born mother-in-law, bless her heart, prepared the rabbit and believe me it was the best rabbit I have ever eaten. We polished off fresh raspberry pies at the finish line.

Recently at the famous Manka's Restaurant in Inverness, a "Devil's Gulch Ranch Dinner" was held with multiple courses featuring products from the ranch: venison, lamb, rabbit, salmon, vegetables and wines made from Devil's Gulch Ranch grapes. A monumental and unprecedented event.

We tried to come to some consensus about the region-specific characteristics of Marin County Pinot Noir, but we reached no real conclusion. Dan Goldfield, who has the most experience with Marin County Pinot Noir has stated that the region's Pinot Noir "tends to have a wild character like an olallieberry, rather than blackberry as found in the Russian River Valley." One thing we all agreed on, however, was that the wines were damn good. A favorite was the 2002 Sean Thackery Andromeda. This was a wonderfully lush and velvety wine with just a dab of Bret that incorporated over 15% alcohol seamlessly into a feast of Marin magic.

**Dutton-Goldfield** After several years of working closely together as winemaker and grape grower since 1990, Steve Dutton and Dan Goldfield merged their talents to create Dutton-Goldfield Winery in 1998. The **2002 Dutton-Goldfield Marin County Devil's Gulch Pinot Noir** was reviewed in the *PinotFile* previously (Volume 4, Issue 25). I found the wine extremely appealing for its unique and exotic berry flavors and bracing acidity. The 2003 vintage is equally good. About 431 cases. Ordering: [duttongoldfield.com](http://duttongoldfield.com).

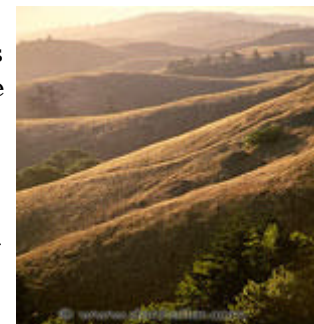


**Pey-Marin Vineyards** Jonathan and Susan Pey are proprietors and winegrowers for the Mount Tamalpais label (Merlot, Pinot Gris and soon Riesling) and Pey-Marin Pinot Noir. Their motto is clever: "Beaune in Marin" and their tagline reads "To showcase Marin County vineyard soils and uniquely cool climate attributes by crafting small lots of Pinot Noir which display exemplary varietal integrity, balance over sheer power and a proclivity to improve in the cellar." The Peys both have an experienced background in the wine business which has served them well in their new venture. The **2002 "Trois Filles"** (three daughters after



their loving gesture to their three young daughters) was one of the best Pinot Noirs I tasted last year. The wine exhibits the finesse and balance of a fine Volnay, but with that exotic berry flavor typical of Marin grapes that I can't quite put my finger on. The 2003 vintage will be released June 1 and I believe will prove to be even better than the 2002 wine. Grapes for the 2003 vintage come from the Stubbs Vineyard and the Corda Vineyard. Ordering: [marinwines.com](http://marinwines.com). Susan Pey is also a great resource for information on Marin County and locating Marin County Pinot Noirs. Her number is 415-455-9463.

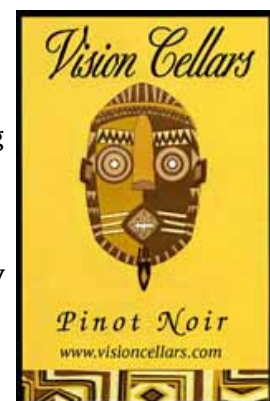
**Point Reyes Vineyards** Owner Steve Doughty buys grapes from outside Marin County but also grows his own Pinot Noir. He started making a sparkling wine for his wife's daughter's wedding in 1995 and the quality has steadily improved. He has one of only two Marin County tasting rooms (12700 Highway 1, Point Reyes Station), as well as a B&B on the property. 415-663-1011.



**Sean Thackrey** Thackrey is a talented but quirky winemaker who makes wine at his house in Bolinas. His story has been featured in past issues of the *PinotFile*. His reputation has been built on blended red wines using Rhone and other varietals. His first Marin County Devil's Gulch Ranch Pinot Noir released commercially is the **2002 Andromeda**. This wine is his first using 100% Marin County fruit. A collectible, this Pinot Noir has been snapped up quickly by Thackrey's loyal following but worth a search in the retail market.

**Stubbs Vineyard** Tom Stubbs made enough money as a real-estate developer to indulge his passion for farming and purchased a 600-acre ranch north of Point Reyes several years ago. His **2003 Stubbs Vineyard Marin County Pinot Noir** is delicious and was crafted by Dan Goldfield. Availability is limited but look for it on Bay Area restaurant wine lists.

**Vision Cellars** Owner and winemaker Mac McDonald is the son of a Texas Moonshine maker and grew up around distilled spirits and fruit wines. He began his career making Pinot Noir in his garage in his spare time. His friends liked his wines and encouraged him to start his own winery which he did in 1997. He currently produces over 2,000 cases per year with purchased grapes from quality vineyards in California. He has made a Marin County Pinot Noir since 1997 and the **2002 Chileno Valley Marin County Corda Vineyard Pinot Noir** was well-received by the wine press and snapped-up by many high end restaurants in Northern California. Ordering at 707-837-9314.



## **“A Celebration of Marin County Pinot Noir”**

**Today Marin County is trying to preserve its diverse agricultural visibility, including the little-known winegrowing heritage. The first step in this agricultural land preservation effort will take place on Wednesday, June 1st when Marin County Pinot Noir winegrowers present their newest vintages for the first time together in an inaugural fundraising event. The event is sponsored by the non-profit North Coast Grape Growers to benefit the Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT). The site will be the historic Escalle Winery, the oldest winery in Marin County, located near downtown Larkspur.**

**Marin vintner Jonathan Pey of Pey-Marin vineyards is excited about the event, “For the first time, Marin’s Pinot Noir specialists have come together to support a cause that is critical to Marin County— its agricultural viability.”**

**The boutique Marin Pinot Noir producers at the event include Dutton-Goldfield, Niebaum-Coppola, Pey-Marin Vineyards, Pt. Reyes Vineyard, Stubbs Vineyard, Sean Thackrey, and Vision Cellars. There will also be a variety of artisan cheeses and other foods grown on family farms in Marin County.**

**The fundraising Pinot Noir tasting and reception will be open to the public from 5-8 PM. Tickets must be purchased in advance (\$25 per person) at [www.duttongoldfield.com](http://www.duttongoldfield.com) and may be tax deductible. Trade and media should RSVP to Susan Pey at 415-455-9463.**

Every Prince needs a faithful companion to share the experience of life and wine . Here is my adorable wife Patty, appearing for the first time after over 180 issues of the PinotFile, at the Corda Vineyard in Marin.

