

**Pinot Noir is
Like Young
Love**

PinotFile

The First Wine Newsletter Exclusively Devoted to Pinot Noir

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Exploring Sonoma

I never seem to tire of exploring the sprawling landscape and valleys of Sonoma wine country on uncrowded back roads. It is a California that elsewhere is only a memory. People keep asking me, "Why don't you move to Sonoma?" And the answer is always the same - for me it is a recurring opportunity to vacation in a dreamland of wine and food without tainting Sonoma's attractions by the daily humdrum of life spent at home. It is all about talking about what I am going to eat and drink when I get there, discussing what I ate and drank the last time I was there and dreaming about what I plan to eat and drink when I return.

Anyone starting out on the Sonoma wine and food trail realizes that it isn't just size (an area greater than Rhode Island) and the Mayacamas mountain range that separate Sonoma from the smaller and better-known Napa. The continuing joke in both counties is that Napa is a Range Rover place and Sonoma is pickup country. In Sonoma, the fruit and vegetable garden of Northern California, there is a tradition of winemakers who are farmers first and who have always believed that winemaking begins in the vineyard. It is not unusual to come across wineries and vineyards that have been in the same families for four, five, even six generations and noble vines that have lived through 115 harvests.

Sonoma County is the closest thing to Farmer Heaven this side of Eden. The comparisons to France's bountiful Provence region are notable. There are over 34,000 acres of wine grapes in the county with over 775 grape growers ranging in size from Gallo, which is the single largest vineyard proprietor, to small family-run vineyards. About 80% of the growers farm 50 acres or less, and 55% farm 15 acres or less. About 70% of the total grape harvest is purchased by wineries rather than grown by them and a considerable portion of the fruit goes out of the county. The wine made from these grapes earns over \$1 billion annually. Sonoma County wines consistently win more medals than any other wine region in significant wine competitions.

The primary factor that creates Sonoma County wine is the proximity of the cold Pacific Ocean. Without the Ocean, at this latitude Sonoma would be as hot as Algeria and the only wines would be manly red ones with none of the finesse that the wines exhibit.

It is easy to become enamored with Sonoma wine, but Sonoma is an abundant



source of food as well. This region's fertile soil and varied geography were recognized many years ago by Luther Burbank whose enduring words still are true today. "This is the chosen spot of all this earth as far as Nature is concerned." Sonoma County played a crucial role in the development of California cuisine as we know it today. Artisans and small farmers developed the products for a cuisine based on the seasons' bounty: heirloom organic fruits and vegetables, handcrafted cheeses such as those from Cowgirl Creamery, olive oils, artisan bakery products (wood-fired oven bread from tiny Wild Flour Bakery in Freestone or sinful bear claws at the Village Bakery in Sebastopol), foie gras, lamb, ostrich, beef, sausages, wild salmon, Dungeness crab, fresh Hog Island oysters from Tomalas Bay, organic poultry and other foods that seem to grow just about everywhere. Stop at any one of several markets on Hwy 116 near Sebastopol and you will find yourself in food heaven. Healdsburg has become quite the "in" spot in Sonoma with its chic restaurants and hotels, but for me, Sebastopol and its environs retain the spirit of old Sonoma.

I recently spent a wondrous 10 days in the Russian River Valley during harvest communing with wine-makers and farmers. Some of the highlights of this trip are featured in this and future issues of the *PinotFile*.



This is a photo of the venerable Martinelli Jackass Hill Zinfandel Vineyard on Martinelli Road in the Russian River Valley. The name of the vineyard is a reference to Leno Martinelli, whose father, Guiseppe, planted this vineyard. Leno faithfully farmed this 60-degree slope (too steep for tractors) from age 13 until age 89! People used to say, "Nobody but a jackass would farm a vineyard there." It is the steepest non-terraced hillside vineyard in Sonoma County. No irrigation, trellising, or pesticides. For me, the wines from this vineyard are the epitome of Sonoma old vine Italian style Zinfandel - fat, sweet and rich.

Sonoma Coast Vineyards: Cool but Hot

The Sonoma Coast AVA is the coolest growing region in Sonoma, yet it has become the hot area for growing Pinot Noir. The terroir here is ideal for producing Burgundian-styled Pinot Noirs that are typically balanced and bold, with ripe fruit flavors that are powerful and assertive. Robert Parker has called the Sonoma Coast a region with “immense potential...where world class Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are being made that are every bit as complex and complete as the greatest wines from France”

John and Barbara Drady realized several years ago that the Sonoma Coast produced fruit for their style of Pinot Noir. They selected winemaker Anthony Austin and growers such as Paul Michalczyk that shared their philosophy to make the very best wine possible. The Drady's are passionate about wine and dead serious about their commitment to quality. Barbara is well known in wine circles for her company, Affairs of the Vine, which conducts educational wine tastings for corporations and other groups, offers several weekend “Wine Boot Camps” where wine enthusiasts can obtain some hands-on winegrowing and winemaking experience, and sponsors the yearly “Pinot Noir Shootout.” John is a reserve-duty Sonoma fireman who wears many hats including assisting with winemaking, marketing the Sonoma Coast Vineyards label, and tending to his pet side project, Fire Engine Red Zinfandel and Shiraz wines (a portion of profits from Fire Engine Red wines supports Sonoma County firefighters).

The Sonoma Coast AVA is the largest in Sonoma County encompassing 750 square miles. The unwieldy AVA was created in 1987 primarily to allow certain wineries (such as Sonoma-Cutrer) to include all of their major vineyards within one boundary so they could use the “estate bottled” title on their wine labels. Despite being the largest AVA, it is the least planted with 7,000 vineyards farmed by over fifty growers.

Since the AVA is immense and actually overlaps five other AVAs, the area has been subdivided by winegrowers into the “true” or “extreme” Sonoma Coast. The extreme Sonoma Coast is considered the area of Sonoma County known as “West County” and is roughly west of Highway 116 out to the Pacific Ocean, and includes such towns as Sebastopol, Freestone and Occidental. This is the coolest area in the Sonoma Coast. Sandwiched between the Pacific Ocean and the mountains, it is a hostile environment of fog, high winds and cold that only a Pinot Noir grower would love.

The vineyards selected for Sonoma Coast Vineyards wines are situated within a 3-4 mile radius of Freestone and are complemented by vineyards in the Two Rock area on the far southwestern reaches of the Sonoma Coast. Barbara likes to refer



to the Extreme Sonoma Coast as “living on the edge” and is distinguished by the following: (1) Production limited by temperature, (2) Temperatures which are marginal for ripening, (3) Long growing season, (4) Vines that produce grapes with mature fruit at lower sugar levels, (5) Crop loads that are very small, and (6) Thin, rocky, shallow soils that have not been farmed previously and are framed within a very cool climate.

The result of “living on the edge” is a variety of viticultural challenges. The vineyards often don’t produce any fruit or so little fruit that they cannot cover the growing costs. For example, in 2005, production was markedly reduced throughout the Sonoma Coast and the cooler the area, the more it was limited. Frequent rain and cold in the Spring can lead to poor vine nutrition at bloom and poor fruit set. The wet weather makes it difficult to get equipment into the vineyards to combat organism problems. The region is largely untamed with birds, deer, wild hogs and gophers in abundance. At Joseph Phelp’s new Sonoma Coast vineyard, gophers were eating 30-40% of the new plantings and seven people were hired to eradicate the gophers. The long growing season exposes the ripening grapes to the threat of fall rains. Crop loads are ridiculously small, never more than 3 tons per acre. Finally, newly planted vines take longer to produce usable fruit in the region, often 5 or 6 years versus 3 years in other Sonoma regions.

So why torture yourself trying to farm grapes in this rugged environ? It is all about quality versus quantity. Struggling vines concentrate more of their energies on fruit production. The lure for pinot-philis is that the wines are many layered, restrained but concentrated, and elegant. It is the *terroir*. that makes these wines special. Wines can be produced from vineyards that provide mature fruit with lower sugar levels. This translates into wines with lower alcohols, mature flavors and mature tannins. The Pinot Noirs from the Extreme Sonoma Coast exhibit all of the characteristics of the wines of the Green Valley and the Russian River Valley AVAs such as lushness, black cherry and red cherry fruits, but in addition, forest floor, mushroom, leather and brown baking spices unique to cool climates.



Sonoma Coast Vineyard’s inaugural vintage was 2002. This was winemaker Anthony Austin’s 31st vintage. Austin studied under famed winemaker Andre Tchelistcheff and was the founding winemaker at Firestone Vineyards. During his tenure at Firestone, he produced quality wines that brought recognition to the Santa Barbara region. His Austin Cellars wines were particularly notable with his Pinot Noirs still highly-sought after by collectors today. (Tony is pictured left doing a punch-down of Pinot Noir)

Besides Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast Vineyards has some other varietal wines of interest. The Petersen-Sullivan Chardonnay is a nod to Chablis and undergoes no malolactic fermentation. This wine has bracing acidity and a lovely nuttiness. Their Sauvignon Blanc from the Sonoma Coast is very unusual. Fruit was sourced from Hummingbird Hill Vineyard, located on a steep hillside of a wind-swept property along Petaluma Hill Road and planted to clones 1 and Musque. The goal in this wine was to preserve varietal purity and delicacy so 40% was fermented and aged in French oak (three-year-old barrels were re-shaved

and re-toasted - this allows oak flavors to shine without the tannins), and the remainder cold fermented in stainless steel. A serious Rosé of Pinot Noir is produced from Dijon Clones 116 and 667. Malolactic fermentation was discouraged and the wine was hand stirred frequently while in barrel. The sur lies treatment resulted in a wine with richness similar to a great Blanc de Noir minus the bubbles.

2002 Sonoma Coast Vineyards Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 14.28% alc., 715 cases, \$50. The grapes for this wine are sourced from four Sonoma Coast vineyards: Bailey and Morelli Lane Vineyards adjacent to Freestone, the Clary Ranch Vineyard located approximately five miles south in the Two Rock area between Tomales Bay and far western Petaluma, and the Nunes Vineyard. Clones used from these vineyards were Dijon 113, 114, 115, 667, 777 and Beringer. The stylistic goal in creating this wine was to showcase the characteristics of a very long hang time combined with the high natural malic acid content of the fruit from these specific sites. Winemaking is traditional with wild fermentation encouraged. The wine is aged 19 months in 50% new French barrels. The aging room is maintained at very chilly temperatures. Deep plum, blackberry and black cherry aromas set the stage for dark fruit flavors highlighted by a lean herbaceousness, wet earth and oak. Easy to drink, it has the right balance of acid and dusty tannins to complement food. Burgundian in spirit.



2003 Sonoma Coast Vineyards Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 14.16% alc., 783 cases, \$50. Vineyard sources included Bailey, Morelli, Clary Ranch, Nunes, Priscilla's and Zephyr. The Dijon clones are the same as the 2002 vintage with clones Pommard 3 and Swan added. Winemaking is identical to the 2002 vintage. This is very sexy juice, almost scandalous. Full bodied in texture and lush, this tastes like juicy black cherries and strawberries overlaid with tones of leather, vanilla and plums. A long silky finish ends with a hint of heat. This wine is still young and will benefit from a few years of cellaring. I'm liking it.

Sonoma Coast Vineyards wines are available directly at 707-874-1993 or through the website: www.sonomacoastvineyards.com.

Pellegrini Family Winery & Vineyards

Bob Pellegrini's family story is typical of so many other Italian clans such as Foppiano, Gallo, Martinelli, Pedroncelli, Sebastiani, and Seghesio. In the early 1900s, brothers Nello and Gino Pellegrini arrived in New York City from their native Tuscany. They journeyed west and established the original Pellegrini Wine Company in Sonoma County in 1933. Nello's son Vincent took control of the winery in the early 1950s and his children, Robert, Richard and Jeanne are the third generation to direct Pellegrini Family Winery & Vineyards.

In 1975 Bob Pellegrini (pictured right) decided to plant a vineyard in a 70 acre prune orchard along Olivet Lane Road in the Russian River Valley. He had returned from Burgundy and Bordeaux to the Russian River Valley in his early 20's and was naïve about the wine business. Bob likes to say that if he knew what he was getting into, he would have never done it. Fueled by his innocence, he planted about 25 acres of Pinot Noir to the Martini Clone on AxR1. The site turned out to be perfect for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir and the Olivet Lane Vineyard is now one of California's precious heritage vineyards. The photo below of the Olivet Lane Vineyard shows the old 8 x 12 foot vine row spacing common at the time the vines were planted.



The Olivet Lane Vineyard was made famous by the bottlings of Pinot Noir by Williams Selyem in the early 1990s. That is when I got hooked on Olivet Lane. Most recently, there have been luscious Olivet Lane releases from Merry Edwards and Wes Mar. Some grapes were sold this year to Pahlmeyer. Most of the grapes are kept for the Pellegrini Family's Olivet Lane label. About 3,000 cases of Olivet Lane Pinot Noir are produced yearly. The winery currently releases 25,000-30,000 cases of wine annually under three labels, Olivet Lane, Pellegrini Family Vineyards, and Cloverdale Ranch (wines from



Alexander Valley). An outstanding Pellegrini Family Zinfandel is produced from the Eight Cousins Vineyard adjacent to Olivet Lane Vineyard, home to 11 acres of old clone Zin. The 2004 Olivet Lane Chardonnay just won a Gold Medal and Best of Class at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair. Prices for all

wines are quite sensible. Nearly all of the wine made is from estate vineyards.

In 2001 a beautiful new Tuscan-style winery was built on the estate which is located just off of River Road in Santa Rosa. Winemaking is state-of-the art here. Until 2002, Merry Edwards was the wine-maker. Currently, winemaking is a team effort with Bob Pellegrini, Scott Sisemore and Kevin Hamel handling the chores. Cecilia Penfore is the enologist.





I enjoy your feedback and comments about Pinot Noirs you have enjoyed. A plethora of good Pinot makes life a lot more enjoyable.

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**One Pinot,
Two Pinot,
Three Pinot,
Four Pinot, Noir
Five Pinot,
Six Pinot,
Seven Pinot, Floor!**

2001 Olivet Lane Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., \$24. Light to medium body. Aromas of cranberry and smoky oak. Appealing sweet fruits dominated by plum with a nice touch of herbaceousness. Finishes nicely. An elegantly-styled Pinot that is a pleasure to drink.

2002 Olivet Lane Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., \$24. Similar to the 2002 in body with an attractive ruby red color. Flavors of cranberry and vanilla that finish with a bracing dose of acidity. A finesse Pinot that is clean and refreshing.

2003 Olivet Lane Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., \$24. A stylistic change corresponding to the change in winemakers. A bigger nose highlighted by ripe fruit and prunes and more body than the previous two vintages. More fruit, more tannins, more oak. A touch of cedar and iodine. Silver Medal at the recent Sonoma County Harvest Fair.

2004 Olivet lane Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., \$24. This one is king of the hill. It's light, silky texture, delicate and velvety mouth feel, and upfront flavors of framboise, cherries and that unmistakable RRV spice make it a spitting image of the legendary 1995 Williams Selyem Olivet Lane bottling. Deja vu! To quote Mick Jagger, "It's only Pinot Noir, but I like it!"

Pellegrini Family Vineyards, 4055 West Olivet Road, Santa Rosa. Tasting room open daily. Schedule a tour with Bob Pellegrini. He has a wealth of knowledge about the Russian River Valley and loves to talk wine. Join the mailing list at www.pellegrinisonoma.com. The phone is 1-800-8910244.

