

**Pinot is Sweet,
So is honey,
If only I had A
lot more money**

PinotFile

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Freeman Vineyard & Winery

Dreams do come true and for Ken and Akiko Freeman their 20 years of planning and imagining has brought them to a small unpretentious winery along Montgomery Road in Sebastopol. Ken's interest in wine was ignited at a young age by his family in New York who loved food and wine. He can recall venturing to Zachy's, a leading importer of French wines, and seeing wooden crates of Romanee-Conti stacked high on the sidewalk in front of the store. From the age of 10, driving through Portugal with his family and seeing cork trees, he has been fascinated by winemaking. Akiko grew up in Tokyo where her grandfather inspired a lifelong taste for great Burgundy and fine food. She was trained in the arts and received a master's degree in Italian Renaissance art history from Stanford (go Cardinal!). It is the couple's mutual love of wine, food, art and travel that has brought them together to focus on making Pinot Noir that pairs beautifully with both Western and Eastern cuisines.



After traveling widely throughout the wine producing regions of Europe and South Africa, they returned to California in 1997 to pursue their dream of making world-class wines. In 2001 they purchased a neglected property with a winery and caves and they embarked on their adventure.

They were very fortunate to attract a gifted winemaker, Ed Kurtzman, who had experience in making elegantly structured, cool climate Pinot Noir and Chardonnay (Ed is in the blue shirt above). After graduating from the Fresno State Enology

"There is enough wine produced to satisfy the variety of palates. We all have grown up with different flavor associations and describe wines differently. It is part of the fun of wine tasting. This is a compelling reason for each individual to rely on their own palate first, while using a wine critic or wine competition score as a guide and comparison second."

... Margi Wierenga,
Brogan Cellars

Program in 1994, he gained experience working at Bernardus and then at Chalone alongside Dick Graff and winemaker Michael Michaud. In 1999, Ed joined Testarossa Vineyards as winemaker and here he crafted a string of world-class wines. Akiko works closely with Ed contributing her skills and gifted palate to the winemaking process.

The Freemans believe in the potential of the Sonoma Coast and Russian River Valley. They have visited over 200 vineyards, searching for locations that meet their demanding requirements. As a result, they have several top-notch partner vineyards. Bailey Vineyard is a 2.5 acre planting of close-spaced Dijon clones located just one half of a mile southwest of the Freeman caves. The Guidici Vineyard is a very cool site located above the town of Occidental. 5 acres are planted here to Dijon clones 115, 667 and Swan and the first harvest was in 2005. The well-known Keefer Ranch was started in 1985 in the Green Valley appellation. The grapes are clones 777 and 23. The 20-acre Meredith Estate Pinot Noir Vineyard was established by Merry Edwards and her husband, Ken Coopersmith. This property is located west of Sebastopol and the 777 and Swan clones are farmed using sustainable practices. The O'Connor Vineyard is just 2 miles north of the Freeman caves. The Pommard clone planted here gives the Freeman blends some structure and density. The Rayhill Vineyard was planted in 2001 to clones 115, 667, 777 and 828 and rests on a ridge not far from the town of Freestone. The 8 acres here are in a very cool weather site. Thorn Ridge is located south of Sebastopol and is owned and hand-farmed by Ted Klopp. Freeman obtains a block of Swan clone from this vineyard. Thomas Road Vineyard is owned and farmed by Steve and Joe Dutton in a relatively warm section of the Russian River Valley. The Freeman's Chardonnay (Ryo-fu "cool breeze") is sourced from the Heintz and Keefer Vineyards.



Above is the Freeman Winery and to the right the entrance to the caves which are built into the hillside. Currently Kosta Browne leases a portion of this facility.



The first vintage was in 2002 (530 cases). The 2003 releases were a Sonoma Coast blend and Akiko's Cuvee (1,200 cases total). The Akiko's Cuvee is their top-of-the-line bottling of Akiko's seven favorite barrels in the winery. I tasted the 2004 releases at the winery and they will be released soon. I found the quality extremely high and the wines exuberant and ultraplush. I suggest joining the winery's mailing list as quantities are small and most of the wine is sold directly to consumers. I tasted several barrels of the 2005 vintage from single vineyards and like other barrel samples of the 2005 harvest from the Russian River Valley, they show immense concentration and quality. Prices are in the \$37-\$50 range. The phone number is 415-831-4756 and the website is www.freemanwinery.com.

2003 Freeman Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 14.2% alc., 930 cases. This wine tantalizes with a beautiful nose of fresh crushed cherries and Asian spices. A little earth, cocoa and cinnamon add to a solid core of Pinot fruits. This lovely wine has that soft texture that makes Pinot Noir so sexy. The wine finishes with just the right amount of refreshing acidic tang.

2004 Freeman Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 14.2% alc., 700 cases. A blend of seven vineyards from which Freeman obtains fruit. 5 day cold soak in open top fermenters, hand punched down, free run sent directly to barrel, press wine settled and barreled separately, 11 months in 100% French oak, 32% new. This wine is similar to the 2004 but needs some time in the bottle to smooth out. A quintessential Sonoma Coast bottling.



2004 Freeman Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 14.2% alc., 814 cases. The grapes for this blend all come within 5 miles of the winery. This Pinot is quite young and still sports youthful oak tannins. A plush fruit backbone promises future enjoyment. Time in the bottle will bring things together nicely.

2004 Freeman Keefer Ranch Pinot Noir 14.2% alc., 190 cases. This is Freeman's first vineyard-designated Pinot Noir. Harvest began in this vineyard on August 15, a full month earlier than in a normal year due to a spurt of heat waves in 2004. This is a very showy wine which is young but a tease. The aromas are of wild strawberries and cherries with brown spices and floral notes. It has awesome balance and is lavish and velvety. Exceptional elegance. I drank this with lunch and it is a cozy food companion.

2004 Freeman Akiko's Cuvee Pinot Noir 14.2% alc., 270 cases. Akiko, Ken and winemaker Ed all select their favorite barrels and put together a blend or cuvee. For the third year in a row, Akiko's blend was everyone's first choice. The Meredith Estate Vineyard makes up the majority of this wine, with smaller amounts of Bailey, Thomas Road and Keefer Ranch. This charmer has a garnet robe and a nose gloriously perfumed with violets and red fruits like currants and strawberries. The ripe fruits are unctuous and the mouth feel is velveteen. There is a touch of tannin evident on this young wine's lengthy finish. The same soul as Chambolle-Musigny.

This is a new winery but the Freemans have years of thought and planning behind their goals. The first releases are impressive and with Ed Kurtzman on board the future is indeed bright. Ultimately Ken wants to shed his day job in San Francisco and move to Sonoma so he and Akiko can devote their energies full time to the winery. Cosmetic improvements to the winery are also planned. Freeman Winery is a unique and tasty merger of East and West aesthetics.

De La Montanya: Variety is Spice of Life

Dennis De La Montanya does not follow the usual track. Instead of concentrating on one or two varietals, his winery produces approximately 20 different wines ranging from 25 to 250 cases each, totaling about 4,500-5,000 cases per year. He covers the whole gamut of wines from Fume Blanc to Pinot Meunier, from Tempranillo to late harvest Zinfandel. His Pinot Noirs have become instant successes yet Pinot Noir isn't even his favorite wine and the style of Pinot Noir he prefers - big, fruity ultracalifornian - is a contradiction for his own Pinot Noirs are in a much more classic, elegant style. His PinUp series of wines feature photos of female customers in attractive poses - the labels were at first approved and then rejected so now they are only sold at the winery. His approach is apparently popular for his Core Wine Club is now 90% full in just a little over two years. Sometime soon the Core Club Membership will max out at 1,000 members. Then most of the wine will be sold directly to Club members and the tasting room will be open infrequently.



The De La Montanya family has a legacy of seven generations of California pioneers, farmers and purveyors of wine. The De La Montanya Estate Vineyards was founded in 1995 and the Winery and tasting room (pictured below) opened in June, 2003. The Winery sits amidst the Felta Creek Vineyard and



straddles the borders of the Russian River Valley and the Dry Creek Valley appellations in Sonoma County. The winery is located just off Westside Road south of Healdsburg on Foreman Lane. A total of 165 acres are farmed in Sonoma County. The winemaker is Michael Loykasek. He showed me the barrel room and talked about the challenges of keeping track of 20 different wines. We barrel tasted the 2005 Tina's Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir which was on track and the 2005 Christine's Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir which had not finished malo and was difficult to evaluate. A 2005 Pinot Meunier absolutely rocked!

The winery produces two lighter styled Pinot Noirs and two more classic Pinot Noirs. Both the 2004 Tina's Vineyard and Christine's Vineyard created quite a stir by winning gold medals at the recent San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition. In addition, at the recent Pinot Noir Shootout, I picked out the Christine's Vineyard Pinot Noir as particularly good in two separate blind tastings. All of the De La Montanya wines are sensibly priced and a 20% discount is given for purchases of 6 or more wines. Phone 707-433-3711, The website is www.dlmwine.com. Adjacent to the winery is a nice well-equipped Little Yellow Cottage for rent to one to two couples. Contact www.winevacationrentals.com or call Tina De La Montanya at 707-433-3711 or 707-484-8091.



Pictured right is the Felta Creek Vineyard with the canes piled between the rows after trimming on a cloudy January day.

2004 Felta Creek Pinot Squared 50% Pinot Noir 50% Pinot Meunier Russian River Valley 14.2% alc., \$101 cases, \$32. A light weight red wine with good acidity. A great chilled summer quaff.

2004 Pinup Rouge Series II Russian River Valley 150 cases, \$28. Made at Laetitia Winery in the Central Coast with De La Montanya grapes from the Sonoma Coast (Flying Rooster Ranch). A lighter weight Pinot Noir completely different in style from the De La Montanya produced Pinot Noirs. More alcohol in the nose and a vegetal note in the flavors. This wine is all about the label.

2004 De La Montanya Estate Pinot Noir Tina's Vineyard Russian River Valley 14.4% alc., 100 cases, \$38. An expressive nose of strawberries, sour cherries and Asian spices. The flavors are rich and plush and feature cherries, cola and mocha. Finishes short with pert acidity.

2004 De La Montanya Estate Pinot Noir Christine's Vineyard Sonoma Coast. 14.6% alc., 48 cases, \$38. An olfactory delight of plump crushed cherries, forest floor and oak. Voluptuous blackberry fruit. The mouth feel is all velvet. The finish is outrageous and clean leaving behind a blast of fresh berries and spice. A poised and complete wine. If the Tina's is a red head, the Christine's is a brunette. Either way, you can't go wrong.



Dennis and wife Tina in the tasting room

Hamel Wines: Passion with Objectives

Kevin Hamel acquired a reputation for terrific Rhone-style wines that he previously crafted at Preston Vineyards in the Dry Creek Valley region of Sonoma County. Most recently he has ventured into the realm of Pinot Noir. Kevin is the consulting winemaker for Pellegrini Family Vineyards where he oversees the production of numerous varietal wines including the Olivet Lane Estate Pinot Noir. He also consults for Inman Family Wines in the Russian River Valley. In addition, he has added a Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir to his own label, Hamel Wines.

Why Pinot Noir? There were three factors that motivated him to dive into the Pinot Noir end of the pool: (1) He found that he was just about as likely to order Pinot Noir as a Rhone-style wine in a restaurant, (2) The Sonoma Coast is producing some of the best Pinot Noirs anywhere, and (3) He was put in touch with a promising Pinot Noir source in the Sonoma Coast by one of his Syrah growers. Actually Syrah and Pinot Noir have a lot in common in that both get their character from their growing region. Neither one needs much manipulation or new oak. If they are grown on a good site, farmed intelligently, picked when they taste ripe, and not shown much intervention in the cellar, they both usually turn out pretty well.

“Pinot Noir may make the most compelling wine on the face of the earth. Its haunting aroma and silky texture have entranced wine lovers for centuries.”

Kevin’s Pinot Noir comes from the Campbell Ranch just north of Annapolis. Steve Campbell’s family has lived on this property since 1938. Over the past few years, the Campbells watched as several growers planted Pinot Noir in the neighborhood. It had become evident to them and many others that this northwest corner of the Sonoma Coast shows great potential for producing exceptional Pinot Noir. In 2000, Steve, his wife Lisa and his father Phil followed suit. They identified a few choice acres of Goldridge soil on their large ranch and planted a nicely exposed ridge top that slopes gently to the north west. The site is about four miles from the Pacific Ocean and about 700 feet up above the fog line.

Kevin’s grapes came from a swath through the center of the vineyard where the flavors showed the most promise. The clone is Dijon 777. Vinification is even more hands-off than for his Syrah. Only a small amount of new oak (18%) is used to broaden the palate impression of the wine. The wine was racked once just before bottling. No fining or filtration were employed.

2003 Hamel Campbell Ranch Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 14.6% alc., 553 cases, \$28 This Pinot is just hitting its stride now and is luxurious on the tongue. In fact, this is unusually soft on the palate for a Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir and goes down like greased lightning. The seductive nose has blackberries, exotic woods, a little leather and chocolate. The coating tannins are well-integrated. I had this wine with some nice veal and fresh Chanterelle mushrooms and it was pure pleasure.

2004 Hamel Campbell Ranch Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (not released, 568 cases). A very early vintage with warm weather at the start of harvest produced a powerful and structured wine. This is more muscular than the 2003 vintage and needs some time in the bottle to iron out. Still, the wine shows authority and presence and good breeding and I look forward to its “coming-out” party.

The Hamel wines (including an excellent Sonoma County “Westside Hills” Syrah) enjoy good retail distribution in California. The phone number is 707-433-9055, e-mail Kevin at hamelwines@aol.com.

