



Sonoma Extreme

RANDY CAPAROSO

Part 1: West Sonoma Coast

Mendocino's skyscraping Mendocino Ridge, the subappellations of Willamette Valley's McMinnville and Chehalem Mountains, Chehalem's sub-sub-region of Ribbon Ridge, Santa Barbara's yet-to-be-defined Santa Maria Bench and Los Alamos Valley—these are just a few of the sexy, exciting West Coast frontiers just barely entering the radar screens of the cognoscenti among wine consumers, while setting aflutter the hearts of sommeliers, if and when they can find the wines.

But recent releases of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Syrah—the star varieties of these emerging regions—are suggesting that the most promising “new” terroirs might actually be found on California's North Coast. The Empire Strikes Back, one might say. Ironically, though, the hottest subregions are located in the coldest, most extreme climates of the sprawling Sonoma Coast American Viticultural Area.

Although the AVA itself is rendered nearly meaningless by the inclusion of warm pockets such as Dry Creek Valley and Chalk Hill, the true



The coastal, cold-climate regions that are redefining American wine quality

Failla estate vineyard in Fort Ross (left); La Bohème vineyard in Occidental, leased by Red Car Wine (above).

coastal zone begins in the high, wild vineyards of Annapolis and Fort Ross, on the northwest edge of Sonoma County. It progresses inland into the complex tectonic folds encompassing the western- and southernmost sections of the Russian River Valley AVA, tracks southeast into the low-lying hills of the Petaluma Gap, crosses over Highway 101 to brush up against the base of Sonoma Mountain, and, finally, spills over into the low, rolling hills of Marin County, sandwiched between Tomales Bay on the west and San Pablo Bay on the east.

What these areas have in common are strongly maritime-influenced macroclimates, so cold that, not too long ago, sufficient ripening of grapes was commonly thought to be improbable, if not impossible. Still, no one subregion

is uniformly colder or provides more hang time than another, at least not in the same ways or for the same reasons. Topographies vary considerably, and factors like elevation, fog, wind, exposure, and, of course, viticultural and wine-making decisions make terroir-related generalizations challenging.

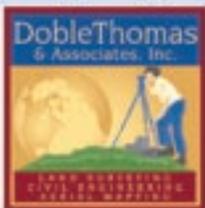
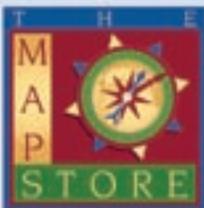
“Anyone looking for pat answers summarizing the soils, temperatures, slopes, and elevations of these regions won’t be satisfied,” says Ted Lemon, winemaker and proprietor of Littorai Wines and one of the early champions (since 1993) of winegrowing on these climatic edges. “The entire area is too complex to speak in generalities.”

Nevertheless, Lemon joined forces this past summer with a seminal core of winemakers (including Freeman Vineyard & Winery, Free-

Randy Caparoso is a career wine professional, longtime journalist, and restaurant wine consultant (Wine List Consulting Unlimited, www.winelistconsulting.com). As a founding partner and former vice president and corporate wine director of the Roy’s Restaurant Group, he was Santé’s first Restaurant Wine & Spirits Professional of the Year in 1998; in 1992 and 1999, he was Restaurant Wine’s Wine Marketer of the Year.

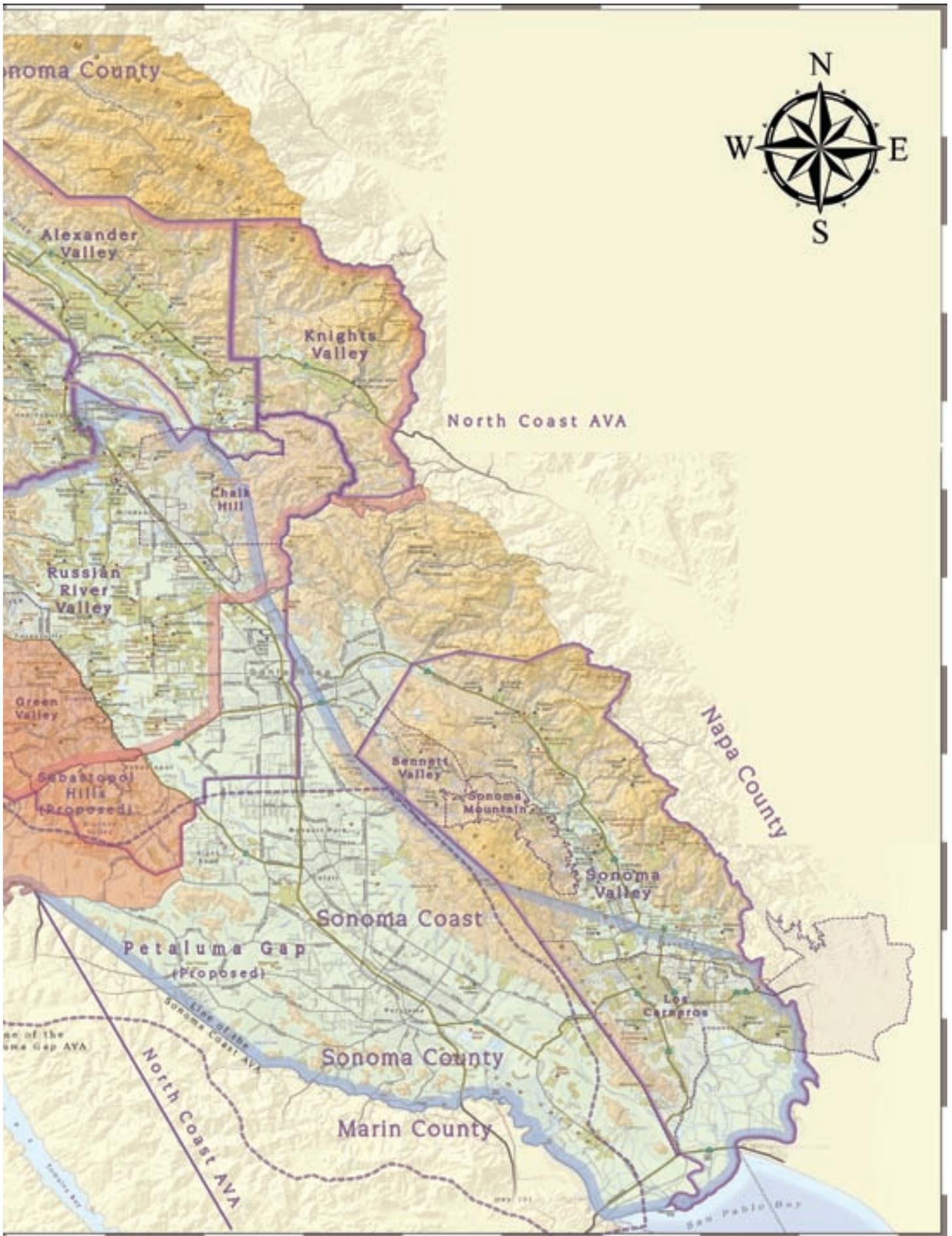


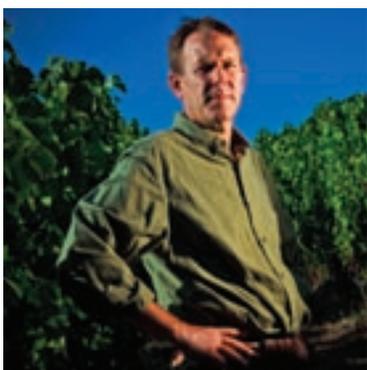
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This is the first detailed map showing the proposed new appellations of the Sonoma Coast, compiled by Bradley A. Thomas of DobleThomas & Associates, Inc. For information on obtaining a full-size version, visit www.themapstore.com.





Hirsch vineyards in Fort Ross-Seaview (top left); David Hirsch (top right); Ted Lemon, proprietor of Littorai Wines (above).

stone Vineyards, Peay Vineyards, and Red Car Wine) to form an association called West Sonoma Coast Vintners. Their mission: to define a more meaningful AVA, the West Sonoma Coast (see map).

Annapolis, Fort Ross-Seaview, and Occidental

Andy Peay likes to joke that having to distinguish the Sonoma Coast AVA, gerrymandered to extend as far east as the Knights and Sonoma valleys, from the “true” Sonoma Coast makes him feel like he’s in *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, arguing the semantics of the Judean People’s Front versus the People’s Front of Judea. The “true” coast, as others have taken to calling it, is roughly a 6-to-12-mile-wide ribbon along the Pacific shoreline, from the 600-to-1,700-foot hills clustered around the town of Annapolis down to Bodega Bay, where the coastal ridges flatten out into the Petaluma Gap.

The midpoint of the extreme coast is the hamlet of Fort Ross, once the site of a Russian trading post and shipyard (1812-1841) and even Northern California’s first vineyard, long since abandoned. About 2 miles inland, the region’s first modern-day vineyards were planted on 1,200-to-1,600-foot elevations along the Madrona Ridge: Bohan and Seaview in the 1970s, followed by David Hirsch’s steady

expansion during the ’80s. This is perhaps the *true* “true” Sonoma Coast, where you are close enough to smell the sea and feel the cold marine air off the California Current flowing down from Canada, yet high enough for vines to bathe all day in sunlight, unrestricted by the lower fog banks. It’s rugged, remote, and mountainous—the way many of us envision the “Sonoma Coast.” While it takes a crow one minute to fly from Hirsch to Flowers, perched on a facing ridge, it takes 30 minutes for a car to negotiate the twisting road over terrain that is literally hell on wheels.

Besides producing wines under his own label, Hirsch has a client list that reads like a who’s who of contemporary winemaking: B. Kosuge Wines, Failla, LIOCO, Littorai, Siduri, and Williams Selyem, among others. Since he broke ground in 1980, a plethora of high-profile plantings—including Helen Turley’s Marcassin, Martinelli’s Blue Slide Ridge, Failla, Helenthal, Flowers, Fort Ross, and, most recently, Pahlmeyer’s Wayfarer Farm and Peter Michael’s Seaview—have joined Hirsch to provide the impetus for a Fort Ross-Seaview AVA, though the petition has now been awaiting approval for three years.

Ehren Jordan, founder of Failla (bottom right).



Photos by Randy Caparoso (top left), Marie Hirsch (top right)

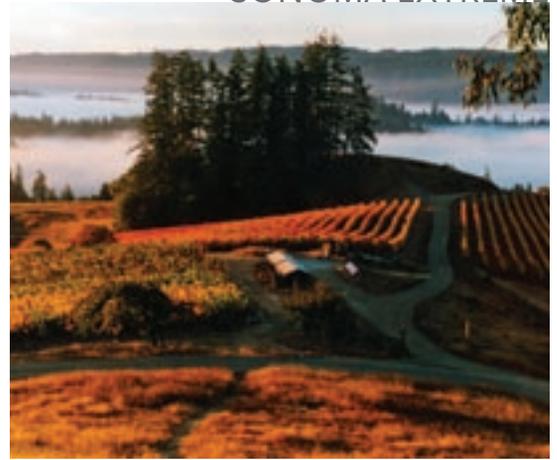
Winemaker Greg La Follette refers to the proposed AVA as “the most misunderstood and most hyped area of the Sonoma Coast.” La Follette, who worked closely with Hirsch and at Flowers’s Camp Meeting Ridge during the ’90s, says that he “always experienced much higher degree-day accumulation there” compared to “much of the blue-chip vineyards lying in the southern hills that line the Petaluma Gap near Sebastopol and Freestone—and I have the hard data to back that up.” But while Fort Ross-Seaview may not have the coldest climate in the West Sonoma Coast, “the beauty of Fort Ross-Seaview is that there is significantly less diurnal fluctuation than lower-lying areas like Sebastopol and Russian River Valley,” according to La Follette; “daytime temperatures tend to be lower, and evening temperatures are higher.”

This, of course, contradicts the mantra commonly repeated in California: that the best vineyards are characterized by warm days to ripen grapes and cold nights to preserve acidity. In fact, going back to Winegrowing 101, we know that vines photosynthesize optimally at daytime temperatures below 85°F—above that, there is little activity in the plant—and that they shut down at night when temperatures dip below 50°F. Paul Sloan, grower-winemaker at the up-and-coming Small Vines, proffers this explanation: “In higher-elevation vineyards, cold air flows downward at night, keeping temperatures in those vineyards just *above* 50°F, not below it. This gives fruit the advantage of continuing the ripening process during the evening, absent photosynthesis and sugar accumulation. You have less of the stop-and-go ripening pattern of more typical, lower-elevation plantings along the coast, especially in places where temperatures frequently hit the 90s during the day and sink into the 40s at night. In places like the extreme Sonoma Coast, it never really gets too hot. But it’s the narrow diurnal swings that get you increased aroma, flavor, tannin, and color development, and you also have the option of picking grapes sooner, at lower sugar levels, without giving up any of the benefits.”

Ehren Jordan, who worked for Jean-Luc Columbo in the Rhône and at Marcassin before establishing his own “extreme” Failla estate in 1995, describes the Fort Ross-Seaview growing seasons as “short, compact—we’re picking Pinot Noir earlier and earlier each year, no more than 22-22.5° Brix, and still getting the full spectrum of flavors without a cloying fruitiness or the overbearing weight of alcohol. The first grape I planted for myself was Syrah, which we also pick closer to 23°, and the wines are lean, lacy, with phenomenal phenolics. It’s all a matter of perspective—we don’t worry about sugars, yet our wines are plenty ‘big’ and Rhône-like. Heck, if you were to get 22° in Cornas, it’s a ‘vintage of the century!’”

Terroir-derived distinctions seem to be accentuated when physiological ripeness is achieved at lower sugar levels. Siduri winemaker Adam Lee says he consistently finds more “red-fruit and soil-related flavors like forest floor and pine needles” in Pinot Noir from Fort Ross-Seaview, while Lemon cites “aromas dominated by spice tones in lighter vintages and dark fruits in riper vintages.” Williams Selyem winemaker Bob Cabral talks about “screaming acids and minerals in Chardonnays,” and in Pinot Noirs, “angular tannin when young, along with exotically scented spice characteristics.” Byron Kosuge believes these high-altitude Pinot Noirs “are not necessarily tannic, but they are firmer in structure than, say, your typical Russian River Valley Pinot Noirs,” adding that “the aromas are also less sweet or jammy, yet more savory and minerally.”

Jordan’s Peay Vineyard Pinot Noir, grown at 650-to-825-foot elevations in the Annapolis subregion, is even more floral, delicate, and bracing than his estate and Hirsch bottlings. Here, in a meditative dell surrounded



Peay Vineyard in Annapolis (top); Williams Selyem winery (middle) and winemaker Bob Cabral (above).





by redwoods and Douglas firs, the Pacific Ocean can easily be seen when the coastal fog clears. Peay characterizes his and other wines from Annapolis (notably those of Hartford Family Winery, Roessler Cellars, Scherrer Winery, and Williams Selyem) as uniformly “racy” in acidity, with “mineral edges in the whites; earthy tea, anise, and forest-floor qualities in Pinot Noirs; pepper and meat qualities for Syrah.”

Peay attributes the tightly wound characteristics of Annapolis to the macroclimate, with temperatures typically ranging in the 60s and 70s during the growing season—as frigid as it gets in the entire county. As in Fort Ross-Seaview, days are moderated by the ocean, only 4 miles away, and nights are never too cold. But unlike Fort Ross-Seaview, he says, the lower-elevation growths near Annapolis are influenced by “unobstructed fog coming straight up the river valley each day. We are *in* the inversion layer, not above it.”

Annapolis has the same nutritionally poor marine soil, classified in the Goldridge series, that pervades most of the Russian River Valley. It’s a permissive (allowing extensive root systems), moon-dusty, yellowish mix of fine sandstone, loam, and clay, low in phosphorus, boron, and zinc, but mildly deficient in nitrogen—which is perfect for most aspects of wine-grape physiology. Goldridge soils, according to Peay, also favor “higher acidity, sturdier tannin, less ‘gushy’ or ‘gobs’ of fruitiness (to borrow Parker), and more tertiary flavors like earth, minerals, tea, and forest floor.”

Freestone Vineyards winemaker Theresa Heredia (top) and winery (below).



Soils in Fort Ross-Seaview are more variable, but generally of the Franciscan type: highly eroded mixtures of marine sediment and volcanic, plutonic, and metamorphic rock, which, like Goldridge, are well drained yet minimally productive, especially in cold conditions. These soils are typical of high-precipitation areas; indeed, as much as 100 inches of rain falls annually in the area around Fort Ross, though almost all of it is concentrated between October and April.

Notwithstanding the differences in soil and climate, both the Failla and Peay vineyards yield only 1-2 tons per acre. “This is less than grand cru Burgundy,” says Peay, “and frankly, I wish we could get more and that the farming was easier—but more often than not, lower yields, smaller berries, and lighter clusters add up to denser, more aromatic, and complex fruit.”

Finally, south of Jenner, where the Russian River empties into the Pacific, a third section of the extreme Sonoma Coast comprises 900-to-1,200-foot hillsides west of the old timber town of Occidental. Both Cabral (who made wine at Hartford in the late ‘90s) and Sloan single out early bottlings of Williams Selyem Pinot Noir from Summa Vineyard, planted in 1975, as among their inspirations.

Although Occidental plantings are farther inland than those of Annapolis and Fort Ross, east-west ridges funnel in cold air from the coast. Narrow diurnal temperature swings and altitude play a part in producing Chardonnays acclaimed for their soaring fruit, distinct minerality, and animating acidity (as in the famed Thieriot Vineyard bottlings by Littorai and Neyers Vineyards). Pinot Noirs from the high ridges west of Occidental (like Williams Selyem’s Coastlands and Hartford’s Seascape) tend to be angular yet vibrant, floral- and wild-red-berry-scented, accented by notes of pipe tobacco, forest floor, and evergreen.

Lemon crafts sultry, feminine Pinot Noirs from Summa, while his Haven Vineyard Pinot Noir often seems more masculine, meaty, and concentrated. Comparing Thieriot, which he farms on a long-term lease, to Haven, lying closer to Jenner, Lemon comments, “Both vineyards are equidistant to the ocean and share similar elevations and south-facing exposures, yet Haven is dramatically cooler in both winter and spring and is the later-ripening site despite having rockier soil with less clay. Things are never simple on the coast!”

Freestone and Sebastopol Hills

South of Occidental, skirting the Petaluma Gap, you find vineyards surrounding the tiny, unincorporated community of Freestone, planted both inside and outside the southwestern boundaries of the Russian River Valley AVA. In these gentle hills, at elevations of 200-800 feet, the most important climatic factors are the thick fog and cold air moving rapidly through a corridor carved by Salmon Creek, as well as through the Gap from Bodega Bay. Farther from the coast than the ridges west of Occidental, and a distant cry from Annapolis, Freestone's sites are still among the coldest in the West Sonoma Coast. For much of the day, vines are shrouded in fog, which exerts an emphatic influence on maturation and the size of berries and clusters.

Napa's Joseph Phelps Vineyards originally plotted out its Freestone property in the late '90s to supply grapes for its Ovation Chardonnay. A separate Freestone Vineyards winery was completed in 2007, and Theresa Heredia was promoted to winemaker. In recent years, Freestone's Fogdog Pinot Noir has come to define the region. Heredia describes the "filtered sunlight" that comes through the fog, optimized by steeply inclined southeastern exposures that follow the sun and capture maximum morning heat. She characterizes her Pinots as having "deep purple colors, plenty of gentle phenolics, rich acidity," and even some "brooding dark fruit," mixed with the high-toned red-berry qualities common to the West Sonoma Coast.

Dan Goldfield, who mines Dutton-Goldfield's Freestone Hill planting on the Russian River Valley side of the subregion, waxes poetic about "concentrated, texture-driven Pinot Noirs" with what he calls a "Freestone spice," generated by the "capricious climate, small berries, and low-juice yields."

Just east of Freestone lie the Sebastopol Hills, where grapes began to supplant Gravenstein apples only as recently as the late '90s. This is the southernmost and newest section of the Russian River Valley AVA, having been absorbed in 2005. Leached, porous Goldridge soils run through rolling hills, as in Freestone, and the climate is similarly cold. Perhaps the most interesting sites are in the southern Sebastopol Hills, on southeast- or southwest-facing slopes along Blucher Valley, where, as in Freestone, whistling winds and impenetrable fog leak out from the adjacent Petaluma Gap. Ryan Zepal-



Balletto's Burnside Road Vineyard (above) and Suacci Vineyard (bottom) in Sebastopol Hills; winemaker Ryan Zepaltas (middle bottom).

tas, who makes Pinot Noir from the Suacci Carciere property, says, "I never worry about getting over-ripe, monolithic fruit from Sebastopol like I do in the rest of Russian River Valley. Because of the cold temperatures, slow ripening helps grapes develop complex flavors before gaining sugar ripeness, thus allowing us to harvest at 23° or less Brix with fully ripened qualities."

Grower Rick DuNah, across Blucher Valley Road from John Suacci, says he never picks for sugar ripeness, but rather for tannin lignification, since "22° Brix is just about all we ever get." La Follette's DuNah





Diane and Rick DuNah (top left); aerial view of DuNah Vineyard in Sebastopol Hills (top center); Baker Lane Vineyards' Stephen Singer (middle).



Chardonnays are sleek, sharp, viscous, and slow-developing, oozing with minerals and honey-nut tones. The DuNah Pinot Noirs, like those of Zepaltas and Suacci Carciere, are wild in raspberry-strawberry and cardamom perfumes and tinged by loamy, fallen-forest-leaf, anise, eucalyptus overtones that La Follette describes as “enigmatic and always there.” Neighboring Umino

mented, floral Pinot Noirs with full-blown red-to-blue fruits etched in fine-grained tannins.

Toward the eastern Sebastopol Hills, near Highway 116 and the Laguna de Santa Rosa watershed, Stephen Singer of Baker Lane Vineyards cultivates both Syrah and Pinot Noir plantings that, for him, are decidedly terroir-driven in a European sense. “I find a great abundance of flavor detail in these grapes,” says Singer—“that is to say, less of a monotone fruitiness and more animal, meat, spice, mineral, and rosemary-marjoram notes, especially in the Syrah, mixed with vivid acid components.”

Vineyard demonstrates similar qualities in bottlings by Chasseur Wines, Surh Luchtel Cellars, and W.H. Smith Wines.

Traveling up over Thorn Ridge and into the northern Sebastopol Hills, increasingly identifiable vineyards such as Maboroshi, Pratt, Pillow Rd., Balletto’s Burnside Road, Chasseur’s Rayhill, and Merry Edwards’s Meredith Estate are planted on slightly warmer sites. North- or east-facing slopes protect some of these plantings from the withering winds that rush in through the Gap. More than elsewhere in the Russian River Valley, this cold climate yields deeply pig-

Green Valley and Mays Canyon

Goldfield sources grapes from Dutton family vineyards peppered throughout this region, which is bordered by the Bohemian Highway on the west, Sebastopol Hills to the south, and the Russian River on the north, encompassing the western edge of the Russian River Valley and most of its sub-AVA, Green Valley of Russian River Valley. According to Goldfield, the microclimates of Green Valley, ranging from altitudes of 200 feet on the eastern valley floor to knolls topping 900 feet in the far west, are a bit warmer than in Freestone and the extreme Sonoma Coast, but the terroir is more variable. “Green Valley is very site-specific,” he says, “with fruit qualities largely dependent upon elevation and fog massing. In many cases, it can be a difference between I and II in degree days.”

In La Follette’s view, factors like “south- and east-facing slopes, efficiencies of solar capture, and the degrees of warmth determined by depth of soil” (since root zones in shallower soils benefit more from heat trapped by the morning sun) have as much or more impact on growing conditions in Green Valley, especially on hillier



Maboroshi Vineyard in Sebastopol Hills.



Photo by Tom Kisaichi (bottom)

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sites. Overall, he says, the “big refrigerator” effect of the nearby Petaluma Gap maintains an “overall reservoir of cool air in the mesoclimate of Green Valley,” lending some homogeneity to this relatively small AVA.

The quintessential upper-slope Green Valley vineyard might be the one owned by Charles Heintz:

a 50-acre planting at 800-900 feet on the AVA’s western edge, just east of Occidental. While sunlight is ample and, on many days, unfettered by fog on Heintz’s Goldridge-crust, southwest-facing slope, the vineyard is still close enough to the coast for Lemon to describe it as a “definitive cold-climate environment, often dripping wet during deep marine layers.” Stellar producers such as Littorai, DuMOL Wines, Freeman, and Landmark Vineyards compose steely, stony, intense yet moderately weighted Chardonnays from this vineyard. The rare Syrahs and Pinot Noirs from Heintz demonstrate parallel attributes: conservative structures, more floral than fruity notes, and distinctively earth-tinged nuances.

Driving east and downhill away from Heintz on Graton Road, you pass a number of vineyards originally planted or farmed by the late Warren Dutton in the lower-lying hills of Green Valley. Rued Vineyard—named for the heritage clone of Chardonnay (a Musqué variant of Old Wente) planted there

by Dutton for the Rued family in 1969—sees a little more fog than Heintz Vineyard. Partly because of the clone, grown on head-trained, mature vines, and partly because the site is just far enough south to be impacted by cold air seeping up from the Petaluma Gap, Dutton-Goldfield’s Rued Chardonnays (like those of Chasseur’s and Kistler Vineyards’ famed Dutton Ranch) tend to be extreme tactile experiences with Old World structure: lemony, sinewy, grippy, and high

enough in phenolics that they express themselves far better after five or six years than during the first two or three.

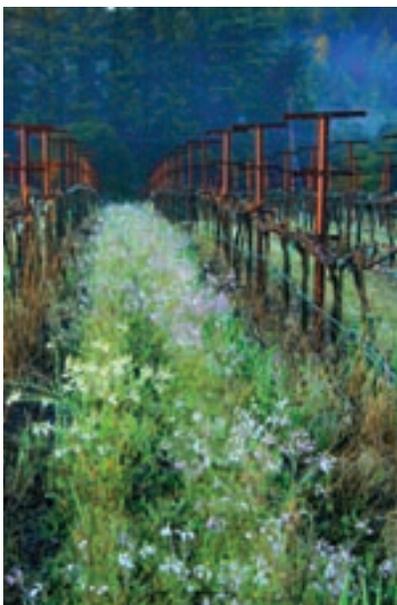
Not far from Rued off Green Hill Road, Sanchiotti Vineyard (going to Dutton-Goldfield, Hartford, Merry Edwards, and other key producers) demonstrates how southeastern exposure can counteract the chilling effects of fog. This is a site that warms up so quickly in the morning, while efficiently tracking the sun throughout the day, that it yields some of Green Valley’s roundest, most robust Pinot Noirs. Despite their power, they maintain the wafting, woody, blueberry-toward-strawberry-preserve perfumes common to much of the West Sonoma Coast (as opposed to the blacker, sassafras-cola fruit of the Russian River Valley).

Pinot Noir grown on Green Valley floors can be equally expressive. Just off Highway 116, Hartford’s Arrendell Vineyard may be farther from the coast than Rued and Sanchiotti, but it lies on a lower flat that tends to trap colder air and is well within the grasp of the Petaluma Gap’s frigid, foggy fingers. It thus produces thicker-skinned fruit, with taut, feminine, violet, savory-thyme nuances that are arguably more cold-climate in profile and proportion than wines from Hartford’s Occidental and Annapolis plantings along the extreme Sonoma Coast.

In the dead center of Green Valley, on a site sloping down to Green Valley Creek—closer to Graton and Highway 116 than to Occidental on the west—Keefer Ranch produces its own Pinot Noir and grapes for bottlings by Failla, Freeman, Kosta Browne Winery, and Siduri. These are invariably meaty yet fluid, with all the high-toned fruit, smoky spice, and foresty tertiary dimensions associated with cold-climate viticulture.

The original gang of five behind the West Sonoma Coast Vintners consortium has also drawn in a good slice of the Russian River Valley AVA just north and west of Green Valley, on the coastal side of Highway 116, below it where it turns to follow the winding Russian River to the Pacific. Reasoning: at this juncture, the river cuts a wide enough swath to funnel thick fog and cold ocean air clear through to plantings like Porter-Bass in the densely forested Mays Canyon. Here, winemakers like La Follette and, now, Luke Bass have produced remarkably acid- and mineral-driven Chardonnays, wild-berry-minty-evergreen Pinot Noirs, and marginally ripened yet bright, buoyant Zinfandels.

(Next issue: *Petaluma Gap and Marin County*)



Charlie Heintz (top); Heintz Vineyard Pinot Noir in Green Valley (middle).

Photos by Randy Caparoso (top), Ken Burkey (middle), Barclay Productions (bottom)



TASTE CULTURE



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