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A view of the Fort Ross Vineyard & Winery in Sonoma's new Fort Ross-Seaview AVA shows the wild landscape above the Pacific coast near Fort Ross, CA. The terraced vineyards are less than a mile from the Pacific Ocean, on ridges as high as 1700 feet. Source: Fort Ross Vineyard & Winery via Bloomberg

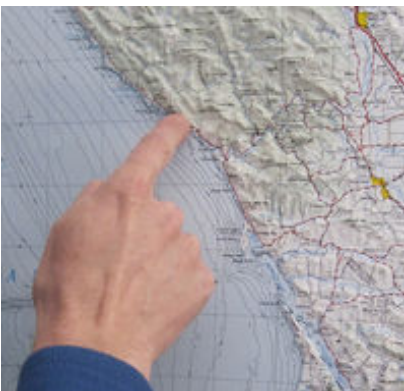
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San Andreas Winemakers Fight Wild Boar to

Make Pinot Paradise

By Elin McCoy on March 19, 2012

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David Hirsch, pinot noir pioneer of the “true” Sonoma coast, owes his success to the San Andreas Fault. Its earthquakes pushed up the remote, high ridges that are home to his eponymous vineyard, one of California’s pinot “grand crus.”

Hirsch, a former New Yorker, is among a couple of dozen vintners and grape growers in Sonoma’s brand-new American Viticultural Area (AVA) Fort Ross-Seaview appellation, which became official in January.

To discover why this region is regarded as pinot paradise and whether the wines deserve the hype, I find myself navigating hairpin curves up narrow dirt roads to an altitude of 1,500 feet, where vineyards poke above the fog like sunny islands.

Beyond steep redwood-forested slopes, I can see the blue Pacific three miles away. It’s taken me 50 minutes to go seven miles, and luckily I’ve encountered no other cars.

Hirsch is working in the oldest vineyard on his 1,200-acre property, planted in 1980. He’s wearing a battered straw hat, a frayed flannel shirt, and dirt-stained jeans.

While the sun is warm, there’s a strong cool breeze.

“This AVA is all about elevation,” says Hirsch. “That gives us cool temperatures during the day, and the ocean keeps the temperature from dropping too low at night.”

Alcohol, Acidity

That lack of big diurnal variation translates into wines with more balance, lower alcohol, more acidity, expansive aromas and complexity.

He produces his own wines in a weathered former sheep barn. Hirsch also sells grapes from the 68 acres planted with pinot and four of chardonnay to a who's who of great California winemakers.

On nearby ridges are vineyards belonging to well-known wineries and growers such as Flowers, Marcassin, Peter Michael, Failla, Martinelli, Fort Ross, and Pahlmeyer. All came to isolated Fort Ross-Seaview because of the pinot.

“We did a test with 16 grape varieties,” says Lester Schwartz, a native South African who owns Fort Ross Vineyard & Winery with his wife Linda. “But only the pinot noir and chardonnay were any good.”

Pinot seems to reflect the terroir -- where the grapes are grown -- better than any other varietal.

Workers at Schwartz's vineyard are completing work on a public tasting room, the first in the AVA.

Sea Otters

It's scheduled to open next month, to coincide with the bicentenary of the founding of nearby Fort Ross by Russian sailors hunting sea otters. In 1817, they brought cuttings from Peru and planted Sonoma's first vineyard.

When we head to inspect the vines, Schwartz explains how difficult it is to make wine here. Wild boars destroy vines, the weather is erratic, and annual rainfall averages 80 inches -- compared with 25 inches in Napa.

My bottom-line question is whether Fort Ross-Seaview wines demonstrate signature tastes and aromas as do those from Burgundy's Volnay.

I'm leaning to “yes.”

The current releases and barrel samples of various clones from different vineyard blocks, I sip and spit over two days have a mineral-and-earth character, distinct from the plump, ripe, fruit of Sonoma's Russian River Valley. Most have muscle, tannic structure, and striking vibrancy.

Rocks, Iron

The intense 2009 Hirsch Reserve (\$85) tastes of rocks, red plums, and warm straw; the 2009 San Andreas Fault (\$60) is bright and smoky. The stunning 2011 barrel samples reflect a great vintage and the influence of Hirsch's new winemaker Ross Cobb.

“I see a common thread of savory, wild red fruit,” offers Jason Jardine, the winemaker at Flowers Vineyard. Its 2009 Camp Meeting Ridge Vineyard (\$68) is more subtle and delicate than most pinots in the AVA, while the tannic 2009 Sea View Ridge (\$65) has an intriguing note of iron.

Fort Ross Vineyard's tangy, berry-inflected 2009 Sea Slopes (\$26) and lush, silky 2009 Reserve (\$49) are fruitier than most.

Ted Lemon of Littorai, one of the first to make a pinot from Hirsch grapes, later pours me a spicy, succulent 2009 (\$65) with a tangerine peel note. Siduri winery's Hirsch bottling is all dark forest floor.

"It's like walking through the woods and inhaling the smell when you kick up pine needles," says winemaker Adam Lee.

One impetus for carving out this AVA was vintners' dissatisfaction with the Sonoma Coast appellation, so huge it's meaningless as a guide to a wine's character.

Sonoma Coastline

Geographer Patrick Shabram, who wrote the AVA petition submitted to the federal Alcohol Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), explains, "Fort Ross-Seaview is one of the three distinct areas in the six-mile wide coastline slice known unofficially as the "true" Sonoma coast.

It's unique because the vineyards must be higher than 1,000 feet, above the fog line. Intense sunlight combined with cool coastal air allow flavors to develop more fully.

Hirsch recalls that there were 18 grape growers with "44 opinions" at the first local meeting. Bureaucratic changes in Washington after 9/11, followed by infighting over boundaries and bickering over the AVA's name ate up another 11 years.

Surprisingly, few vintners plan to put the Fort Ross- Seaview name on their labels, so I don't see it having marketplace clout anytime soon. Vineyard names like Hirsch and Flowers' Camp Meeting Ridge already have reputations and loyal followers.

Ted Lemon thinks it was too soon to subdivide the west Sonoma coast. Hirsch disagrees.

"We're hardly out of the cradle," he says, "But it's not a marketing gimmick. It means something."

(Elin McCoy writes on wine and spirits for Muse, the arts and leisure section of Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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