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THE TRUE SONOMA COAST

Cool-Climate Winemaking in California

One of America's most challenging regions—marginal, rugged, and wild—is also one of its most promising. **Jonathan Swinchatt** investigates the people and place that make it "The True," and what may now be on the horizon

Main photography by **Jerry Dodrill**

Photography © 2007 Jerry Dodrill

Sunrise over Coleman Valley, still blanketed in coastal fog

David Hirsch was looking for a quiet retreat, a place removed from the competitive stress and superficial values of the women's fashion business—which is to say, he sold fine dresses to affluent women. He had enjoyed his twice-yearly trips to Paris, essential to staying current and keeping his customers content, but the effort and the travel was taking its toll. He needed to find a piece of land far from the apparent glamor of his business—a site on which he could explore a newfound interest in growing trees, an endeavor that seemed to promise the kind of balance he was seeking. Eventually he found 1,100 acres (445ha) of rugged land on the north coast of Sonoma County, California, distant enough from his home in Santa Cruz, a place that was becoming, for him, too crowded and urban. The year was 1978.

Hirsch did not rush to plant trees. Generations of sheep grazing on the cleared ridges had ravaged the land, accentuating its native tendency to slip and slide, to slowly slouch into the steep ravines. Much of the cleared land has the look of a hip-hop fashion plate, the mantle of earth rolling down the hills in irregular folds, as if too big for the frame beneath. Hirsch looked, and wondered, and talked to experts, and then one day he visited the land with his friend Jim Beauregard.

By that time, Hirsch had made the passage, as so many do, from the wines of Bordeaux to those of Burgundy, guided by John Horgan, a wine importer who had provided Hirsch with access to some of the finest producers, including Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. Not surprisingly, given his elevated exposure, Hirsch quickly took to the wines of the Côte d'Or, which became something of a passion. Then, on the day in 1980 that he and Beauregard stood atop a ridge on his estate, his friend said, "If you plant Pinot Noir here, it will be world famous." Given his passion for Burgundy, and perhaps with a vision or two of Romanée-Conti and Chambertin, he seized the idea and planted his first vineyard block that same year. In 1988, he increased his plantings to 19ha (47 acres), mostly Pinot Noir in a variety of clones. Then suddenly, in 1994, winemakers began to call—fine producers of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay such as Williams Selyem and Kistler, and the then-new, now-renowned Littorai. Just as Beauregard predicted, Hirsch's vineyard became a destination on the wine map. Its reputation would continue to grow as more and more producers of fine Pinot Noir sought his grapes.

The serendipitous character of Hirsch's tale is not unusual in a land distinguished by its wine denizens as the "true" Sonoma Coast. Much of it is for the self-contained, for those who have little need, at least day to day, for the glitter and glamor that so often accompany wine where it chooses to settle and evolve. And much of it will stay this way even in the light of growing public acclaim. The land is rough and difficult to access, not readily adaptable to the wishes of those who are attracted to the more superficial aspects of the vinous life; it would take an articulated limo to maneuver the switchbacks and hairpins that mark most of the roads. Growing grapes on land like this requires a different kind of dedication—not just the normal passion for wine but also a willingness to put up with the inconvenience and solitude of semi-isolation. You can see the vineyards of a neighbor on the ridge 6 or 8 miles (10 or 12km) away, but borrowing a spare part for your tractor, should one be available, will take an hour or more of slow and torturous driving. Such conditions choose their inhabitants, and there are not many, only a few dozen vineyards, though more are being developed as the region's reputation soars. Most of the wine is made offsite, both by those who grow the grapes and others who buy them. So far, the region is known best by way of its small-production winemakers, though their success has tempted larger outfits to try their hand at growing grapes in one of America's more challenging regions. All have learned that it is unpredictable country that demands attention, dedication, and a mind freed, at least partially, from the presumptions of education or experience elsewhere.

The place: Sonoma and the "true" Sonoma Coast

America's most visited wine region—the Napa Valley—has become a destination for millions of wine-imbibing tourists—not only because of its fine product but also because it is an easy place to visit and understand, at least superficially. A distinct valley bordered by linear ranges, it has a visual integrity that pleases the eye and relaxes the mind. Drive its two main roads—Highway 29 on the west and the Silverado Trail on the east—and you will have seen, and had easy access to, the bulk of its vineyards and wineries. Look at a map of the American Viticultural Areas here—the 14 that exist within the umbrella Napa Valley AVA—and they are laid out in front of you with a distinct sense of order, implying a geographic and geologic distinctiveness that imparts to their wines something characteristic of the AVA. That this is not necessarily so is overshadowed for most by the ease with which they can experience Napa and its wares.

In anarchic distinction, Sonoma County, Napa's immediate western neighbor, shows no such order. The irregular and overlapping boundaries of its 13 AVAs reflect a geography that defies easy understanding or efficient travel. Perhaps, though, Sonoma is a funkier place than Napa, with an ethnic and economic diversity that is foreign to its tonier neighbor to the east. In decades past, Sonoma was perhaps best known for Zinfandel and Chardonnay, its Cabernet Sauvignon not often reaching the heights of crowd-pleasing power and ripeness that have attracted such attention to Napa. Over the past 15 years or so, however, attention has been increasingly focused on Sonoma Pinot Noir, particularly from the Russian River Valley. And in more recent years there has been growing interest in the even cooler climate of the Sonoma Coast—most notably that

part of it north of the town of Bodega and within just a few miles of the ocean—the region now known to an increasingly devoted clientele as the "true" Sonoma Coast.

The distinction is a matter of geography. The Sonoma Coast AVA covers 750 square miles (1,942 sq km), running from the shores of San Pablo Bay near San Francisco northward to the Mendocino County line. Narrow in the north, the AVA jogs inland and widens south of the small town of Bodega (one of the locations for Hitchcock's film *The Birds*), extending eastward to include the low-lying land south of the city of Santa Rosa. As is true of many California AVAs, the Sonoma Coast encompasses a broad range of topographic, geologic, and climatic conditions. Distinguishing its narrow northwestern corner as the true Sonoma Coast is recognition that this piece of land is uniquely different from the remainder of the AVA.

This is a young, dynamic, and restless piece of Earth—Hirsch calls it a "land of geology in motion." Flying into San Francisco or Oakland from the north, even an untrained eye can see the slash of the San Andreas Fault that separates Point Reyes from the mainland and forms the linear valley of the western reaches of the Gualala River, the main drainage in the northern part of the True. Most of the land is wild and rugged, shaped by forces that started raising this portion of the California Coast Ranges some 3 million years ago. At that time, several thousand miles of the Pacific Tectonic Plate had already slid beneath North America, renewing itself all the while through the addition of new crustal material at the mid-ocean ridge. As the Pacific Plate plunged downward, the edge of the continent grazed its surface, acting like a giant earthmover, scraping off soft ocean-floor sediments and breaking out chunks of hard ocean crust, plastering them on to the edge of the continent, forming the chaotic assemblage of diverse rock types—sand, silt, volcanic lavas, and metamorphic schists—known as the Franciscan Melange. Compressive forces associated in part with the San Andreas Fault raised these deposits into a series of ridges that lie parallel to the coast. The mixture of soft ocean sediments and hard chunks of crust forms a distinctive landscape, with smooth, soft-appearing slopes punctuated by hard, jagged chunks of rock from a few feet to many tens of feet in extent. A variety of faults cuts across or runs parallel to the hills, where abrupt changes in bedrock create a patchwork of different soils. Commonly, these form only a thin cover over decaying bedrock, much of their original volume lost to post-logging erosion. Hirsch maintains that without that loss he would be growing mushrooms in the vigorous humus derived from temperate rain forest.

To the south—between the Russian River and Bodega Highway, the southern border of the true Sonoma Coast—the land changes, from the steep and rugged hills and canyons of the north reaches of the True, to a gentler, more rolling topography. Here grapes grow on the Wilson Grove Formation, rocks made of sand and silt derived from volcanic deposits that were forming between 3 million and 8 million years ago in the eastern part of Sonoma and western part of Napa Counties. Over time, these sediments—particles of volcanic ash and lava—have weathered into Goldridge soils, well-drained material with just enough clay to maintain moisture during much of a long growing season. Wilson Grove sediments, and the associated Goldridge soils, also occur as ridge-top patches in the northern part of the True, where they support the vineyards of Peay, Hartford Court, Artesa, and others. While a single name, Goldridge, suggests a significant degree of uniformity, these soils show considerable variability in structure and texture, which seems to be reflected in the wines they produce.

Ted Lemon, of Littorai Wines, came to the True in part because of the geology. He had traveled the West Coast from Washington to Mexico, seeing many good small patches but concluding finally that there was no "holy ground" for Pinot Noir. Understanding the Earth dynamics that had formed the topography, Lemon imagined the Sonoma Coast as a deck of shuffled cards: layers of diverse geology creating an unpredictable mix of materials. He was intrigued, both by the land and by the potential in the wines then being made. Together, they suggested a place with a future.

Most others, however, have come to the True not for the distinctive geology, but for a climate that promises to grow—for those with sufficient focus, dedication, and discipline—grapes that will produce the balance, intensity, and structure of great Burgundy in an American Pinot Noir. And from the evidence that is accumulating, wine growers of just that type are producing wines that reflect, more than a little, the climatic promise. The key lies in a relationship between ocean and land that provides daytime temperatures 14–20°F (8–11°C) lower than those just a few miles inland, cool nights, and a long growing season that often stretches from February to October.

The hills of the True rise from a coast that is bathed by the California Current, a southward-moving stream of cold water that, together with dominant onshore winds, cools the adjacent land. These conditions also create a dense bank of coastal fog during the growing season. The ridges of the True lift most of the vineyards above that fog bank, exposing grapes to warm, often hot days and cool nights that allow the fruit to maintain acid levels unusual in America. The long, cool growing season also promotes slow maturation, partly responsible for the nuance and subtlety that set the wines apart from the more fruit-driven style that so many Americans identify with Pinot Noir.

Rain is the biggest challenge. Periodically in the spring it arrives in monsoon-like waves, stripping vines of blossom and potential fruit, leaving paltry yields—in 2005 a mere half-ton per acre. More commonly, rain falls from January to March: 100 inches (2.5m) or more—enough to make this a land of temperate rainforest, reflected in the towering Redwoods and Douglas Firs. The soils, while generally porous and well drained, contain enough clay to store sufficient water to allow some to dry-farm, others to come close to that goal—part of an ethic that stresses natural process and non-additive farming.

The people

Looking northwest from Hirsch's vineyard, a flash of brilliant gold on a ridge a couple of miles distant catches the eye. It is the 80ft- (24m-) high gold-leafed stupa at Odiyan, a Buddhist retreat and temple complex inspired and built by Tarthang

Left to right: David Hirsch of Hirsch Vineyards; Vanesssa Wong of Peay Vineyards; Eric Sussman of Radio-Coteau

Photography: (left) courtesy of Hirsch Vineyards; (middle) courtesy of Peay Vineyards; (right) courtesy of Anne Dowie, www.annedowie.com

Tulku Rinpoche, one of the first Tibetan lamas to come to the United States after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959. Tarthang Rinpoche arrived in Berkeley in 1969 and began building Odiyan in the 1970s on the first ridge above the Pacific. When asked what is unique about the true Sonoma Coast, Hirsch replies, "The same thing that brought the lama here—the power of the land, only seen from a viticultural and winemaking perspective." The comment has a bit of a mystical cast, but primarily it reflects Hirsch's deeply intuitive connection with the land. He says that he came here wanting to possess it, that it "took a long time to shed my baggage, all the attitudes, concepts, and assumptions that I brought with me, and just learn from the land. I'm far more naive, innocent, and open than I was when we planted most of the vineyard in 1990. Eventually, we had to let the land possess us. If you're going to develop a site, where do you go if you have a question? You have to refer to the site, let it talk to you over time."

Hirsch came to the True originally to grow trees; most of his colleagues came to grow grapes and make wine. They approached from a variety of directions but all with the same notion: to make Pinot Noir true to the cool-climate character of the grape, emphasizing aroma, elegance, and nuance, within a structure that does not overwhelm those more subtle qualities. A surprising number—including, by chance, most of those interviewed for this article—are originally from the US East Coast, where they developed a love for French wines, particularly those of the Côte d'Or. Several—Ted Lemon, Eric Sussman, and Ehren Jordan among them—went on to serve their apprenticeship in France. Lemon ended up as vineyard manager and winemaker at Domaine Guy (now Jean-Marc) Roulot of Meursault, the first American to be chosen for such a position. Burgundy is their model, but their inclination is to respect rather than emulate. As Sussman puts it: "I look to Old World reference points. Wine growing requires a lot of detailed work, but even more than that it requires stepping back and letting a natural process happen on its own. So much in the world is no longer that way—we think we can do better, so we tend to interfere. I'd like to preserve what others have shown me. Yes, it's a different setting from where I was trained, but I see it as just bringing what I have learned to a new platform."

For the most part they are a soft-spoken group, deeply committed to growing Pinot Noir that carries with it the essence of place and revealing it as fully as possible in the wine. They speak of interfering as little as need be in natural processes that work best when left to themselves. Hirsch talks of being "active in a responsive mode." Sussman says that "the hardest thing is not to do anything, to step back and listen." This approach—non-intervention—is as difficult to grasp as the Zen notion of the action of non-action. Neither expression conveys the experiential heart of the idea, which depends on attention, awareness, and the courage to resist the tendency to attempt to control natural events. It is a concept particularly difficult to understand in the context of wine growing, which requires multiple choices and decisions every day. As we take a brief look at what they do, we must remember that their actions are only the surface manifestation of a much deeper process—a way of knowing and working that is, at its heart, ineffable.

These small-production wine growers—David Hirsch (Hirsch Vineyards), Ted Lemon (Littorai Wines), Nick Peay (Peay Vineyards), Ehren Jordan (Failla Wines), and Eric Sussman (Radio-Coteau)—are something of a maverick bunch. They are largely unconcerned with media coverage and are content to limit their production to levels (normally fewer than 6,000 cases) that allow close contact with the land

they farm or the vineyards from which they buy grapes. They share a profound respect for the land, which they farm biodynamically, organically, or as close to those ideals as they think they can, given the demanding nature of their marginal climate. They believe strongly that irrigation and the use of manmade fertilizers adversely affect the expression of terroir. Their goal is to dry-farm, but they irrigate to establish vineyards or to get them through heat spikes that overly stress vines growing in well-drained, low-nutrient soils. Sussman, who currently buys grapes from small vineyards in the True and adjacent AVAs, spent two years scouting sites that had the potential to dry-farm or use minimal irrigation—"sites exposed to the elements in a manner that vines could grow without a lot of input." Lemon farms his home vineyard and two others biodynamically, using compost made from a mix of plants—oats, barley, red rye, vetch, native radish and others—grown on his 30-acre (12ha) "integrated farm." For Jordan the difference between a good vineyard and a great one is "as slim as the margin between a winner and loser in the Indianapolis 500." The difference lies in the details—the aggregation of small acts such as removing lateral shoots in the fruit zone, seen by many growers as too much work for too little return.

Peay sounds abjectly apologetic when he speaks of periodically having to use pesticides, organic when they will suffice, always searching out the least harmful. Jordan farms organically "to create a healthy vineyard for myself—I work in it—as well as for my family and my wines." Many of them talk of working for the future, of preserving methods developed over centuries rather than moving too quickly to new, technology-based approaches. As he gets to know his sites, Sussman feels increasingly less compelled to change anything unless absolutely necessary, wanting "to maintain the pedigree of the site. You can always get more uniformity, but it's also a choice to work with what you have, to express that personality. The hardest thing is to step back and listen—to the people who work the vineyards, the weather, the vines. You need to have great confidence in the process not to react quickly and interfere with the natural course of things." These non-interventionists work in a different world from those who practice "precision farming," but their meticulous attention to detail—possible because they choose to limit their production—is perhaps the most precise of all.

They have the luxury in the True of letting fruit hang and develop mature flavors without risking excessive ripeness—in most years they pick between 22 and 25° Brix. "I look for balance and vibrancy," says Sussman, "I want to capture freshness in the vineyard, and the site expression and complexity that tend to get lost in super-ripe fruit." Sorting is painstaking, in the vineyard as well as before and sometimes after destemming. The choice of destemming or whole-cluster fermentation depends on the year.

They prefer native yeasts that encourage slow fermentation at lower temperatures, leading to interesting textures and more subtle, layered wines. When problems arise during fermentation, Jordan tends to walk away and let the wine "work it out itself. You need to know what's going on but also you need to avoid the tendency to validate your existence by doing something." Sussman admits that "stepping back, letting the wine do its thing is risky business. With each vineyard, at the start I feel like I need to control everything, but each year it gets easier to let go." He seeks to "let the wine evolve naturally, with, at most, a gentle human fingerprint."

Of place and wine

On a regional scale, the True is known largely through the wines of this small group of East Coast Francophiles who chose the region for its potential to produce classically styled Pinot Noir. These wines are distinguished by their balance and intensity, by their fresh acidity, and by nuances of aroma and flavor not found in their richer cousins. But just across from Hirsch on the same ridge sits Marcassin, the home vineyard of Helen Turley, best known for producing some of Napa Valley's most rich and powerful wines. Her Marcassin Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, available only to the members of a mailing list as closed as the latest hot hedge fund, reflect the same approach. They are big, fruit-forward wines that wow the New World palate, receiving scores from wine critics that, were they course grades, would win her every academic accolade at the most prestigious universities. Turley also makes wine for Martinelli, whose Charles Ranch property abuts both Marcassin and Hirsch. The juxtaposition of Hirsch, who prizes his wines for their acid balance and structure, and Turley, with her focus on coaxing from the grape every drop of fruit that she reasonably can, shows that the True, cool as it might be, has the potential to produce wines in completely contrasting styles. And so the stage is set for the next evolutionary step of a young terroir.

A spate of new labels is due to arrive shortly from the True, the outcome of projects put in place by a variety of long-established California winemakers, most of modest size but including the ever-expanding Kendall-Jackson. Jason Pahlmeyer bought into the True after tasting Turley's Pinot Noir. Brice Jones came after losing control of Sonoma Cutrer. Craig Williams, director of winemaking at Joseph Phelps, was originally looking for a few acres on which to grow Chardonnay for their Ovation label but ended up with 20 acres (8ha) of that variety and 80 acres (32ha) of Pinot Noir near the town of Freestone, adding a winery that will be home to their new Freestone label. Steve Kistler is nearby, on 20 acres (8ha) near Occidental. How these, and other, newcomers will affect perception of the True awaits their first vintages. But they are California winemakers who almost certainly have a different notion of great Chardonnay and Pinot Noir than that of those who were weaned on the wines of the Côte d'Or. (Note, though, that Don Blackburn, winemaker for Brice Jones's Emeritus Vineyards, was trained in Burgundy and Bordeaux.)

The relationship between the place and the wine is scale-dependent, however, and the regional view is only the most general. Attempts are now being made to define place in the True on a finer scale. The most advanced is the petition for a Fort Ross-Seaview AVA, covering the midsection of the True, the area just north of the Russian River, inland from the coastal village of Fort Ross and near the tiny town of Seaview. Hirsch is in this area, along with Failla, Flowers, Marcassin, Martinelli, Wild Hog, and a few others. In the north, another cluster of vineyards—including Artessa, Brice Jones, Hartford Court, Pahlmeyer, and Peay—surrounds the town of Annapolis. And south of the Russian River, near the towns of Occidental and Freestone, a third cluster includes Freestone, Kistler, Sonoma Coast, and several highly prized vineyards such as Summa, planted in 1975, and Theriot. Most vineyards in each of these areas are only a few years into production, so attempts to identify the defining characteristics of these three divisions of the True are premature at best.

On the scale of individual vineyards, however, perceptions are beginning to clarify. In addition to their defining acidity, Hirsch sees his wines as "brooding," adding that some winemakers "have not been able to handle" the character of his fruit. Wines made from Hirsch fruit are often described as more masculine and tannic than those from vineyards such as Peay and Theriot. Lemon says that wines from Summa are "rounder, lusher" than those of Theriot, which are "less tannic, more peppery, with notes of orange peel." The two vineyards are separated by a road and a few hundred feet; both are on Goldridge soils. In 2005, Vanessa Wong, winemaker at Peay (and married to Nick Peay), decided that areas within their 33 acres (13ha) of Pinot Noir (of the 48 acres [19ha] planted) had developed enough distinctive character to warrant two bottlings rather than a vineyard blend. The vines were planted in 1998. With one or two exceptions, the oldest vines in the True date back only as far as 1990, and many are a decade or so younger than that. The general expectation is that with time and older vines, tannin profiles will evolve and the wines will become more complex, with greater depth and distinction.

The complexity of terroir, however, can prove daunting. Recent detailed soil studies at Hirsch, undertaken while he extended his plantings to a total of 72 acres (29ha), revealed such extreme variation that he has now defined some 25 blocks, some with sub-blocks as small as one fifth of an acre (0.08ha). He intends to continue vinifying the sub-blocks separately, blending to find the most characteristic and distinctive wine the property can produce. In 2005, the blend of all the lots seemed to be the best, but he and his winemaker thought they might achieve something spectacular by eliminating the least enticing barrels. After several attempts, they gave up; the final wine contained elements from every lot.

Final remarks

The true Sonoma Coast is an edgy and risky place. At Freestone Vineyards, low enough to be caught in the morning fog, Craig Williams works with vines planted on slopes about 8 miles (13km) from the ocean, at a gap in the coastal hills formed by the Salmon Creek drainage. Strong winds from the ocean blow through the gap, making it one of the coolest spots in the True. Williams was worried about the ability to ripen fruit under these conditions, but he has seen consistent production of mature grapes at 25° Brix or less. Difficulties, however, remain. They have had to develop vineyard-management techniques to prevent infection with the mildew and fungus that thrive in the cool and moist conditions. Williams imagines that the best vintages will be limited in number—perhaps three or four out of ten—but of a quality that will seduce the memory and allow the lesser years to disappear into some black hole of the mind. Up on the ridges, above the fog, the gamble is not quite so stark, but everyone in the True knows that they have chosen a place in which quality depends on a clear eye and persistent vigilance; under these demanding conditions, even a minor distraction can cost them the very high quality that they seek.

One project to watch is focused on Balistreri vineyard, less than a mile west of the town of Freestone, on the lower slopes of the hills and the flat land adjacent to Salmon Creek. Many consider these low elevations too cold even for Pinot Noir, but Sonoma Coast Vineyards has chosen Balistreri as its home vineyard and has produced from it several vintages of lean, tightly structured Pinot Noir more than reminiscent of good Burgundy. Balistreri, in its extreme climatic position, may be a bellwether to climate change in the True. Lemon wonders how long the exceptionally cool conditions of the True will continue to hold. As climate continues to warm, will he be able to produce Pinot Noir of the character he seeks five years from now? Ten? If not, he is ready to bud over to other varieties, most likely the more adaptable Syrah, rather than move north to British Columbia. Jordan thinks he will not be faced with these decisions in his lifetime. Extreme sites such as Balistreri might provide early signs of marked change. On the other hand, Sonoma Coast winemaker Anthony Austin—a Californian to the core—is entirely ready to acidify if that's what's needed to produce the structure he seeks, in which case we might not always know.

The True is a relatively small area, with a climate and topography that limit the area suitable for high-quality vineyards, but these are not the only controls on future development. Residents of the True prize their isolation and quiet and have become increasingly active in the effort to limit development, even for vineyards that would be unlikely to attract many visitors. Permits require months or years, mounds of paperwork, and the expense of the lawyers who are needed to sort through and understand the byzantine environmental and zoning regulations. These conditions have discouraged several vineyard owners from expanding and others, no doubt, from coming here. At the same time, it's difficult to imagine a wine region of such obvious potential not continuing to grow. If the wines due to come on-line match or surpass the quality of those already being produced, surely the motivation will be there for others to try their hand at producing the still-elusive great American Pinot Noir. ■

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