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Home > Blogs > Stirring the Lees with James Molesworth

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A Stop at Hirsch Vineyards

A pioneering Pinot Noir vineyard atop the coastal range of Sonoma hits its stride

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When I was warned ahead of time that the road up to Hirsch Vineyards was a bit dicey and that I should make sure I had a good car to handle it, I had to chuckle. After handling a few hours driving on unpaved roads with softball-sized rocks strewn across them in South Africa, how bad could a road in Northern California be?

Turns out the road itself isn't all that bad, though I wouldn't want to drive it in the rain in anything without four-wheel drive. The real treacherous aspect is trying to stay on time for your appointment, because you'll find yourself pulling over every few miles as you reach a new vista point. Stunning views of the Pacific, along with the jagged fingers of the ridged coastal mountains grab your attention. For an Instagram addict, it's double the fun.

Though I'm not in California often, I do love my infrequent and all-too-short trips out here. I'd been in this neighborhood before, stopping in at Flowers last year. That time, I was choppered in, which afforded a different kind of view. This time, the drive up the steep, winding road gave me new perspective for the vagaries of farming on such an extreme site.

One of those perspectives is "Why bother?" Especially when put into the context of history. In 1979, David Hirsch, now 69, bought 1,000 acres of sheep farm up on the craggy ridge of the Sonoma Coast, before there was even an AVA. Hirsch was soon planting Pinot Noir vineyards, becoming a pioneer in the area, which today has Flowers and Martinelli's Blue Slide Ridge vineyard, among others. These and other well-known properties are highly sought-after for the bright, racy, minerally Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays typical of this markedly cool growing area. But while Hirsch often gets the credit for getting the ball rolling, it was more chance than outright planning.

"George Bohan was really the first to plant up here," said Jasmine Hirsch, David's daughter, who works and lives on the estate along with her father. "And unlike someone like Josh Jensen [of Calera], my dad didn't come in looking for a specific spot to grow grapes. Rather, he'd bought the land and got lucky. He realized he needed something to make it economically viable. The land had been treated badly--sheep grazing compacts the soil, and the land had been cleared right down to the top soil--no trees or other vegetation left in many spots. Combine that with 80 inches of rain, all in winter, and steep slopes, and there were serious erosion and top soil problems when he bought it. But he wanted to do something that would respect the land. He was always a passionate Burgundy drinker and so, in went some Pinot vines."

The first plantings, just 3 acres, went in in 1980. A second round of planting totaling 43 acres was completed in 1990 through 1995 and then the most recent phase of vineyards (another 22 acres) were established in 2002, bringing the total to 68 acres



James Molesworth

Pinot Noir vines line the craggy top of Sonoma's coastal mountain range at Hirsch Vineyards.

James Molesworth

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of vines; a scant 3.9 acres are Chardonnay, the rest Pinot Noir.

Hirsch sold his grapes off for the first several years, with the production going into large indiscriminate Sonoma blends. Even as he expanded his plantings in the early '90s and a Sonoma Coast AVA was eventually approved, word on the area's burgeoning quality was slow to filter out, according to Jasmine.

"Then in '94, Williams-Selyem, Kistler and Littorai all bought grapes from us for the first time," said Hirsch. "And then word got out pretty quickly."

Today, the Hirsches sell grapes to eight different wineries, all of whom bottle the fruit as a Hirsch Vineyard designate, a prestigious acknowledgment of the vineyard's quality. Williams-Selyem and Littorai have continued, while Kistler dropped out. Joining them are Failla, Siduri, Lioco, Kosuge, Kutch and Breggio.

Then in 2002, the Hirsches decided to start bottling some of their own production, and today they produce wine from a little more than half of the estate, totaling around 5,000 cases, with the rest of the fruit still sold off.

As we walked through the vineyard, Hirsch pointed to the small Chardonnay block and its odd quadrilateral cordon pruning, which results in several arms spreading out from the trunk, and two panels of canopy growth and an expanded fruit zone.



James Molesworth

A good horse can easily get you up the road to Hirsch Vineyards ...

"With the fog, there's disease pressure, so there are always challenges here. But this pruning system opens the canopy and actually increased both quality and yields. With yields naturally low across the site, that was a benefit that my dad really loved."

Hirsch, 33, with a cherubic face and lightly raspy voice, carries the official title of director of sales and marketing. Nonetheless, she speaks at length, both authoritatively and with genuine passion, about her family's vineyard, its viticulture and the winemaking. She returned home after living and working in Europe, finding the inexorable pull of the land too much to overcome.

"I realized in 2008 that if I didn't return soon, I wouldn't at all, and I didn't want that," she said. "But, don't forget, we didn't have a winery here until 2002, and I was gone by then. I didn't grow up in a winemaking culture, I grew up in a farming culture, which is different. So when I returned, I realized I needed to live on the property if I was going to be part of the vineyard and the family business."

Hirsch noted that she, along with her dad, winemaker Ross Cobb, the vineyard manager and much of the field help, all live on the relatively remote property. That intimacy with the land is critical, according to Hirsch.

"If you want to make wines that transparently show what the vineyard is, you have to be here all the time," Hirsch said. "We've got four weather stations on the estate and I've seen 20-degree differences between them on the same day. You won't understand that if you're just stopping by to visit and check on the grapes every now and then. This is technically a single vineyard, but really it's 68 acres of vines divided up into 60 different parcels, all managed differently and then ultimately vinified separately. If you're going to get a handle on that, you have to be here all the time."

Pinot Noir is the focus of the vineyard, accounting for the vast majority of the plantings. And as the site has been developed, inevitably mistakes from the earlier years have led to different approaches with each new set of plantings.

"I love old vines, but not all old vines are great just because they're old," said Hirsch as we talked about the original plantings, some of which still remain. "Healthy, well-planted old vines are great, but old vines aren't always necessarily healthy or well-planted. We have some virus issues such as leaf roll, as well as the threat of phylloxera on the older plantings that are on AXR rootstock [a rootstock susceptible to the root louse which spreads the deadly vine disease]. That will all have to be addressed in the future."

"But it just goes to show how idiosyncratic things are in a vineyard. We have old vines on their own roots that have never gotten phylloxera even though they are right next to parcels that we had to rip out because they got phylloxera after being planted on AXR. And those old vines on their own roots were planted that way simply because my dad didn't know you needed rootstock," she said. "So sometimes accidents work out for the best. But overall, the newer plantings took into account more in-depth soil analysis, row alignment and so on. I think ultimately they will be better parcels, even though they are relatively young vines now."

Prodded by Ted Lemon of Littorai, Hirsch and her father have slowly begun converting the vineyard to biodynamic farming as well, with a little more than half the vineyard now using the hyper-organically styled approach. Plans are to be fully biodynamic in the future.

"I don't believe everything about biodynamics, but I do believe one thing: It makes the vineyard healthier. And so if by going to biodynamics we can manage leaf roll and handle the disease pressures we have, while also leaving a healthier vineyard for the long term, then I'm all for it," said Hirsch resolutely. "It's pretty funny to think though, that my dad used Round-Up on the weeds here when he first started. He likes to tease the biodynamic consultant we have about that," she added with an infectious chuckle.

The **2011 Chardonnay Sonoma Coast** (505 cases made) offers bright plantain and green fig flavors with an almost crunchy texture, though it broadens out nicely with a just-creamy edge through the chamomile-tinged finish. It has weight overall but keeps its stony cut. The grapes are picked early for freshness and natural acidity, fermented in neutral French oak and then aged in barrel for 11 months before moving to tank for five months before the bottling, staying on its fine lees throughout.

The **2011 Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast The Bohan-Dillon**, named for the road leading up to the winery, is the only Pinot produced here which includes non-estate fruit. It delivers very bright, crunchy bitter cherry and pomegranate notes, with a flicker of bergamot and a whiff of white pepper on a bright, unadorned frame.

The estate Pinots include the **2010 Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast San Andreas Fault**, which combines fruit from around the property, 30 different parcels all told. It shows a light sassafras hint, giving way to sage, steeped cherry, singed anise and alder notes. It has muscle, but stays pure and racy over all, almost sleek, with the alder note giving a slight tug at the very end. There are approximately 3,000 cases of this wine (average retail \$60) which forms the backbone of the portfolio. The bottling was the first from the Hirsches when they started their own production in 2002 and has since been joined by three following wines starting in 2009.

"We look at the San Andreas and the Reserve bottlings as the macro view of the vineyard," said Hirsch. "The West and East Ridge bottlings are micro views. With the fragmented parcels we have, and vinifying them all separately, we found these different expressions and thought they merited their own bottlings."

The **2010 Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast West Ridge** (165 cases, \$85) is a very bright, more elegant style of Pinot. Sourced from parcels on the cooler sides of the ridge, where the soils range from red, rocky clay to yellow and black clay, it combines 43 percent each from Swan and Mount Eden clones, with the rest Pommard clone plantings. The wine shows floral, strawberry patch, red cherry, blood orange, sandalwood and mineral notes that all flow suavely through the finish, where an echo of slate checks in. Though it carries a modest 12.8 percent alcohol, it still has mouthfeel, weight and persistence, though stays squarely in the elegant camp from start to finish.

The **2010 Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast East Ridge** (240 cases, \$85) takes a decidedly different angle in expressing the site, with darker notes at the core--steeped cherry, damson plum, anise and bitter licorice--all framed by a light charcoal hint and backed by a long, smoldering, tightly-grained finish. The wine is sourced from warmer, steeper slopes with more uniform soils, primarily red, rocky clay. It's clearly more muscular in style compared to the West Ridge with the vines primarily (50 percent) Mount Eden clone, though Hirsch admits it's not a pure selection, along with 40 percent Pommard clone and the rest Swan.

The **2010 Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Reserve** (295 cases, \$85) is selected from better parcels in the vineyard as well as a barrel selection in the winery. It is dark and briary in feel, with lots of black cherry, blackberry coulis and singed alder notes followed by a gorgeous dried blood orange echo on the finish. It leans toward the East Ridge side of the spectrum in its darker profile, but it has even tighter grain than the East Ridge and deeper cut than that bottling, narrowing its focus and adding more length.

The Hirsch Vineyard is clearly a special site--winemaking on the edge, so to speak, but winemaking driven by the vineyard first. It's a rote and played-out expression that wine is made in the vineyards, but that's only because too many people claim to do so when in fact they spend more time in the winery. At Hirsch, things have been built from the ground up. It shows in the vineyard. It shows in the wines.

Member comments 1 comment(s)

Glenn Keeler — SoCal — May 30, 2013 7:56pm ET

Great post James. I'm a big fan of Hirsch and wines sourced from Hirsch (Littorai). Based on your photos, I'll have to make a visit next time I'm up there.

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