

~ *How do you get to be the leader of the other 49?*

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## The Pinot Paradise of the Cool Sonoma Coast

*A visit with David Hirsch, the visionary behind the area's first vineyard*

By JAY MCINERNEY



Charles Gesell for The Wall Street Journal

SEEKING BALANCE | David Hirsch at Hirsch Vineyards

**YOUR PHONE STOPPED** working more than an hour ago; your GPS and [Google Maps](#) are useless out here, some 2½ road-hours west of [Healdsburg, Calif.](#), the jumping-off point for Sonoma County wine pilgrims. Napa, with its thronged tasting rooms and its trophy architecture, might as well be a thousand miles away. From the coast, the road slaloms up the ridge and eventually turns into a dirt track halfway to your destination. At some point you cross the San Andreas fault. The rolling, camel-colored meadows are punctuated by groves of fir and redwood. The telephone poles alongside the dirt road are the only signs of civilization. Just when you think you're completely lost, manicured rows of bright green vines appear on the hillside ahead.

When I finally found David Hirsch, he was in a field just off the road, struggling with a faulty irrigation valve, sporting a battered straw fedora, a very faded plaid shirt with a prominent hole in the front and faded jeans—an outfit I recognized from several pictures taken in recent years. Since leaving the apparel business some 25 years ago, he doesn't seem to have spent much time thinking about clothes.

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**Oenophile: Wines From David Hirsch, and Made With His Grapes**

When Mr. Hirsch bought this thousand-acre ridgetop ranch in 1978 he was thinking about trees rather than grapes, "about silviculture rather than viticulture," he said, the cadences of his native Bronx still present after 50 years in California. In case you don't know what



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

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silviculture is, he will tell you, with reference to George W.S. Trow, the late New Yorker cult culture critic, along with a sidebar on the Austrian theosophist Rudolf Steiner and a disquisition on the complex geology of the property. For a man of the soil, Mr. Hirsch's frame of reference is pretty esoteric. Over lunch in the rustic house designed by his Czech-born wife, Marie, with views of the Pacific framed by redwoods, he waxed poetic about viticulture: "Heat feeds the sugar. Light feeds the acidity. Heat is sex. Light is intelligence. To make good wine you need them in balance."

Mr. Hirsch originally had ambitions to restore the forested landscape that had been badly degraded. Only hints of the redwood forest that had once blanketed the ridges remained. "I called it Appalachia," Mr. Hirsch said. "First it was clear-cut, then grazed by sheep and seriously eroded. The soil went down the hillsides." The topsoil was thin to nonexistent, but Mr. Hirsch knew that vines survive and thrive where other crops can't.

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### The Off Duty Summer 50

*The beach is beckoning, but before you hit the shore, consult this guide to 50 seaside essentials —from swank swimsuits to ice-cold canned sake, comfy snorkel fins to video-recording binoculars.*



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal, Styling by Anne Cardenas (4)

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Almost on a whim, he planted grapes in 1980, with the help of his friend Jim Beauregard, whose family had pioneered grape growing in the Santa Cruz Mountains, south of San Francisco. Mr. Hirsch was a wine enthusiast who traveled regularly to Burgundy. "Back in 1972, Romanée-Conti was \$324 a case," he recalled. "I almost bought a house in Beaune." Instead he decided to purchase a ranch on the Sonoma Coast, far closer to his home and his clothing business in San Francisco. But he didn't forget Burgundy entirely; the first vines he planted were Pinot Noir, the native red grape of the Côte d'Or. (He also planted Riesling but eventually grafted those vines to Pinot.) The former importer and clothing manufacturer discovered his inner farmer and took to grape growing full-time.

In the years since, Hirsch Vineyards has become one of the most celebrated sites in Northern California wine lore, a kind of de facto grand cru, and others, including Flowers, Marcassin, Martinelli and Failla have followed Hirsch's lead in planting Pinot Noir and Chardonnay on the ridges above the fog line of the Sonoma Coast. This may be the best place in Northern California for these cool-climate grapes.

Early buyers for Hirsch's grapes included Kendall-Jackson and Sea Ridge Winery. "It was just a hobby through the '80s," Mr. Hirsch said. But in 1994, the three magi came calling: Burt Williams of Williams Selyem, Ted Lemon of Littorai and Steve Kistler of Kistler Vineyards. "Burt and Ted and Steve were in this tasting group," he said. "They heard about us or tasted some wines from the vineyard, and they came up and liked what they saw." The three all contracted to buy grapes from Hirsch and went on to make a series of Hirsch-designated wines that garnered very favorable attention and put Hirsch, and the Sonoma Coast, on the map.



Charles Gesell for The Wall Street Journal

Mr. Hirsch works with Ryan Keisling.

Meanwhile, Walt and Joan Flowers, who owned a—you can't make this up—nursery in Pennsylvania, had purchased 321 acres on a ridgetop just to the east and planted vineyards, followed closely by cult winemaker Helen Turley and her husband, John Wetlaufer, who established Marcassin Vineyards, releasing their first vintage in 1996. The surrounding area has clearly become the Gold Coast of a new California Côte d'Or, although the wines vary in style and it's not easy to characterize a regional flavor profile.

"It's like individuals from the same clan or village," Mr. Hirsch said. "You have group characteristics: These are areas on the coastal band and we have a strong maritime influence. But the individual characteristics can be just as distinct. We have a commonality with Marcassin and Martinelli. It's really hard to farm here."

"Right over there," he said, pointing west down the ridge, "the Pacific and North American plates come into contact and grind away to create an incredible mélange of every kind of soil type, from heavy clay to sand, and all kinds of rock has been thrown up: igneous,

metamorphic and sedimentary." It's hard to generalize about Hirsch, or the area, but probably safe to say this geological and meteorological diversity helps account for the wines' complexity.

Last year, the area around Hirsch was recognized as a distinct American Viticultural Area, the Fort Ross-Seaview AVA, although whether any of the wineries within the area will rush to use this name on their label is unclear. It's not exactly a catchy phrase. What is clear is that the Sonoma Coast AVA, a gerrymandered sprawl of more than 500,000 acres, is far too broadly drawn and includes vineyards nowhere near the ocean.

In 2002, David Hirsch decided to start vinifying and bottling some of his own grapes—a task currently presided over by winemaker Ross Cobb, who formerly worked at Williams Selyem and at Flowers and also makes several acclaimed Pinots under his own name. Mr. Hirsch's daughter, Jasmine, is learning the ropes while handling the winery's marketing. Mr. Hirsch continues to sell his grapes to Littorai, Williams Selyem, Breggo, Kutch, Failla, Lioco, B. Kosuge and Siduri. Tasting through these bottlings presents a great opportunity to consider the influences of winemaking and terroir. Suffice it to say that Hirsch wines seem to have a more earthy, more savory, less fruit-driven character than most California Pinots, and bright acidity. They're some of the most distinctive and best in California, which is why finding a bottle of Hirsch is only slightly easier than finding the winery.

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