



▶ wineanorak home

▶ blog

▶ new to wine

▶ features

▶ food and wine

▶ wine travel

▶ wineanorak TV

▶ photographs

▶ producer index

▶ tasting notes

▶ book reviews

▶ about

▶ what's new?

▶ links

The wines of Hirsch Vineyards

Remarkable Pinot Noirs from California's Sonoma Coast

With *Jasmine Hirsch* at *The Grain Store*, London, August 2013

Website: www.hirschvineyards.com

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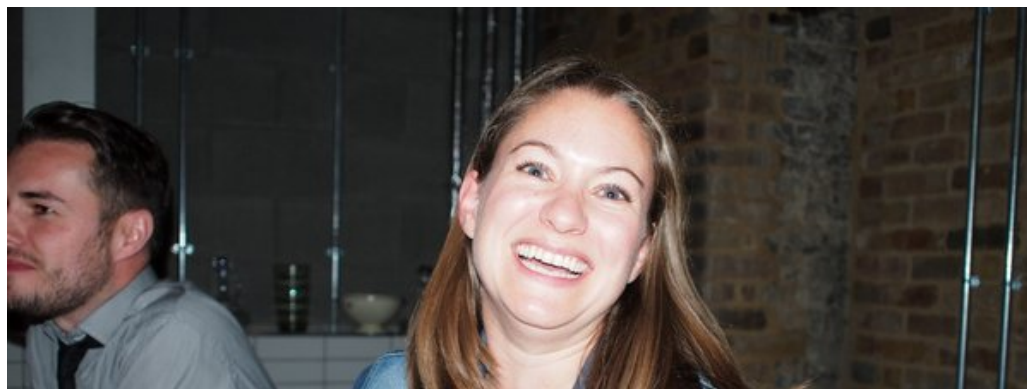
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Jasmine Hirsch, daughter of Hirsch Vineyards proprietor David Hirsch, was in town, visiting her new importers Roberson Wine (www.robersonwine.com). So Roberson's Mark Andrew asked me if I'd like to come out to play. Of course!

California is making some serious Pinot Noir these days, and Hirsch is one of the stars. But it started out almost by accident.

Let's backtrack to the 1970s. David Hirsch, from an immigrant family in the Bronx, went to Columbia University but dropped out after a year. So he went to California to become a hippy. He then got into the fashion business (selling women's clothing), which took him to Paris on regular business trips. From Paris he found his way to Burgundy and got bitten by the wine bug.





Jasmine Hirsch

Living in Santa Cruz, he'd had the premonition that California would one day get crowded, so he decided to buy some land while it was still available. He looked around and found a huge sheep ranch, about the same distance north of San Francisco as Santa Cruz was south. No one wanted to be there: it used to be redwood forests but it had been completely logged, so nothing was left. This was a large 400 hectare property, and it didn't cost him much.

He'd never intended to plant grapes here, until he was persuaded to have a go by a friend. In 1980 he planted 2 acres of Riesling and 1 of Pinot Noir. It was a crazy place to grow grapes with the ocean just a couple of miles away. He was a true pioneer of California's Sonoma Coast.

He carried on working in the clothing business and sold the grapes to others. Things really started to move in the early 1990s. This is when Hirsch planted another 40 acres of vines, and began selling to the likes of Williams Selyem, Kistler and Littorai, all of whom used the 'Hirsch' vineyard designation on their bottles. 30 different wineries have bought Hirsch grapes, including Rochioli, Siduri and Flowers, in addition to those already mentioned. The success of the farm meant that David quit the day job and devoted his energies to growing grapes.

It wasn't until 2002 that David decided that Hirsch would make their own wines, and he began with Pinot Noir. Chardonnay followed in 2006. A winery was built right in the middle of the vineyard, but this necessitated constructing a 10 mile power line to connect it up to the grid. It's quite a remote place.

There are currently 68 acres of vines, with plantings taking place in three stages: 1980, early 1990s and another 20 in 2012/3. Hirsch is a single vineyard, but within the vineyard there's a lot of complexity. 'It's like a village in Burgundy,' says Jasmine. 'There are 40 parcels in 68 acres.' These parcels are all vinified separately. The soil complexity stems from the fact that this site is half a mile from the San Andreas fault, where the north American plate meets the Pacific plate. It leads to a mix of soil types and a detailed topography of hillsides that can lead to widely differing microclimates on the property, with a 15 F difference across the site on a single day.

A big change has recently occurred in the viticulture. Ted Lemon of Littorai persuaded David to farm Block 6 organically for him (Littorai is biodynamic). David loved the results, seeing slowed fruit maturity, raised health and lowered vigour. He is now in the process of converting all of Hirsch to biodynamics. 60% of the vineyard is now managed biodynamically, with the remaining 40% receiving compost. David says that the full conversion will take 50 years. 'He'll be 69 next week,' says Jasmine. 'He's a workaholic.' Andrew Lorand is helping with the move to biodynamics as a consultant.

What makes these wines special is the way they combine concentration with balance. There's an elegance to them, and no trace of over-ripeness. 2008 was, says Jasmine, a real wake up call. This was when Chardonnay came in at around 15% alcohol and Pinot Noir at 14.5%. Now the alcohol levels are around 13% and the wines show no sign of under-ripeness.

In 2010 new winemaker Ross Cobb joined Hirsch. Ross has his own label, Cobb, and is highly regarded. 'Finally we have a winemaker who is equal to my father,' says Jasmine, clearly delighted that her dad's viticultural skills are being matched by the work done in the winery.



THE WINES

Hirsch Vineyards San Andreas Fault Pinot Noir 2010 Sonoma Coast, California

From 30 different blocks, this is a macro expression of Hirsch. Fresh with nice structure. Lovely complex black cherry and plum fruit, showing some richness and depth but also real freshness with a savoury, mineral twist and lovely balance. Dense but not at all jammy, with good acidity. 94/100

Hirsch Vineyards san Andreas Fault Pinot Noir 2011 Sonoma Coast, California

Immediately, this seems elegant and inviting. Sweet cherry and plum fruit with a supple personality and nice freshness. Poised with silky texture to the smooth cherry fruit. Some mineral characters, too: lovely stuff. 94/100

Hirsch Vineyards West Ridge Pinot Noir 2011 Sonoma Coast, California

Supple, expressive and really elegant with lovely silky cherry fruit. Perfumed and fresh, showing great acidity and subtle green herby notes. Amazing freshness, purity and elegance. 96/100

Hirsch Vineyards East Ridge Pinot Noir 2011 Sonoma Coast, California

This is quite a rich expression of Pinot Noir, showing spicy, dense, sweet berry fruits. Supple and smooth with freshness as well as ripeness. Quite a bit of structure, too. 94/100

Hirsch Vineyards Reserve Pinot Noir 2011 Sonoma Coast, California

Powerful but still fresh with good structure alongside the sweet cherry and plum fruit. Lovely density. Supple with good concentration, retaining elegance despite the intensity. Lovely structure and weight. 96/100

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