



Winemaking in a Hostile Climate on Sonoma's Coast

By: Eric Asimov

It's the rare morning along the Sonoma County coast when you don't wake up in a fog. From the cliffs of this hamlet on the Coast Highway, you can hear the Pacific crashing on the craggy shore. You just can't see it through the mist. It's a wild, beautiful, out-of-the-way place, perfect for whale watching, collecting driftwood or beholding mesmerizing sunsets. But wine? Fine for drinking, but nobody in his right mind would plant a vineyard here.

Of course, sanity has never been a prerequisite for the wine business. Anybody who has ever struggled up the precipitous, death-defying slope of a vineyard in the Mosel or Côte-Rôtie recognizes that point right away. So it is that more and more serious grape growers have abandoned common sense to buy land and put in vineyards along the Sonoma coast, despite the fog, the incessant spring and fall rains that can destroy a crop and the isolation that requires many people to generate their own electricity...

These vineyards are not on the edge of the ocean, but two to five miles inland, on ridges high enough that the fog dissipates in time for the grapes to get morning sun. But others are even closer to the coast, close

enough to feel the sea winds and to smell the brine. Mostly they are planted with pinot noir, a grape that is finicky and difficult to grow in the best of conditions. Here, growers obtain a tiny yield at best, half of what they might hope for in a sunnier, saner region. They have also planted chardonnay, and, notably, a bit of syrah too, though the temperature is too cool for grapes like cabernet sauvignon and merlot.

Among the newcomers are small, idealistic operations like Peay Vineyards near tiny Annapolis; Failla and Fort Ross Vineyards near Cazadero, and also established names like Pahlmeyer, Peter Michael Winery, Kendall-Jackson, Joseph Phelps Vineyards and Benziger Family Winery, none of which have started selling wine made in these vineyards. They join established operations like Flowers, which has three vineyards just a little more than a mile from the ocean, and small boutique producers like Williams Selyem, Marcassin, Kistler and Martinelli, whose wines from coastal vineyards are practically impossible to taste unless you have a coveted spot on their mailing lists or are willing to pay a few hundred dollars in a restaurant...

Aside from the legal battles, it takes a special sort of determination to hazard the coastal life. Two brothers, Nick and Andy Peay, found

exactly the sort of hilltop land they were looking for, 80 acres near Annapolis with the trees already cleared, and began planting their vineyard in 1998, before tougher regulations were enacted. The land included a drafty old house, home for Nick Peay and his wife, Vanessa Wong, who is also the winemaker. Coyote and bobcats prowl the territory, electricity can fail in a high, howling wind, and the nearest grocery store is 45 minutes from the town of Annapolis, population 75. Andy Peay, who is in charge of marketing, lives in Healdsburg, more than an hour away.

Like most of the coast grape growers, the Peays decided that it would be too difficult and expensive to construct a winery in such an isolated, rugged place. So they built theirs in an industrial park in Cloverdale, also an hour away.

“It makes for an awful lot of driving,” Andy Peay said.

Still, with 48 acres now planted, Peay Vineyards is making wines of rare intensity and precision. While still exploring the stylistic potential of the vineyard, Ms. Wong has turned out pinot noirs that combine lightness with intensity, and crisp attractive chardonnays. The Peay wines made from Rhone grapes shine, like beautifully spicy syrahs and a 2004 viognier, with aromas of minerals, honey and flowers.