

# CALIFORNIA'S NEW CRU

The forthcoming West Sonoma Coast appellation is putting the spotlight on a handful of ambitious winemakers—and their remarkable terroir. // *By Jim Clarke*



**MISTY MANOR**  
The fog-covered Pazy Vineyards,  
a leading member of  
West Sonoma Coast Vintners.

JAK WONDERY



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**NORTH OF SAN FRANCISCO**, just a few miles from the cool breezes of the Pacific Ocean, vineyards adorn the mountaintop ridges that poke through the dense fog below, the vines basking in the bright California sunshine. This is the Sonoma Coast, or, as at least some locals are accustomed to calling it, the “true,” or “west” Sonoma Coast. Local wineries think that’s a distinction worth making.

“In 2011, six wineries got together and we founded the West Sonoma Coast Vintners group,” says Andy Peay of Peay Vineyards. His 52-acre property lies in Annapolis at the northern end of the region; they were the very first to plant vineyards there. “We had a belief that the coastal part was quite different from the inland areas, and we were determined to discover more about that and see what the differences were, in both the wines and the growing regions.” In 2015 the group took that information and submitted it to the government, applying to have the West Sonoma Coast designated an AVA (American Viticultural Area), the official designation for U.S. winegrowing regions. After many delays—the Trump administration put a hold on all new

regulations, for one—approval is imminent. The resulting AVA will stretch from Annapolis down through Fort Ross-Seaview (already an AVA in its own right) and into the Occidental Freestone area.

If the word “west” seems redundant, the problem is that a Sonoma Coast AVA already exists. However, it encompasses not just the area along the coastline but also a large swathe of inland, decidedly uncoastal places, like the Russian River Valley. “It’s so misleading,” says Chantal Forthun, winemaker at Flowers Vineyard & Winery. “The Sonoma Coast appellation is so large. I think calling out the western far reaches of the appellation is incredibly important because the wines have so much more coastal identity and they’re so distinctive from the inland Sonoma Coast wines.”

In the early 1990s Joan and Walt Flowers’ experience with nurseries and two years of climate and soil studies convinced them the coastal area was right for pinot noir and chardonnay, but the wine industry looked askance at the remote location. Hirsch Vineyards had been established nearby over a decade earlier, but when Bronx-born David Hirsch bought a disused

**BLOSSOMING BUSINESS**

Chantal Forthun, winemaker at Flowers, and the winery’s tasting room, above. Facing page: Hirsch Vineyards’ coastal setting.



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WEST IS BEST  
The tasting room at  
Occidental vineyards.



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sheep ranch in 1978 he was primarily looking for a place to retreat from the day-to-day work of running his clothing company. Two years later he planted vines at the suggestion of a friend, and only in 1987 did his pioneering, entrepreneurial spirit take over and he began developing the vineyards full-time.

Around the turn of the millennium came an influx of new properties, all founded with winemaking in mind, such as Failla Wines, Peay Vineyards, and Freeman Vineyard & Winery. But large wine concerns have not invaded these mountaintop sanctuaries. "The big corporate guys want flat, no hills; they want to use large equipment," says Carroll Kemp, owner of Alma Fria and committee chairman for the AVA submission process. "Aside from a few small spots that's simply not possible on the West Sonoma Coast. So the family farmer is always going to define the

region in the long term." Pinot noir makes up about two-thirds of the region's 1,500 acres of vines, followed by chardonnay. "The reputation of the area rests on the success of those two varieties," Kemp says. Several wineries are also working with syrah.

Local conditions may demand a boutique mindset, but that wouldn't mean much if the grapes and wines themselves didn't stand out. Freeman Winery's Yu-ki vineyard in Freestone is just three miles from the coast, but founder Ken Freeman can contrast the fruit it gives them with their estate vineyard, Gloria, inland in Green Valley. "In Green Valley we hope to get three tons per acre, but we only get two tons per acre in Freestone. At harvest, fruit from the vineyard on the coast comes in almost a month later. It's more distinctive fruit, with more acidity. At Gloria we get more fruit-forward notes, a little bit more cherry, and out on the coast we get an umami, forest-floor character."

"You have a longer growing season at more moderate temperatures so you're able to develop flavors and intensity." —Catherine Kistler

COASTAL PIONEERS  
From top: Ehren Jordan  
of Failla Wines; a  
chardonnay from Freeman  
Vineyard & Winery.



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The coastal fog—and the inversion layer it creates—plays a major role in creating a cool but sunny environment for the vines. "If you're used to coming to Napa and basking in 105-degree temperatures, this is not your neighborhood," says Ehren Jordan, founder and owner of Failla Wines. He says on days when Napa temperatures exceed 100, a coastal site he's developing will be struggling to reach 75. "A smoking-hot day there is 85 degrees." The elevation and the resulting wind also minimize disease pressures, so almost all the region's vineyards practice some form of organic or biodynamic winegrowing.

The area's soils bear the impact of human and superhuman influences. "If you clear cut and bring in sheep and cattle, there's tremendous erosion," says Jasmine Hirsch, who took over winemaking responsibilities at the family property in 2019. "You're farming on shallow soils lifted up by the San Andreas fault and then shorn away by the rain. That is a big part of why the wines have so much structure." The fault is just a half mile from Hirsch and influences all the wineries on the coast; its activity has created a hodge-podge of different soils, resulting in varied, complex expressions in the wines.

That structure and the potential for complexity and balance attracted Steve Kistler of Kistler Vineyards in the 1990s. He purchased several sites and in 2011 founded Occidental Vineyards; all but one of their vineyard sources will lie in the new AVA. "You have a longer growing season at more moderate temperatures," says his daughter, Catherine Kistler, "so you're able to develop flavors and intensity and get to actual, full ripeness of the grapes at lower sugar levels while preserving natural acidity. So the wines have all of this freshness and intensity and brightness to them without distractingly high alcohol."

"The pinots have a nice structure to them," says Jose Delgado, wine director at San Francisco's Mourad restaurant. "A lot of them are pretty intense in terms of tannin" compared to other California regions, where he says pinots often show soft tannins or none whatsoever. On the nose, the wines offer a mix of fruit, savory, and floral aromas. "You get this darker fruit profile, like black cherries or black raspberries. There's also just a lot more perfume than in pinots from the valley." Other areas may develop some of that perfumed quality with age, "but never that intense perfume you get up there."

Andy Peay says it was precisely this combination that drew him to the area: "The ability to have fruit, floral, and earthy components all in the same wine." He also says the remoteness, the low yields, and the other challenges all act to keep the winemakers focused. "I think I can speak for the group by saying that they're wines that speak of place. Otherwise why go there? You have to be out there because you feel the wines are distinct and distinctly good. So anybody who's gone out there is pretty passionate about what they're doing: 'I feel like the best pinot noir and chardonnay, and syrah can be grown out here and I'm going to go do that.'"



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