

THE POUR

## On the Sonoma Coast, Fog, Wind and Exceptional Wine

At Peay Vineyards, a coastal pioneer, reflecting on the evolution of an appellation, following one's muse and seeing tastes grow more diverse.



By [Eric Asimov, The New York Times](#)

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ANNAPOLIS, Calif. — At [Peay Vineyards](#), 53 acres of vines on a ridge near this tiny town just 3.5 miles from the Pacific Ocean, the fog generally burns off by around 9 a.m. and the air begins to warm up, at least for a little while. By midday, a breeze starts to blow, ruffling the leaves of the towering redwoods and getting stronger until the fog rolls in again in the late afternoon.

This is part of the challenging viticultural life in the northern part of the [West Sonoma Coast](#), which in May became the newest official American wine appellation.

If the name sounds oxymoronic — it's not as if there's an east Sonoma coast — it's testimony to the gerrymandered nature of American Viticultural Areas, as wine appellations in the United States are formally known. The new designation was created after years of debate to distinguish the area along the coast from the vast area encompassed by the original [Sonoma Coast](#) appellation. When that appellation was established in 1987, it stretched absurdly eastward to areas so far away from the coast that the ocean had little influence on the climate.

So it was that West Sonoma Coast was established, to denote the area actually along the coast, stretching from the Pacific five to seven miles inland, north to the Mendocino County border and south to the [Petaluma Gap](#), another ocean-influenced American Viticultural Area. The new appellation includes three subregions: the area around the towns of Freestone and Occidental to the south, Fort Ross-Seaview in the center and Annapolis in

the northern reaches of the appellation near the Mendocino border Peay in 1998 planted the first substantial commercial vineyard in the Annapolis area.



From left, Nick Peay, Andy Peay and Vanessa Wong

For Peay Vineyards, the new designation comes as an acknowledgment, if not exactly vindication, that the area they pioneered 25 years ago offers distinctive qualities shown transparently in their wines, primarily complex, polished pinot noirs; savory syrahs; fresh, intense chardonnays; and smaller amounts of vibrant Rhône whites. “The wine, the quality in the glass, vindicates our gamble to grow grapes out here,” said Nick Peay, who, with his wife, Vanessa Wong, and brother, Andy Peay, are the three proprietors. “The A.V.A. just helps communicate to the wine-buying public, gets them to try the wine, gets the wine into their glass. The wine can speak for itself.”

The area along the coast is completely different from inland areas that still qualify for the greater Sonoma Coast appellation, generally cooler in the days, warmer in the nights and wetter. But even within the appellation, the conditions in the subregions vary considerably.

Fort Ross-Seaview, to the south of Annapolis, is partly defined by elevation. Vineyards must be 920 feet above sea level or more, effectively putting them above the fog line. The higher altitude means it’s generally warmer there, with earlier harvests than around Annapolis, which is lower in elevation and cooler by daytime.

Back in the mid-1990s, when the young Peay brothers — Andy is now 52 and Nick 56 — decided they wanted to plant a vineyard and make wine, they were something of an anomaly. They had grown up in a suburb of Cleveland in a wine-loving family, but Andy had no experience growing grapes or making wine. Nick, at least, had worked for a small winery that bought grapes from all over the Santa Cruz Mountains.

What’s more, neither wanted to make the sort of powerfully fruity, sometimes overripe, high-alcohol California wines that were increasingly in vogue in the late 1990s. “We were looking for a cooler place than anywhere else,” Andy Peay said.

“The theory Nick had was, if we could find a place where we didn’t struggle against the beautiful California sun, we could make wines that were fruity but had other aromatics as well.”



The Peays found the vineyard site in 1996 and began planting in 1998. Credit...Bryan Meltz for The New York Times

They decided, Andy recalled as he, Ms. Wong and I walked through the vineyard in early June, to look for ridges in the coastal mountain ranges, places where cool air could penetrate from the ocean but where they had at least a little protection from the fog. Mornings are foggy, then, after a brief window, the wind starts to blow and the fog rolls in again. The 53-acre vineyard is certified organic.

“We drove around in pickup trucks, looking for rivers and low spots and other things that might indicate fog, like lichen and moss on fence posts and trees,” Andy said. “Ferns would tell you water was trapped in soils.”

They finally found a promising site near Annapolis, an old sheep farm and apple orchard. “The old-timer had a spiral notebook and kept a daily log of temperatures and precipitation,” he said. “We saw how the temperature changed throughout the season. It had quite a high average precipitation, but it’s California so we don’t get rain in the summer.”

In 1996, they bought 280 acres 600 to 800 feet in elevation, with a weathered barn and house. Gravenstein apple trees still dot and land, as do the timbers from old sheep paddocks. “We knew we were taking a gamble,” Nick said, “but I had learned a lot about exposure to marine air and temperature changes with elevation.”

The brothers began planting the vineyard in 1998, primarily with pinot noir, which, before [the movie](#)



[“Sideways”](#) sent the popularity of pinot noir soaring in 2004, was something of a risk. They planted smaller amounts of chardonnay and syrah and tiny quantities of viognier, roussanne and marsanne. It would be a few years before they’d have enough grapes to make wine. Nick took on the role of farmer. Andy would handle marketing and sales. In 2001, in time for their first vintage, Ms. Wong, an experienced winemaker, joined the team. She has made every vintage since.

The West Sonoma Coast region has blossomed in the last 30 years, beginning in the more southern areas with Summa Vineyard and Coastlands Vineyard near Occidental and Hirsch Vineyards, Fort Ross Vineyard and Flowers Vineyards around Fort Ross. The Annapolis area followed. Vineyards in the area now include Hartford Court, Campbell Ranch, Goldrock Estate, Ridgetop Vineyard and more. Plantings have slowed, though, as environmental regulations limit the available land.

Peay’s initial wines were not in the dominant style of the time. They were intense without being heavy or fruity, and taut and refreshing with lively acidity. The aim, Andy Peay said, was to show the characteristics and potential of the vineyard in wines that were intended to go with food. That required him to sell the wines virtually by hand.

“When we started I didn’t want critics tasting our wine because our palates didn’t align,” Andy recalled. “In the 1990s, you submitted your wine to a couple of reviewers, got a 98 and unplugged your phone. That wasn’t the style we wanted to make.” Instead, he visited sommeliers in Bay Area restaurants who were then largely avoiding California wines because they were too heavy and high in alcohol to go with their menus.

Over the last 20 years, the stylistic pendulum of California winemaking has swung in Peay’s direction. Tastes are far more diverse, and the Sonoma Coast has come to be known as a source for fresh, balanced wines, though that depends as much on the intent of the producers as on what vineyards can offer.

After 20 vintages, the Annapolis area is still a challenging place to make wine. Immigration rules and the difficulty of living in the area make it hard to attract vineyard workers. The Peay winery is inland, in Cloverdale, where the 2021 vintage is aging in barrels, because it would have been too expensive to build a winery at the vineyard.



Scallop Shelf is one of Peay’s three estate pinot noir cuvées. Credit...Bryan Meltz for The New York Times

Their farming and winemaking has evolved as well. They have changed pruning methods, and have had to redo a couple of blocks that were either planted in the wrong place or with the wrong clones. “It was naïve to plant

30 acres at once with no experience,” Andy Peay said. Nick Peay hates to label his farming practices, but Peay is certified organic and follows regenerative methods. “We have come to the style of farming we practice by being aware of our responsibilities as custodians of the land, sensitive to the long term effects of farming, and desiring to pass on a natural system that will last in perpetuity,” he said.

Ms. Wong’s winemaking has gotten more precise over time. In good vintages Peay now makes several different pinot noirs, syrahs and chardonnays, a viognier and a blend of roussanne and marsanne (if these two ripen enough for a wine). In addition, they have a second label, Cep, for wines made from purchased grapes that sell for about half the price of the Peay wines.

The wines age well. A 2014 estate chardonnay was floral, mineral and mealy in a Meursault sort of style, while a 2014 Pomarium pinot noir had complex aromas of flowers, tea and red and black fruits. A 2005 La Bruma syrah was peppery and olive-flavored with tightly coiled acidity and plenty of time ahead of it. I’m not much of a fan of viognier. I often find them flamboyant and flabby, but Peay’s 2019 was fresh and lively with focused flavors of ginger and fruit.

Significant challenges remain. When they planted the vineyard, for example, they were not anticipating the effects of the climate crisis. In 2020, drifting smoke from forest fires forced the Peays to make just 500 cases of their estate pinot noir rather than the usual 2,000. A spring frost this year on May 8 killed an estimated 10 percent of the crop. The local waterway, the Wheatfield Fork, which empties into the Gualala River and used to be good for kayaking, was already dry in June.

Nobody said life working on the West Sonoma Coast was easy. The fog keeps rolling in and the wind will blow. But the wines are worth it.