

San Francisco Chronicle

SFCHRONICLE.COM | Monday, March 7, 2022 | CONTAINS RECYCLED PAPER | \$2.00 ★★★★★

Climate fuels vineyards' move to coast

By Esther Mobley

A wind-battered hillside in Bodega offers a glimpse into California wine's future.

Here, less than 5 miles from the ocean, a winery is in the process of planting Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vines on what would have been considered an unsuitable site for a vineyard only a few years ago.

The vertiginous, 100-acre property is directly exposed to the Pacific's harsh, chilly gusts, and a thick fog engulfs it every day. Within view of the hill stands the Potter Schoolhouse, which Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds" immortalized as a token of this coastline's forbidding nature.

Windy sites are unappealing, con-

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Climate drives vineyards' migration toward coast

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ventional wine-growing wisdom goes, because the breezes can knock the crop off the plants, and excessively cold temperatures can prevent the fruit from ripening fully.

But the Bodega Vineyard, as it's called, is proof that the conventional wisdom is shifting. As more of the Bay Area's established wine-growing areas see rising temperatures, extreme heat events, unusual frost patterns, serial wildfires and other erratic weather conditions, places like this far-flung stretch of the Sonoma Coast hold new appeal. That's what drew the Donum Estate, a high-end winery whose main vineyard is 40 miles southeast in Carneros, to buy this daunting property.

The planting of the Bodega Vineyard is the latest chapter in a longer, ongoing story: Slowly but surely, climate change is compelling a migration of California grapevines from inland valleys toward the ocean. The migration could accelerate, as new information, such as the recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, suggests that the consequences of a warming planet may be even more severe than was previously thought.

"For us, climate change isn't a problem as much for heat as it is for extremes," said Donum winemaker Dan Fishman. Carneros, which has been considered a prime area for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay for decades, is currently getting the worst of both worlds, he said. In the summer, temperatures exceed 100 degrees, putting the vines into heat stress. And winter lows are getting lower, sometimes dipping into the 20s. In 2020, Donum's estate got frost damage for the first time in many years, decimating an entire section of the vineyard.



Alvin A.H. Jornada / Special to The Chronicle

Winemaker Dan Fishman stands among the trellises of 2-year-old grape vines at Donum Estate's Bodega Vineyard.

Bodega is comparatively mild, Fishman said, hovering between 40 and 80 degrees year-round — a kind of Goldilocks band for viticulture. As Donum has tracked temperature data here over the last few years, it's never recorded a temperature over 90 degrees. That means the vines here won't be susceptible to catastrophic frost events in the winter, nor will they be at risk of turning to raisins during a searing summer heat spike.

Winemakers dream of these mild, even temperatures, which allow grapes to ripen slowly, taking more time to develop complex flavors. But in many places, these leisurely growing seasons are becoming rare.

The industry's coastward migration has been in progress already for a while. Once upon a time, areas of the Sonoma Coast like Freestone, Occidental and Fort Ross were considered too cold and extreme for winegrowing; now, vineyards there such as Peay, Hirsch and Ceritas are among the most highly acclaimed in California.

Within the larger Sonoma Coast area, this particular stretch of Bodega has seen a

handful of vineyards planted in the last 20 years. Adjacent to Donum's site are the De Coelo Vineyard, owned by Sonoma's Benziger Family Winery, and the Occidental Vineyard, owned by famed vintner Steve Kistler. The Bodega Vineyard itself was carved out of a larger parcel that used to be known as Platt Ranch, which Sonoma County wine geeks may recall as the onetime source of top wines from Radio-Coteau, Littorai and others. (This wine critic adored the Rieslings from Platt Ranch.)

But there had never been any grapevines on the 100 acres that Donum bought, and seemingly for good reason: It's directly exposed to the ocean and its winds. That stands in contrast to Do Coelo, Occidental Vineyard and other parts of the original Platt Ranch parcel, which are shielded by ridgelines or forests.

The stark exposure made Bodega Vineyard look undesirable, Fishman said: "People thought it was too windy." When Donum bought the property in 2017, for \$2.1 million, it had been on the market for 18 months.

It's true that the wind is risky, he acknowledged. The average wind speed at Donum's Carneros estate is about 5 mph, whereas the Bodega Vineyard's average is around 10, topping 20 mph weekly, and exceeding 40 mph occasionally. For the first half of every year, while the grapevines are still forming the delicate flowers that will become grapes, those winds will always be a threat.

"For our current climate, I think this is really the edge of what's possible" for wine grapes, he said.

But once the fruit has formed, Fishman continued, "the wind becomes your friend." For one thing, it can lead to thicker grape skins, which boost a wine's tannins, giving it more color and texture. The airflow also prevents mildew from forming on the grapes, which makes it easier to farm organically without using fungicides.

The Bodega Vineyard hasn't yielded any fruit yet — establishing a vineyard from fallow land takes several years — but Fishman can already sense the character of the wines that will come from the 19 acres of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay he's planted. He expects the Pinot from the top of the hill — the windiest, most exposed face of the property — to be intensely flavorful, with dark-fruit flavors like blackberry and currant, yet to feel light in weight.

But the wine's probable deliciousness won't be its only advantage for Donum, which owns three other vineyards — two in Carneros and one in Russian River Valley. Buying land here is also a hedge against the destruction that wildfire and smoke taint can bring.

"The more your vineyards are spread out, the more your risk is spread out for fire and smoke," Fishman said. "If

smoke goes into Carneros, it's probably not going to blow here." Like many parts of Wine Country, Donum's other vineyards were affected by smoke during the 2020 wildfires.

It can all sound a little doomsday-ish, making such a major real estate investment in anticipation of a future in which disasters like fire, frost and heat are the norm. Certainly, not every fledgling Bay Area winery can afford to buy 100 acres near the coast, and well-funded companies like Donum may find themselves in an exceedingly privileged position as climate change's effects intensify. Since 2011, the Donum Estate has been owned by Danish fashion entrepreneur Allan Warburg and his wife, Mei Warburg.

Even if they aren't ready to abandon Wine Country's more established neighborhoods — which are still producing tasty wine, after all — it's nevertheless notable to see a winery with Donum's resources lucidly confronting the reality of California's changing viticultural landscape.

In fact, one might even say that Donum is embracing that reality. The Warburgs are serious art collectors, having installed sculptures by famous artists like Ai Weiwei and Keith Haring at their Carneros winery. One of the latest installations, "Sonic Mountain" by Doug Aitken, consists of 365 giant steel chimes that sway and sing with the wind. The idea is that it will respond to and reflect the weather.

The Donum team has a new term for the sculpture's genre, Fishman said: climate change art.

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