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PINOT
NOIR
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PINOT NOIR IS GAINING
ACREAGE—AND ACCLAIM—
IN REGIONS UP AND DOWN
THE CALIFORNIA SEABOARD

By Kim Marcus —————



Photograph by
ADAM SAVITCH

PINOT NOIR'S

groundswell across coastal California is wide and deep. And it seems far from cresting. The grape thrives amid one of the most extensive geographic spreads of any variety in the state, delivering delicious wines from Mendocino's Anderson Valley in the far north to the Sta. Rita Hills of Santa Barbara County on the south central coast. Pinot's ascendancy in the Golden State is reflective of its remarkable adaptability to a diversity of sites and its ability to express the characteristics of those sites as vintners have honed their skills in cultivating the grape.

Pinot Noir's triumph is as breathtaking as the beauty of the coastal regions it favors, and two of the many vineyards I have visited recently illustrate the emerging quality at the frontiers of grapegrowing, not to mention the perseverance of the producers exploring these regions.

One of the most dramatic settings for a vineyard in all of California is Sea View Ridge, owned by Flowers winery. This site lies only 2 miles from the cool waters of the Pacific Ocean in northern Sonoma County, yet grapes are able to flourish because Sea View Ridge sits above the reach of coastal fog for most of the day during the growing season, allowing the strong summer sun to ripen the fruit to maturity.

Sea View Ridge is truly at the edge of the continent, with the San Andreas Fault close by. The vineyard was established in 1996,

and most of its 43 acres, dominated by red volcanic soils, are planted to Pinot Noir. Winemaker Chantal Forthun says the *terroir* here produces wines with a lighter fruit profile and more restrained tannins in comparison to the bolder and riper styles that have been the hallmark of the state's Pinots from farther inland. "What's neat about these wines is that they offer strawberry, raspberry and rhubarb rather than plum and dark cherry," she notes.

I found those flavors and more in the Flowers Sea View Ridge 2016 (93 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale, \$75), a pure and powerfully juicy red, with plenty of toast and mineral accents. Forthun's wines, like those of many other producers that make bottlings from the immediate coast (such as Hirsch, Raen and Failla), fall at the mid- to low end of the alcohol content range, from about 12% to 13.5%. It's a trend that has become more pronounced as

grapegrowing has moved closer to the coast, where cooler temperatures result in lithe, precise wines.

More than 300 miles to the south, winemaker Kathleen Gaffney at Spear Winery in the Sta. Rita Hills is pursuing her own *terroir*-driven model. She uses all neutral oak to make the wine from the estate vineyard's 33 acres. "The reasoning behind using neutral barrels is to put the vineyard at the forefront and steer away from artificial flavors," Gaffney explains. And she's onto something in just her second vintage with the Spear Sta. Rita Hills 2017 (91, \$45), a fleshy wine with focused flavors of dried cherry and raspberry flanked by notes of crushed stone and brick.

The Spear estate is situated in the heart of the appellation on a north slope in hilly terrain that features limestone and where cool winds from the Pacific are funneled in by the east-west orientation of the terrain, unique for the Pacific coast. "The vineyard is certified organic," Gaffney says. "We're trying to present the consumer with an unadulterated presentation of the vineyard. A lot of [our] winemaking is to remove the human element." Her sentiments echo an aesthetic common among many of the state's Pinot Noir practitioners.

These wines are just two of the gems in the treasure trove that California Pinot Noir provides. Over the past year, I have tasted more than 650 Pinots, and the overall quality is very high. That more than 350 of them scored 90 points or higher attests to the breadth of California's success with Pinot Noir, even as more than 200 of those 90-plus wines came from Sonoma County, the state's heartland for the variety. (An alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted begins on page 48.)

In terms of vintages, 2016 and 2017, the two years most prominent among the current releases, offer contrasting flavor profiles. The 2016s are more balanced and powerful overall, as the weather was benign through most of the growing season and vineyards in northern districts benefited from normal rainfall after a series of drought-affected vintages. The 2017 vintage was a touch problematic, with late-spring rains slowing vine growth in May and June,

followed by a warm summer climaxing in a searing heat wave in early September. At their best, the 2017s are showy up front, but they have less aging potential than the '16s.

Leading the pack in this report are four classic-scoring wines, each at 95 points, all richly styled and all hailing from Sonoma County, pointing to its continued dominance in producing the state's greatest Pinot Noirs. They also come from winemakers and vintners with long experience honing their craft—Mark Aubert (Aubert), Matt Courtney (Ferren), Anne Moller-Racke (Donum) and Bob Cabral (Three Sticks).

All four are also single-vineyard bottlings. The Aubert Sonoma Coast UV-SL Vineyard 2017 (\$85), with concentrated dark fruit flavors that turn plush and minerally, is from a vineyard in western Sonoma just 6 miles from the coast. Ferren Sonoma Coast Frei Road Vineyard 2016 (\$75), elegant, with layers of fruit and plenty of spicy notes, comes from a site a bit farther inland owned by top Sonoma growers the Martinelli family.

Winside Vineyard in western Sonoma is the source of Donum Russian River Valley Single Vineyard Reserve 2016 (\$100), with a savory undercurrent to dark fruit flavors that are packed with Asian spice notes.



Donum contributed a classic-scoring Pinot Noir from its Winside Vineyard in Russian River Valley, north of the producer's Carneros winery, where the estate vineyards are punctuated by an extensive collection of contemporary sculpture.

And from one of the county's most famous vineyards, Durell, comes the Three Sticks Sonoma Coast Durell Vineyard 2016 (\$70), very refined, with a luscious creaminess and spicy richness.

Durell stands out in this group because its location, at the southern end of Sonoma Valley, straddling Carneros at the tip of the sprawling Sonoma Coast appellation, shows that top wines can be sourced from outside the confines of the Russian River drainage (the home of its classic-scoring peers in this report). Durell, owned by Three Sticks proprietor Bill Price since 1997, benefits from the experience of head winemaker Bob Cabral, who came to the winery from Russian River Pinot pioneer Williams Selyem in 2015.

Cabral oversees the making of nine Pinot Noirs at Three Sticks, most of which are small-production single-vineyard bottlings such as the Durell, a pattern increasingly common among California Pinot Noir houses.

"The great thing you've got is the vineyard, and we continue to explore site-specific blocks we can make wine out of," Cabral says. After fermentation using all indigenous yeasts, Cabral neither fines nor filters the wines, to better let the vineyard shine through. He also uses 20% to 25% whole clusters in fermentation to give the wines texture and depth. "We're experimenting and trying things that we think will work well with the various sites," he explains.

Other top Sonoma-based producers highlight the panoply of styles the county offers. Although exciting, the diversity is increasingly complex. My advice is to explore with an open mind and indulge in the cornucopia—if you ultimately discover a certain flavor, texture and body profile you like best, zero in on the producers who consistently deliver the goods.

The following Sonoma quartet scored 94 points. In the powerfully ripe style is the Argot Sonoma Mountain Estate Vineyard 2016 (\$75); firm and elegant is the Hirsch Sonoma Coast Block 8 2016 (\$95); Kerr Sonoma Coast 2016 (\$65) is opulent, rich and plush; and the Rochioli Russian River Valley Little Hill 2017 (\$86) offers a pure and minerally profile.

For a good introduction to what California Pinot Noir has to offer, look to regional blends from Sonoma; drawing from a number of vineyards, they have greater availability and generally lower prices. These are led by Flowers Sonoma Coast 2017 (92, \$50), Williams Selyem Sonoma Coast 2017 (92, \$55), CrossBarn Sonoma Coast 2017 (91, \$37), Rodney Strong Russian River Valley 2016 (91, \$25), The Calling Russian River Valley 2016 (91, \$37) and La Crema Sonoma Coast 2016 (90, \$25).

Beyond Sonoma, two regions impressed me over the past year with a surge in quality that bodes well for the future. These are Mendocino's Anderson Valley and the Santa Lucia Highlands of Monterey County. From Anderson Valley, three wines that stand out for finesse and fruit intensity are Goldeneye Confluence Vineyard 2016 (94, \$86), with delicate floral touches to crushed red fruit flavors; Dutton-Goldfield Valley Angel Camp Vineyard 2016 (93, \$58), suave and finely textured; and Lazy Creek Middleridge Ranch 2016 (93, \$50), lithe and elegant.

From Santa Lucia Highlands, which comprises the foothills and benchlands at the base of the rugged 5,000-foot mountain range that extends to the Big Sur coast, there were a half dozen outstanding Pinots in 2017, led by the Francioni family-owned Roar. Statewide producers such as Walt and Kosta Browne, as well as the Lucia winery of local grapegrower Gary Pisoni, also performed well in 2017.

The top-scorer from these rising star appellations is the Roar Santa Lucia Highlands Sierra Mar Vineyard 2017 (94, \$58), plush, spiced and creamy, with powerful dark and red fruit flavors. First planted in 2007, Sierra Mar is the most southerly of the Francioni

vineyards and is dominated by decomposed granite. According to winery manager Nick Francioni, the key to quality in 2017 was harvesting the bulk of their fruit before the heat hit on Labor Day, along with well-timed irrigation of the vineyards beforehand to prevent dehydration. Still, it was a push. "The low was 70° F, and the workers were in T-shirts. It was just madness," Francioni says.

In Santa Barbara County, the overall quality was second only to that of Sonoma, with more than 60 wines scoring 90 points or higher. Richard Sanford, a dean of Santa Barbara winemaking, crafted Alma Rosa's elegant and lusciously fruity Sta. Rita Hills La Encantada 2016 (93, \$62), from one of the region's top vineyards. An appellation blend worth pursuing is the Brewer-Clifton Sta. Rita Hills 2017 (92, \$40), registering on the savory side, with forest floor notes to the dried fruit and spice flavors.

From his base in the Santa Maria Valley in the northern part of Santa Barbara County, winemaker Jim Clendenen drew upon vineyards in Anderson Valley, the Russian River Valley and the Central Coast to make the refined Au Bon Climat California Isabelle 2015 (93, \$50), featuring sandalwood accents to its red fruit flavors, backed by silky tannins.

Looking ahead, the 2018s will begin arriving at the end of this year. A relatively cool and long growing season, the new vintage promises stellar quality. The crop was large, and there was no late-summer heat as in 2017, providing plenty of excellent raw material for California's Pinot Noir winemakers, at the ready to push the boundaries of quality once again.

Napa Valley bureau chief Kim Marcus is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California Pinot Noir.

Kim Marcus' Recommended California Pinot Noirs

More than 650 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at [WineSpectator.com/PinotAlpha101519](https://www.winespectator.com/PinotAlpha101519).
WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
DONUM Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Single Vineyard Reserve 2016	95	\$100
Rich and well-crafted, with a savory undercurrent to the ripe dark plum, cherry and dried blackberry flavors, packed with Asian spice notes.		

ALPHABETICAL GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA PINOT NOIR

DONUM

Pinot Noir Carneros Single Vineyard 2016	\$80	91
Pinot Noir Carneros West Slope Single Vineyard 2016	\$120	93
Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Single Vineyard 2016	\$80	93
Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Single Vineyard Reserve 2016	\$100	95