

LINDA MURPHY



Crus down the Sonoma Côte

Ross Cobb is the future of California Pinot Noir. OK, that's sensationalism, yet his Pinots from the 'true' Sonoma Coast region are head-turners and image-erasers. For those who think Californian reds are too rich, fat and alcoholic, think again (and see box below).

Cobb's six Pinot Noirs are 13.5% alcohol or lower – his streamlined Emmaline Vineyard 2006 Pinot Noir checks in at 12.8%, yet is not lacking in juicy fruit, spice or minerality – and have glorious purity of fruit. They're elegant and nuanced, with mouthwatering acidity and remarkable complexity. Put them in a blind tasting with red Burgundy, and I bet they show well, perhaps fooling a Francophile or two.

The Pinots are from the vineyards Cobb's father, David, planted near Occidental in far-western Sonoma County, 6.5km from the cooling winds and fog of the Pacific Ocean, and at 365m elevation. Yields are very low, meaning a tiny production, which will disappoint wine lovers in the way grand cru Burgundy does (the quality's there but not the quantity).

Cobb is not alone in producing a 'new' style of Californian Pinot – one that is less alcoholic, less obvious, more delicate and nuanced. Cold-climate viticulture delivers such wines.

Jamie Kutch, a young Wall Streeter who left New York before the economic collapse to produce Pinot Noir from the Sonoma Coast, makes understated wines under his Kutch Wines label. His McDougall Ranch Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir is taut, focused and superbly elegant.

Kurt Beitler, whose grandfather Charlie Wagner founded Caymus Vineyards in

Napa Valley, produces solid, ageworthy Pinots from the Stuller and Taylor Ridge vineyards, among towering redwoods in the Sonoma Coast region.

Rising star Sojourn Cellars, based in the town of Sonoma, sources Pinot Noir from the Sangiacomo family's Sonoma Coast vineyard on Roberts Road, in the Penngrrove-Cotati area. Unblocked from ocean winds and fog, this vineyard in what is known as the Petaluma Gap produces vibrant, high-acid Pinot for Sojourn, Tandem Cellars and others.

Lynmar Estate, in the heart of the Russian River Valley, goes outside its appellational border to make a structured,

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spicy Pinot Noir from Charles and Diana Karren's Terra de Promissio Vineyard in the Petaluma Gap.

Dan Goldfield of Dutton-Goldfield Winery is a wizard at cold-climate Pinot, crafting crystalline, focused wines of about 13.5% alcohol from the Dutton family's McDougall Ranch and Freestone Hill vineyards, and Mark Pasternak's Devil's Gulch Ranch in Marin County, to the south of the Petaluma Gap.

Under winemaker Theresa Heredia, Joseph Phelps' Freestone Vineyard in Freestone, on the Sonoma Coast, turns out Pinot Noirs with Californian fruitiness and Burgundian minerality. Like other

producers in this developing area, Freestone's viticulture and winemaking have been works in progress, starting in 1999, and 10 years later finding the right clones and rootstocks for the environment. Freestone's success, previously projected for the future, is now.

Those who believe that only Burgundy can make Pinot Noirs of elegance, balance and ageworthiness, and that California has no chance, are misinformed. Yet those believers cannot be faulted, because the best sites for Californian Pinot are only now being discovered, and the wines being produced from them are in small quantities, and sold largely to mailing list customers and restaurants. The world has not yet tasted them.

Yet they are here, from not only the Sonoma Coast, but also the Santa Rita Hills region of Santa Barbara County, the Anderson Valley in Mendocino County, and wind-whipped Monterey County.

'You can harvest ripe Pinot Noir grapes at 22.5 Brix [resulting in a wine with about 12% alcohol], if they're planted in the right places,' says Cobb, addressing the global complaint that Californian wines are too ripe and alcoholic. 'On a 1-to-10 ripeness scale in California, I pick at 6 or 7. Higher than that may be good for valley-floor Cabernet Sauvignon, but not Pinot Noir.'

The typical American consumer's taste for Pinot Noir may still be stalled on ripe, fruity and soft, yet an evolution is in the works. All but a few wine critics are tired of the flamboyant, potent styles of red wines, and are advocating lesser alcohols and more acidity, and embracing leafy, herbal and earthy notes which give wines their complexity.

California will never be Burgundy, and only idiots (and marketeers) say it could be. Yet there are enough Californian winemakers making Pinot in the Burgundy vein, sourcing grapes from the most marginal of climates, and embracing acidity and tannin structures that might not win favour with the masses, yet appeal to connoisseurs. Cheers to that. **D**

Linda Murphy is *Decanter's* US West Coast correspondent

WHAT LINDA'S BEEN DRINKING THIS MONTH...

MORE OF THE SAME

What else? Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir. The best Pinot I've tasted, from anywhere in the US this year, is **Ross Cobb's 2006 Diane Cobb Block, Coastlands Vineyard**. It's simply gorgeous, with a floral nose and subtle

black pepper and savoury underbrush backing the pristinely ripe red fruit on the palate. Dry and with crackling-fresh acidity, it clocks in at just 13.5% alcohol, shattering the myth that all Californian Pinot Noirs are overly alcoholic.