



Cobb Wines: Playing the 'Pinot Noir long-game'

Will the quality and complexity of California Pinot Noir ever match that of Burgundy? Matthew Luczy argues that Cobb's Pinot Noirs have an identity all of their own...

California Pinot Noir is never going to be Burgundy, and vice-versa, but there's room for both – as Burgundy prices skyrocket, markets are expanding. As the climate changes, yields are plummeting. What were once 'alternatives' to Burgundy are becoming more than just exploratory curiosities.

The history, lineage, and dominance of Burgundy is a high hurdle to clear, and ends up functioning as a roadblock for a conversation focussing on delicious wines.

And it was made abundantly clear to me that it's absolutely possible to grow, produce and enjoy Pinot Noir without any comparison to Burgundy when Ross Cobb visited Los Angeles in late 2019. He hosted a vertical tasting for a small group of sommeliers and distributor, spanning the 18-year history of this small Sonoma Coast winery. As all present at the time will attest, these wines have an identity all their own, and shouldn't be considered 'alternatives' to anything.

Ross strikes a balance that's hard to attain – wines that are soft and supple without being lazy; bright and clean without being tart. This winery is among the best in the state and has its eyes on the Pinot Noir long-game.

History

In 1989, Ross Cobb's parents, David and Diane, purchased around 8ha of western Sonoma Coast property and planted 0.6ha of Pinot Noir, set up as a clonal nursery consisting of 14 different clones sourced from UC Davis. This would grow to become the Coastlands Vineyard, and this first plot would later be known as the Diane Cobb Block.

After a few years of the Coastlands fruit being sold off to Williams Seylem Winery, Cobb Wines was founded by Ross in 2001. He was then the assistant winemaker at Flowers Vineyard & Winery, and before that he was an assistant winemaker at Williams Seylem itself.

The vineyards

The vineyards of Coastlands, Emmaline Ann, and Rice-Spivak form the winery's core production, and all fall within an unofficial subregion of the western Sonoma Coast known as Freestone-Occidental. Yields hover between 1.5- and 2-tons/acre. The coastal proximity instills a fine-grained salinity, giving these wines a soft, supple spine with a weightless, cleansing lift.

Winemaking

The goal at Cobb is to produce delicate and pretty wines that retain structure. Approximately 40% whole-cluster fermentation is used, and the wines are aged anywhere from 22-34 months in the barrel, the first year on gross lees, the second on fine lees. Around 35% of the François Frères and Remond barrels are new, and the bottled wines are held for two to four years before release.

How do they age?

I've consumed multiple bottles of Cobb's Pinots over the course of three days, and only noticed the beginning of deterioration on the fourth day. Their ability to withstand oxygen parlays into the cellar as well: the 2001 Coastlands and 2006 Emmaline Ann show no signs of slowing down, and easily have another 10-15 years ahead of them.

2017 Coastlands Vineyard
Diane Cobb Pinot Noir,
Sonoma Coast

Points 94

2017 Coastlands Vineyard
Old Firs Pinot Noir,
Sonoma Coast

Points 95

2018 Doc's Ranch
Vineyard Pommard & 114
Selection Pinot Noir,
Sonoma Coast

Points 92

2017 Doc's Ranch
Vineyard Swan & Calera
Selection Pinot Noir,
Sonoma Coast

Points 94

2017 Emmaline Ann
Vineyard Pinot Noir,
Sonoma Coast

Points 94

2017 Rice-Spivak
Vineyard Pinot Noir,
Sonoma County,
Sonoma Coast

Points 93

2018 Coastlands Vineyard
Old Firs Pinot Noir,
Sonoma Coast

Points 94

2018 Doc's Ranch
Vineyard Swan & Calera
Selection Pinot Noir,
Sonoma Coast

Points 93

2017 Doc's Ranch
Vineyard Pommard & 114
Selection Pinot Noir,
Sonoma Coast

Points 94

2018 Emmaline Ann
Vineyard Pinot Noir,
Sonoma Coast

Points 95

2018 Monticue Vineyard
Pinot Noir, Sonoma
County, Sonoma Coast

Points 93

2017 Wendling Vineyard
Pinot Noir, Anderson
Valley, Mendocino
County

Points 95