

THE OENO FILES

by Robb Report

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Welcome to The Oeno Files, our insider's guide to fine wine. Each week Robb Report's wine editors Mike DeSimone and Jeff Jenssen explore the people, trends, and bottles every oenophile should know.



The Sonoma Winemaker Quietly Crafting Some of the Region's Best Pinot Noir

In-the-know Pinot Noir lovers with an eye on Sonoma are familiar with the likes of Williams Selyem, Hirsch Vineyards, and Flowers Vineyard & Winery, but many would be surprised to learn that each has been made at some point by the same winemaker: Ross Cobb. It's equally remarkable to find out that Cobb has been quietly producing his own wine, Cobb, since 2001. Cobb specializes in Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Riesling made with grapes from his family's Coastlands vineyard in the Sonoma Coast AVA as well as others in the area.

Three miles inland from the Pacific, Coastlands is home to some of Sonoma County's oldest Pinot Noir vines, which were planted in 1989 by Ross's parents, David and Diane. The former sheep farm sits at 1,150 feet above sea level and is divided into four blocks known for low yields of powerful Pinot Noir. Within a few years the family was selling grapes to high-profiled neighbors as well as to Williams Selyem, which bottled Coastlands Pinot Noir as a single vineyard expression for many years.

After studying agroecology with a specialty in soil science at the University of Santa Cruz, Ross began work at Ferrari-Carano in 1994 and launched the first soil lab there. Four years later he was hired by Burt Williams and Ed Selyem and took on the roles of viticulturist and enologist at their eponymous Russian River Valley winery. He moved to Flowers in 2000 and began making Cobb with his parents in 2001, remaining at Flowers for another eight vintages. In 2009, Ross assumed the role of head winemaker at the newly launched Hirsch, where he worked for six years.

Meanwhile, his parents had made a name for their wines in the Bay Area by targeting the best San Francisco restaurants listed in the Zagat guide and personally making sales calls. Without a distributor, Cobb was soon sold in 120 area eateries, and shortly thereafter it launched its direct-to-consumer business, using mailers to spread the word and their home fax machine to receive orders. While lovingly crafting his own wines and those of his employers, Ross made great connections with other vineyard owners and brought grapes from a select handful of cold-climate single vineyards into the Cobb portfolio.



Ross describes his wines as being “very true to the site and providing a sense of place, similar to Burgundy.” In addition to that esteemed region, which he has been to 14 times, Ross has also visited winemaking areas in Hungary, Bulgaria, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, and all corners of France. He credits this travel

with helping him in his winemaking career, telling us, “My research and discoveries brought back from these trips allowed me to dive deep into the Coastlands soils, microclimate, and viticulture, and my winemaking in response.” He calls Pinot Noir a lens and reflection of its terroir and aims for—and achieves—“complex, earthy, and spicy” Pinot Noirs, all of which have alcohol levels of between 12.5 and 13.5 percent.

Cold soaks, partial whole cluster fermentation with native yeast, and 22 months in mostly older French barrels with a minimum of new oak yield an elegant, restrained style that is much more in line with examples from Burgundy than the over-extracted style that Sonoma can be known for. Ross attributes his time at Flowers and Hirsch with the ability to experiment with whole cluster ferments, different fermentation styles, techniques like punch downs and pump overs, and the ability to work with a variety of French oak sources and different coopers to learn what oak was best suited for his style of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. He’s also grateful to the many German winemaking interns he has mentored over the years, who introduced him to great Riesling that he now farms and makes into three vineyard-designate bottlings.

In addition to Coastlands, Cobb also owns two other Sonoma Coast sites, Abigail’s Vineyard and Doc’s Ranch, and leases and farms several other sites throughout the AVA. In addition, it sources fruit from a few vineyards a little farther north in Mendocino. The pinnacle of its portfolio is the trio of wines from its original site: Cobb Coastlands Vineyard Pinot Noir, Cobb Diane Cobb Coastlands Vineyard Pinot Noir, and Cobb Coastlands Vineyard Old Firs Block Pinot Noir. The Diane Cobb block is named for Ross’s mother, one of the vineyard and winery cofounders, who passed away in 2006, while Old Firs takes its name from the Douglas firs on the site. Ross says Coastland’s soils owe their origins to an ancient tidal pool, and that while this deep, sandy, clay loam is usually eroded, thin, and rocky, here they are rich and fertile thanks to the elevation. There is also a “marine inversion” effect, so the vineyard sees warm weather when it’s cold in the valley and cool temperatures when it’s hot inland, which aids in ripening and maintaining freshness.

Soils, elevation, climate, eight different clones of Pinot Noir, an incredible vintage, and the winemaker’s hand combined to create an outstanding trio of releases from Cobb in 2021. There are subtle differences among the three, but there is a delicious through line of bold red berries, touches of spice, earthiness, and florality, sumptuous tannins, and vivid acidity. If you were already a fan of this under-the-radar winery, we apologize for giving away your secret.