

# Pinot Noir Winemaker Who Has Worked For Famous Wine Brands Makes His Own Wines

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Coastlands Vineyard

She was a vision of strength, freedom and unassuming beauty, and the sun highlighted the warm colors in her hair as she dug through the ground to make a hole for the wide selection of 18 clones of the lesser-known Pinot Noir grape. It was a grape that made wines that didn't have the big structure and power of the more widely preferred Cabernet Sauvignon at that time. But she had no interest in following the obvious path carved out by those around her as she was an adventurer at heart. She shaped surfboards for Hobie in the 1950s, flew airplanes to spot swordfish for fishermen and was the art director for Practical Vineyard and Winery magazine for a quarter of a century. So finally, she and her husband were going to find their own way on their Sonoma Coast property in California, only three miles from the Pacific Ocean.

In 1989, the next adventure was to plant a vineyard of Pinot Noir with her marine biologist husband, far earlier than the start of the Pinot Noir trend that made the grape a craze for premium drinkers looking for a red wine with finesse and an enchanting bouquet. And so, they found the perfect sanctuary for their vines within a thicket of Bay Laurel trees where an old oak majestically held court with the numbers 1906 carved into it, most probably noting the devastating earthquake in San Francisco in 1906.

At that moment, their son Ross, who was going to college, was helping out with the vineyard work to earn some extra spending money. He dreamed of becoming a professional musician and traveled around with his band while studying agroecology at the University of Santa Cruz, focusing on soil science. He had no intention at that time of becoming a winemaker or taking over his parent's vineyards as it was a passion project that only included an acre and a half of carefully selected Pinot Noir clones that were planted on their own roots (ungrafted).

But at a certain point, life puts one at a crossroads - Ross decided to go down the path of not only working with vineyards but also learning whatever he could about winemaking. He went on to work for some of the most respected wine producers in Sonoma, which ranged from large to medium to small in size, getting experience with various styles and grape varieties. Finally, small-lot, site-specific Pinot Noir wines ended up becoming his ultimate obsession with his own label, Cobb Wines.

## Open To Endless Possibilities

When it comes to music, Ross has every conceivable type of music on vinyl and he believes he has around 8,000 records, but he lost count. And there is no order to where they are placed so he loves to grab one and let that decide what he listens to next. Some of the records represent his music tastes at different stages of his life and some are records he was given for free, sometimes a collection of music he wasn't a massive fan of, as a collector needed to move and give them away. It is very representative of Ross's open spirit and viewpoint that most things have something valuable to give as long as one can be open to it.

For a time, Ross was the same with wine, looking to learn as much as possible from a wide range of experiences. His first job was working with Ferrari-Carano in 1994 and he set up their first soil lab. It was an incredible experience for a young man to learn how to make premium wine on a large scale. Since he was looking for a wide range of experiences, he worked for Randall Grahm at the small operation of Bonny Doon Vineyard, located in Santa Cruz, two hours south of Sonoma. Randall pioneered working with Rhône grape varieties in California and experimented with unknown grapes and methods of production. And so, Ross couldn't have picked two places that were more opposite regarding the wealth of knowledge and experience gained.

Eventually, he gained experience with small, well-respected Pinot Noir winemakers along the Sonoma Coast, starting with Williams Selyem, becoming the viticulturist and enologist. He then became associate winemaker at Flowers Winery, working under the brilliant Hugh Chappelle until Ross took over as head winemaker. He then helped launch Hirsch Vineyards' own label as he had built a relationship with the owner, David Hirsch. He was the head winemaker there until his daughter Jasmine Hirsch took over.



Budbreak at Doc's Vineyard which is next to Cobbs' Coastland Vineyard

While Ross was making his way through the wine business, his parents started selling that special block of Pinot Noir grapes to Burt Williams, one of the founders of Williams Selyem, which was first planted in 1989. When Burt came out to taste the different Pinot Noir clones that were located in their tiny vineyard with Ross's parents, they decided that a clone called Jackson 16, which is believed to have been discovered in California back in the late 1800s, tasted the best to their palates so the Cobbs expanded their vineyard with more plantings of Jackson 16. They continued to plant another 12 and a half acres down the hill on their property, a total of 14 acres, and became a source for premium Sonoma Pinot Noir wine producers.

Remarkably, the original vines planted in 1989, which are on their own roots, have not had to be irrigated for around 25 years.

## Laser Focus

Ross still loves a wide variety of music and is pulled towards whatever moves him but when it comes to wine, he has become quite laser-focused. For years, while working his day job at another winery, he made minuscule batches of wine from his family's property. Once he could give up his day job to focus on making his own wines under his family name, he finally could go deep into truly knowing the multitude of facets of each tiny plot of their vineyards. Along the way, he became quite enamored with the sense of place that top, small Burgundy wine producers could express in their wines. So, no matter how tight money was, he would jump on a plane with a backpack and visit producers, bringing a wide array of great California Pinot Noir wines. He was welcomed to many a wine producer's home and they were fascinated to learn from him but he felt he was lucky to take in everything they had shared from centuries of generational knowledge.

He returned to Burgundy 14 times, even when other wine producers were telling him to go somewhere else, he just became enraptured with the Burgundian wines and the ability to capture the essence of a tiny section of a vineyard. He wanted to achieve that high degree of expression of place from his family vineyards, knowing that Pinot Noir was the ideal vessel as it has an affinity for terroir expression, and eventually expanded that mission by sourcing from other vineyard sites.

## The Imprint of Courage

Ross's family vineyards are named Coastlands Vineyard but he makes a special bottling, sourcing grapes only from his mother's original plantings. He has been doing experiments with their favorite Pinot Noir clone, Jackson 16, and not only had his parents, as well as the late great Burt Williams, loved the aromatic and flavor profile that this grape gives to wine but it also seems that it might be resistant to a pest called phylloxera. Over a century ago, this pest devastated the vineyards of Europe and can cause havoc anywhere that has European grape vines, such as Pinot Noir, in the ground. The only precaution that seems to be almost 100% effective against this pest is grafting the European vines onto American rootstock, so that is why the Cobbs' first vineyard planted its Pinot Noir on its own roots is unique.

Ross says that they go to great lengths to ensure that phylloxera doesn't infest their soil, and it helps that their vineyard is pretty isolated, with only two other vineyards within a two-mile radius and neither of those has the pest. But it is still something to worry about so if the Jackson 16 clone is resistant to phylloxera then he could plant all his vineyards with own-rooted vines. He says that maybe his daughter, who is currently 15 years old, may want to take on that project and come up with one of the most significant wine discoveries of the century.

At the time, when Ross saw his mother being the fierce, adventurous woman she was, planting those vines with his father, he couldn't completely take in how precious a moment it was, as he was a college-aged young man who was trying to figure out who he was as an individual and grappling with the pressure of having to quickly figure out what he wanted to do with his life. But that is the reality for so many; it is only later in life when those memories slow down and linger and one sees the most poignant aspects of life with more clarity while everything else that seemed overwhelming disappears. Ross could have taken a much more secure, guaranteed path as a winemaker but he wanted to learn more, grow more and spend more time delving into unlocking the secrets to making Pinot Noir wines from his family site that brings the drinker to another level as those great Burgundy wines did for him.

Unfortunately, Ross's mother, Diane Cobb, passed away during the height of harvest in 2006. So Ross and his father decided to make that special bottling from the original block of her own-rooted vines that she had meticulously selected and planted and named it after her.

Sometimes, when the sun is shining with a warm, golden glow over the Pacific Ocean, which is not far from his mother's plot of vines, he thinks about his mother being one of the bravest people he has ever known and will ever know. Even though he was an overwhelmed young man when she was planting the vineyard, her courageous spirit imprinted on him, leading him away from the fear of taking those leaps and bringing him towards taking big chances in life. The biggest chance he took was to stop selling his mother's special block of grapes to another winery, a highly valuable plot that brought in a steady income. Instead, he started making wine from his mother's precious Pinot Noir plot himself and named it after her, to honor her for being a great example who had shaped his life away from fear so he could embrace daring challenges.



Lineup of 2021 Cobb Pinot Noir wines CATHRINE TODD

2021 Cobb, Coastlands Vineyard, Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, California: 100% Pinot Noir. Tantalizing flavors of mulberry coulis and a dusting of cinnamon with raspberry cobbler intertwined with complex notes of broken earth with an overall vibrant quality.

2021 Cobb, "Diane Cobb," Coastlands Vineyard, Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, California: 100% Pinot Noir. The aromas are simply scintillating on this beauty with an intense minerality and oyster shell notes fleshed out by deep red fruit flavors of cherry sauce balanced by higher-tone notes of cranberries with a long, expressive finish.

2021 Cobb, Doc's Ranch Vineyard "Joann's Block," Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast, California: 100% Chardonnay. A dazzling nose of golden apples, lemon curd and hint of hazelnut with crisp acidity highlighted by notes of stony minerality with a nimble body with a hint of richness. Doc's Ranch Vineyard is a neighbor and friend of Ross Cobb and this Chardonnay vineyard is named after the matriarch of the family, Joann, who loved Chardonnay wine. She was able to taste the first vintage of this Chardonnay shortly before she passed away.

2021 Cobb, Doc's Ranch Vineyard, Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, California: 100% Pinot Noir. Exuberant nose with baking spices, black raspberry scones and candied violets with a hint of a more grounding note of tree bark and a touch of fleshy fruit on the palate with an overall sprightly quality.

2021 Cobb, Doc's Ranch Vineyard – Swan & Calera Selection, Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, California: 100% Pinot Noir. A wine that precisely expresses pretty notes of lavender, fresh sage and rose oil with pristine red fruit on the delicately structured palate that expresses so much finesse.

2021 Cobb, Wendling Vineyard, Pinot Noir, Anderson Valley, California: 100% Pinot Noir. A dark, brooding nose that is very intriguing with layers of black and blue fruit layered with wild herbs and sweet tobacco leaf with a broad body and crisp acidity. This vineyard is owned by fourth-generation grower Paul Ardzrooni, who runs the vineyard management company that Ross Cobb uses for all the vineyards where he sources fruit.

