

How to Read the Label of a Sonoma Pinot *by Lettie Teague*

The second in a three-part series on Sonoma, California

THE PINOT NOIRS of Sonoma, Calif., are widely acknowledged as some of the best in the world, and as a result some regions within Sonoma have gained a further measure of fame. To be sure, a great wine should taste of a place, but are there truly discernible differences between a Pinot from the Russian River Valley and one produced in the Sonoma Coast? The answer, I learned on a recent trip to Sonoma, is yes and no.

The weather, the soil and the exposition of the vineyard—that is, its position in relation to the sun—all play a part in determining a wine's character. The name recognition of a particular site can be significant, too, when it comes to selling that wine. In the case of Sonoma vineyards that span several AVAs (American Viticultural Areas), a winemaker can choose which one, if any, he or she wants to put on the label.

Take, for example the 2016 Hartford Court Hailey's Block Pinot Noir from the Green Valley of Russian River Valley. Hartford Court winemaker Jeff Stewart chose the Green Valley appellation for the wine even though the vineyard's physical location meant he could have labeled it simply Russian River Valley, or chosen Sonoma Coast.

I asked Mr. Stewart about his labeling strategy when I met him at the Hartford Court winery. He explained that it was “the most accurate, physically and in terms of wine style.” Then he elaborated, “I think of Green Valley as being more fog influenced and therefore slightly cooler than other neighborhoods in the Russian River Valley.” A cool site will often give rise to lively acidity and juicy, bright fruit in a wine, and they did in this one—though I'd apply the same descriptors to several of the other, non-Green-Valley Hartford Court Russian River Pinots I tasted with Mr. Stewart that day.

One of the Sonoma AVAs, the Green Valley of Russian River Valley—yes, that's the complete name—occupies a southwestern part of the larger Russian River Valley AVA. The region is most often described with the word fog, just as “wind” frequently characterizes Petaluma Gap, one of the newly designated AVAs, named after an opening in the Sonoma Mountains that funnels cool air from the Pacific—though there is plenty of fog and wind in other parts of the Russian River Valley and the Sonoma Coast. The fame of the Russian River Valley AVA, created in 1983, was the reason that winemaker Scott Rich of Talisman Wine chose that place name for the label of his Pinot Noir from Gunsalus Vineyard—though it is eligible for two others. But he had no say in the case of another of his Pinots, sourced from Huckleberry's Vineyard. That wine carries the Green Valley of Russian River Valley designation on the label, he explained, because the

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vineyard's owners preferred that AVA name over the others. They could, however, change their minds, and the AVA name on the label, each year if they wanted to; Mr. Rich has actually done so with a few of his wines.

Given such geographic ambiguity, not to mention shifting marketing strategies, I posed the question repeatedly during my travels through Sonoma: Can a wine drinker predict what a Pinot Noir will taste like based on the AVA listed on its label? When I asked Karissa Kruse, president of Sonoma County Winegrowers, she acknowledged that ambiguity is a problem but noted that the smaller, more recently designated AVAs perhaps better reflect the character of a place than the really large ones like Sonoma Coast—or at least they were created with that intention in mind.

Williams Selyem winemaker Jeff Mangahas acknowledged the potential for confusion around the current AVAs. The Williams Selyem winery helped put the Russian River Valley on the map and is one of its most venerable producers along with Merry Edwards Winery, Rochioli Vineyard & Winery and Dehlinger Winery. (Most Williams Selyem Pinots are available only to the winery's mailing list, though some can be found in restaurants and in a few retail stores.) Mr. Mangahas recalled a time when the Sonoma Coast name had become popular. “People were relabeling their previously labeled Russian River Valley [wines] as Sonoma Coast, more as a marketing tool,” he said. One of the Pinot Noirs we tasted, the terrific 2016 Williams Selyem Terra de Promissio Vineyard Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast was produced from a vineyard located in Petaluma Gap, though Mr. Mangahas noted that the vineyard's owners preferred to label it Sonoma Coast. With that in mind, I wasn't surprised to find that he, like most Sonoma Pinot producers I met, believes that vineyard site matters much more than AVA name.

One much-discussed Sonoma AVA doesn't even exist officially as yet. The far western edge of the Sonoma Coast is slated to be designated the West Sonoma Coast AVA, though a specific date has not yet been set. Producers in the area like to call this place the “True Sonoma Coast.” That's how Jasmine Hirsch, general manager of Hirsch Vineyards, located there, referred to it. “Though I know I'm not supposed to,” she said when we sat down to taste some Hirsch Pinot Noirs. Among them was the remarkable 2016 Hirsch Vineyards Raschen Ridge Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast, produced from Hirsch's highest-elevation vineyards and first bottled in 2014.

Ted Lemon of Littorai Wines, just west of Sebastopol, also makes wine from Hirsch Vineyards fruit. He will be eligible for the West Sonoma Coast AVA when it becomes official, but he's not necessarily planning to use it. “We do not believe that the existing boundaries are appropriate,” he wrote in an email. “However, we are only one winery among many operating in our region, each of which has its own opinions.”

Adam Lee of Siduri Wines in Santa Rosa (which he sold to Jackson Family Wines in 2015 but still oversees) acknowledged the situation was “complicated, but Pinot Noir is complicated.” Mr. Lee helped put a number of Sonoma Pinot Noir vineyards on the map and is now a “Pinot Noir specialist” for Jackson Family Wines as well as the owner of Clarice Wine Company. Focusing on specific vineyards rather than AVA names such as Sonoma Coast or Petaluma Gap may sound daunting, but it's a sounder strategy overall, if only because vineyard names stay the same year after year.

ADVANCED PLACEMENT

Sonoma Pinot Noirs Brimming With Terroir

2016 Dehlinger Goldridge Russian River Valley Pinot Noir Winemaker Eva Dehlinger describes the Russian River Valley as a “very balanced climate.”

2016 Hartford Court Russian River Valley Pinot Noir Jeff Stewart makes a range of first-rate, single-vineyard Pinots and also this one, from a blend of several of those sources.

2016 Hirsch Vineyards Raschen Ridge Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir Produced from a cool, high-elevation vineyard of a heralded producer, this is a small production Pinot of great polish and purity.

2017 Littorai Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir Sourced from notable Sonoma Coast vineyards by discerning proprietor-winemaker Ted Lemon.

2014 Talisman Sadie's Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Winemaker Scott Rich sources Pinot from a number of cool-climate vineyards named after dogs. This one is lithe and pretty with a bright, mineral edge.