

A bounty of Pinot picks from Sonoma Coast

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Sprawling across more than half of Sonoma County, the Sonoma Coast is an unwieldy creature of convenience.

Leave aside any geographic squabbles for a moment, though, and consider something more crucial: The Sonoma Coast, or at least a portion of this omnibus appellation, is turning out some of the most exciting Pinot Noir in America.

Our latest tasting of about 40 wines reaffirmed my belief. This time, I was joined by Paul Einbund, wine director of Frances in San Francisco, and Rebecca Rapaszky, wine buyer for Vin, Vino, Wine in Palo Alto.

Given the area's potential, we were particularly tough graders. And what we found amid the occasional stylistic mishap was an impressive roster - wines that excelled in modes big and small, lean and plush.

That reaffirms my conclusions from other recent tastings, particularly those focused on what's sometimes dubbed the "true" Sonoma Coast (for being, you know, near the coast) which starts more or less in Sebastopol and moves west to the ocean's edge: This is undeniably great land for wine. It's no surprise that some of California's top talents, including our past three Winemakers of the Year, have gravitated there.

Why is it great? Perhaps because of the marginality that makes for the best wine. This undulating and complicated terrain is fully exposed to the coastal fog and rain; its soils are a dog's dinner, a chaotic work of both the San Andreas Fault and the uplift of the old marine bed. Nothing here is easy, or easily understood.

That is why extreme coastal sites - Hirsch and Flowers in Cazadero, Campbell Ranch and Peay in Annapolis - have been familiar for nearly a decade to the top tier of Pinot hounds. Farther inland toward Sebastopol, vineyards like the Suacci site in the Blucher Valley (in that overlap of the coast and Russian River Valley) are gaining similar momentum.

For our tasting, we focused on the 2009 vintage, which happened to be particularly auspicious. After the wildfires and frost of 2008, the next year brought a relatively warm spring and summer, and a quiet September. The only glitch was October rain - but that came when wise money had already pulled Pinot from the vine.

The result is a vintage where amazing flavor could be had at relatively low alcohol levels. Across the board, our tasting revealed less brute force and more nuance - partly the year, and partly an evident reinterpretation by winemakers of what ripeness means on the coast.

The layers of mineral and spice, of footloose fruit and earthy depth, are no fluke. The year 2009 should be a landmark for the coast; these wines deserve serious attention.

I'll extend that to others we didn't encounter in the panel, labels such as Failla, Freestone, Cobb and Littorai that have helped solidify the coast's reputation for sinuous, impressive Pinot. Yet the proliferation of new names in our lineup, including Von Holt and Vaughn Duffy, shows that the Sonoma Coast still has room to evolve and grow.

This coastal lot of vintners often talks more of exploration than appellation (see sfg.ly/nXMVWi). It's a savvy move, for California's wine geography is still young, and the coast's younger still. As it happens, that spirit of exploration is turning out some of the best of what California can grow.

2009 Freeman Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$44, 14.1% alcohol): Ken and Akiko Freeman and winemaker Ed Kurtzman again show their ability to finesse the fruit from around the appellation - much from the Rayhill and Sexton Road sites near Sebastopol's Bodega Highway, but from Occidental and Petaluma as well. This straight Sonoma Coast bottle again slightly edges the stylish, green-peppercorn-tinged 2009 Akiko's Cuvee (\$54, 14.2 percent) with its cool, saline edge. Aromas of damp forest (think redwoods after a rain), bright raspberry and duskier bayberry flavors make for a finessed, layered package.

2009 MacPhail Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$39, 14.3%): James MacPhail, who sold his label to the Hess Collection in July, is resilient after sitting out the tough 2008 vintage. This appellation bottle from four sites is fashionably dark

and earth driven, redolent with soy. But there's vivacious fruit - lots of wild strawberry. If you're targeting a bigger style, this is how it's done.

2009 Francis Ford Coppola Director's Cut Sonoma Coast Pinot

Noir (\$21, 13.5%): Coppola winemaker Corey Beck found a surprisingly subtle expression from divergent spots - Carneros and Russian River Valley - that highlights the versatility (and geographic muddle) of "Sonoma Coast" in an everyday bottle. The refreshing high tones sell it well: cranberry, chalky stone and a zesty, minty edge.

2009 Zepaltas Suacci Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$45, 13.4%):

Ryan Zepaltas has found extraordinary depth in a Sebastopol vineyard he knows well (he makes wine for the Suacci family). A clear spicy note from the use of grape stems, and packed with classic pine needle, truffle and dark earth to accent fresh black cherry. Far more structured than it first seems. His affordable, sandalwood-accented Sonoma Coast bottle (\$29, 13.9 percent), which mixes Suacci and La Cruz vineyard fruit, is nearly as good.

2009 Vaughn Duffy Suacci Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$39,

13.2%): Matt Duffy found an edgy, impressive approach for his inaugural vintage from the stellar Suacci site. Refreshing, moss tinged and foresty, with dark mineral and appealing fruit - raspberry, bayberry, vibrant orange peel. A touch of whole-cluster spice adds a final, complex touch.

2009 Von Holt Suacci Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$42, 13.3%):

This new label is run by Chris Von Holt, previously a Secret Service agent detailed to four presidents, and made by John Fones, who works with Ed Kurtzman (Freeman, August West). A winning start: An oak accent leads to leathery berry fruit, cassis, celery seed and a curious pine-mushroom note. Give it a year to mellow.

2009 Hirsch Vineyards San Andreas Fault Sonoma Coast Pinot

Noir (\$45, 13.7%): 2009 marks a new style for Hirsch, as winemaker Ross Cobb settles in. This effort, a tribute to the coastal ridge's defining geology, is still shifting a bit; give it a year in bottle. A puzzling Scotch whiskey note evolved into loamy, soy-tinged aromas. It's fine-boned, saline and full of bayberry. The 2009 Hirsch Bohan-Dillon (\$30, 13.1 percent) is a fine second wine - almost porcelain in its structure, with white tea, cranberry, mineral and a soft coniferous presence.

2009 Lioco Hirsch Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$60, 13.5%): Beautiful but atypically light-footed for a Hirsch bottling, this shows crazy mineral tension and an ethereal side, perhaps thanks to Lioco having secured some of Hirsch's meager amount of Mount Eden and Pommard vine selections. Dramatically heady, full of savory whole-cluster spice and foresty depth, with vibrant red fruit and wild blueberry.

2009 Thomas George Estates Campbell Ranch Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$48, 14.4%): This new Healdsburg label takes a weightier, crafty approach to one of the coast's emerging star sites in Annapolis. Shows a dark side - charcoal and birch bark - and a bit of sweetness that's balanced by tangy red fruit and stoic mineral.

2009 Peay Scallop Shelf Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$54, 13.8%): Even as the Peays have expanded their Pinot roster, this bottling meant to show the more intense mineral side of their Annapolis estate is in beautiful shape in this sublime vintage. The tea, moss and perfumed berry notes have a certain delicacy this time out, and its significant structure never seems obvious. A pretty, quieter take.

2009 Kutch Falstaff Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$39, 13.1%): Jamie Kutch's move to a lighter style has paid off, though a stylish wood presence is in effect. (Age it a year.) This effort, using tiny clusters from a cold parcel of richer Goldridge soil near the western end of the Petaluma Gap, provides a deftness of flavor: robust cherry, with hints of menthol, matcha and oyster mushroom adding depth.

2009 Landmark Kanzler Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$65, 14.9%): This Kenwood property (recently sold to the owner of Fiji water) typically has more Rhone on the brain, but its foray into Pinot is a deft example of the deeply extracted style. Heady, spicy (about 20 percent of the grapes were left in whole clusters) and painted on a big canvas, with plush brandied cherry fruit, and an appealing forest-floor accent that adds intrigue.

2009 Flowers Camp Meeting Ridge Block 2 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$70, 13.5%): Flowers, now tied to the Huneeus family (Quintessa), was one of the "true" coast's pioneers, and Camp Meeting Ridge in Cazadero is one of its quintessential sites, a San Andreas jumble of schist, shale and sandstone. Here's a curious but skillful oak-focused approach (48 percent new barrels) to the light-

touch style. Any which way, the finesse of the fruit comes through: radiant cherry, tight mineral and that coastal complexity, with thyme and pine-forest accents.

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