
CALIFORNIA'S COOLEST PINOT

Sites once thought too marginal are now producing world-class Pinot, says **LINDA MURPHY**. What's more, they're at the elegant end of the spectrum



It's easy to understand how California Pinot Noir is disregarded internationally. For a start, it's not Burgundy. It's not even Oregon, where winemakers align themselves more closely to the Cote d'Or than the Golden State. California's sunny, mostly warm climate makes grape growing relatively easy. Too easy, perhaps – how can great Pinot be made without challenging conditions? Then, of course, there are some key US critics who embrace ripe, flamboyant Pinot Noirs, pursuing points over provenance. Vintners keep making them, but overseas consumers are increasingly shunning them.

Yet there are increasing numbers of producers and buyers who embrace wines made near the sea. Grapes here are grown in vineyards located close to the Pacific Ocean, or within range of its winds and rolling fog, which temper California's sunshine. Elegant, high-acid, lower-alcohol wines have been made by such pioneering California brands as Saintsbury in Carneros, Au Bon Climat and Sanford in Santa Barbara County, Calera in San

Benito County and Flowers and Hirsch on the Sonoma Coast. More opulent, ripe wines may have stolen the show in recent years, but that trend seems to be waning.

The less-is-more club is expanding in California, with sites once thought to be too cold for grape growing emerging as sources of characterful Pinot. Oregon's Willamette Valley has a latitude and climate similar to Burgundy, and makes Pinots with silky tannins, refreshing acidity and ageability. California Pinots made from the state's most marginal growing sites – the 'true' Sonoma Coast; the Petaluma Gap within the Sonoma Coast appellation; Marin County and the Santa Rita Hills in Santa Barbara County; and Anderson Valley in Mendocino County – deliver the same, expressing terroir, vintage and a finesse that California doesn't get enough credit for.

'It's about going to the most dangerous places to grow grapevines, without going over the edge,' says winemaker Greg La Follette, whose Tandem Wines brand sources fruit from, among other sites, the Sanguicombo family's vineyard in the Petaluma Gap area of the Sonoma Coast. 'We're finally planting grapes where vintage makes a difference.'

'There has been a huge acceptance of a more vineyard- and vintage-driven style,' adds Dan Goldfield, winemaker/partner at Dutton Goldfield, which makes Pinots from the Russian River Valley, Green Valley, Sonoma Coast and at Mark Pasternak's Devil's Gulch Ranch in Marin County. 'Master Sommeliers tell us they want more delicacy in Pinot than they did five years ago. Alcohol obscures detail; we're ramping down on alcohol, so we can see the vineyard character in the wines. We want to see all the differences between vineyards and vintages.'



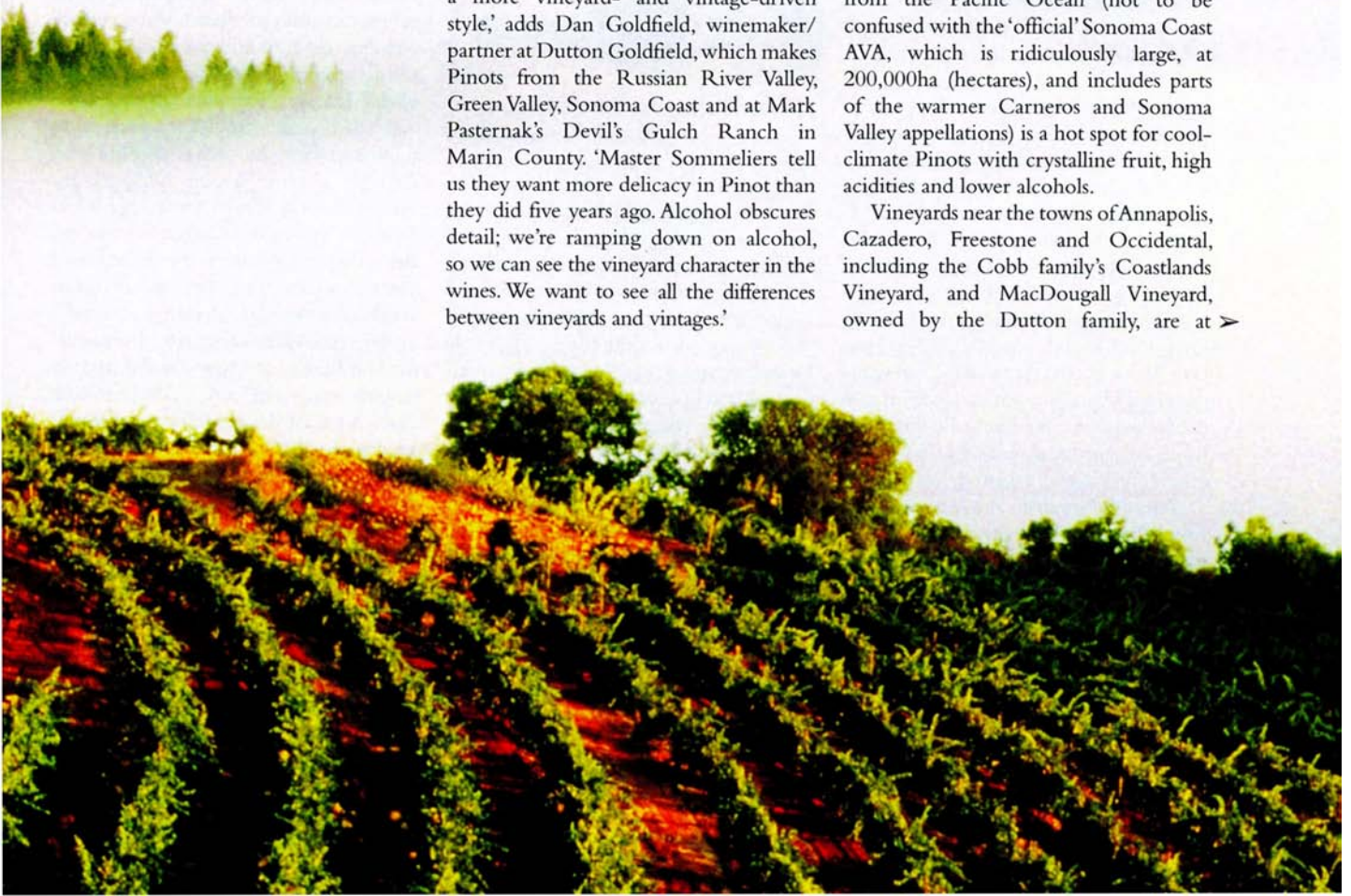
The Coast guard

The 'true' Sonoma Coast, where many vineyards cling to ridges just 3km to 8km from the Pacific Ocean (not to be confused with the 'official' Sonoma Coast AVA, which is ridiculously large, at 200,000ha (hectares), and includes parts of the warmer Carneros and Sonoma Valley appellations) is a hot spot for cool-climate Pinots with crystalline fruit, high acidities and lower alcohols.

Vineyards near the towns of Annapolis, Cazadero, Freestone and Occidental, including the Cobb family's Coastlands Vineyard, and MacDougall Vineyard, owned by the Dutton family, are at >

PHOTOGRAPH: CHARLES O'REAR/CORBIS. MAP: MAXINE HEATH

This page: rolling fog tempers the hot summer in California's cooler climate spots, yielding fresher, more elegant wines



elevations of 300m or higher – above the fog line, where they get lots of sunlight, yet without significant daytime heat. A site further inland, in the heart of the Russian River Valley, could be shrouded in fog until 11am and get as hot as 38°C by late afternoon. ‘On the true Sonoma Coast, you can harvest ripe Pinot Noir grapes at 12%abv if they’re planted in the right places,’ says Ross Cobb, winemaker for Cobb Wines, produced from his family’s Coastlands Vineyard. ‘On a 1–10 ripeness scale in California, I pick at 6 or 7. Higher than that may be good for valley floor Cabernet, but not Pinot.’

Flowers’ and Littorai’s Sonoma Coast Pinots are highly valued, as are the wines of Peay Vineyards, Joseph Phelps’ Freestone Vineyards, and Hartford Court’s Land’s Edge Vineyard Pinots, all just a salty marine whiff away from the Pacific.

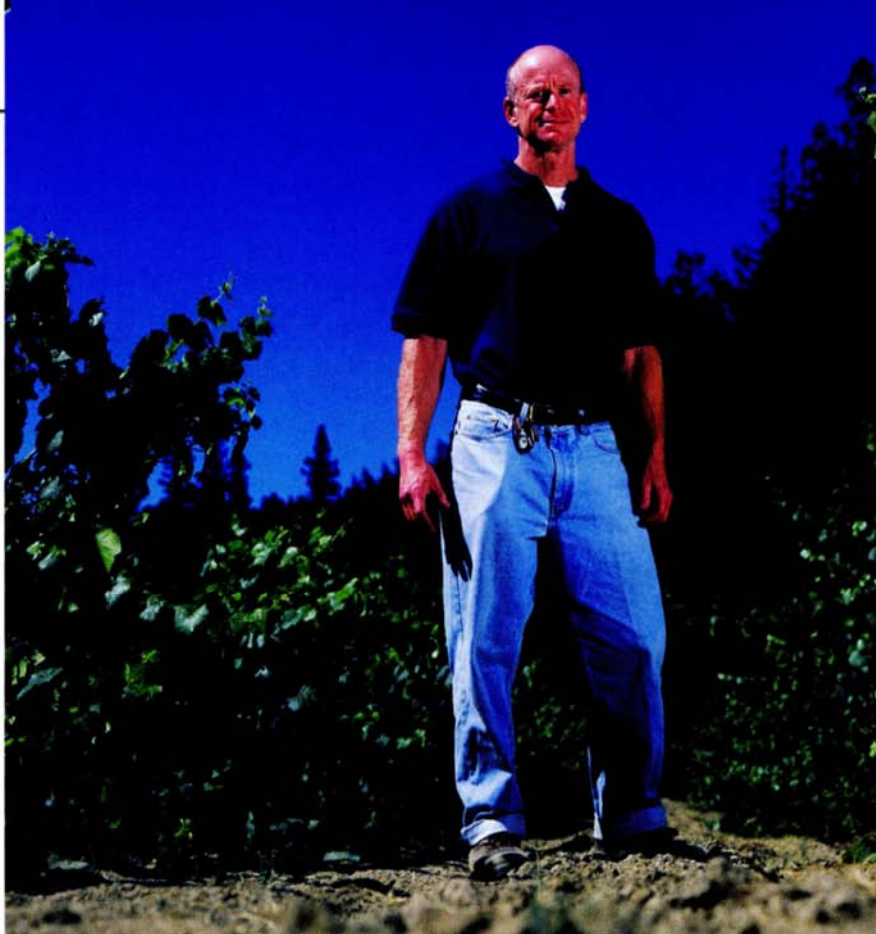
Mind the Gap

In the Petaluma Gap region of the Sonoma Coast appellation, Denis Malbec, a former Château Latour cellar master who consults in California with his wife, May-Britt, produces Pinot under the Notre Vin brand. The grapes come from Charles and Diana Karren’s Terra de Promissio Vineyard in the Gap, a west-to-east break in the coastal mountain range southeast of the Russian River Valley and northeast of Marin County, through which cool marine winds and fog blast their way across vineyards.

During the growing season at Terra de Promissio, mornings are usually shrouded in fog, which burns off around noon. By late afternoon, the cool air returns, and by nightfall, the fog envelopes the vineyard again. Daily temperature swings of 20°C and more are common, and there’s just enough sunlight to ripen small yields of tiny, intensely flavoured grapes.

‘I like the balance of temperature and light here,’ Malbec says of the Petaluma Gap. ‘It doesn’t get above 27°C, and while the wind is not my friend, I like what it does to the grapes (in drying out moisture). It’s an advantage over Burgundy, which must contend with rain and botrytis.’

Terra de Promissio also sells grapes to Kosta Browne, Lynmar and DuMOL. Azari Vineyards, Keller Estate, Pflendler Vineyards and Ridgeway Family Vineyards are also among the rising stars in the Petaluma Gap. ‘The Gap is a part of the Sonoma Coast that is just now being recognised,’ says Lynmar winemaker Hugh Chappelle. ‘It’s as exciting a region as any: the Pinots have the aromatic qualities of Carneros and the power of the true Sonoma Coast.’



Above: winemakers Hugh Chappelle of Lynmar and Greg La Follette of Tandem (right)

‘It’s about going to the most dangerous places to grow vines without going over the edge’

Greg La Follette (above right)

The Hills are alive

In the Santa Rita Hills AVA of Santa Barbara County (labelled as ‘Sta Rita Hills’, to appease Chile’s Viña Santa Rita) Richard Sanford planted the Sanford and Benedict Vineyard in 1970, the first in this western part of the county. ‘Too cold for wine grapes’, he was told. Yet today Santa Rita Hills shows Californians again pushing the limits, yielding Pinots that have a keen richness, structure and acidity. Sanford sold his winery to the Terlato Wine Group in 2005, and started anew with Alma Rosa, also in Santa Rita Hills.

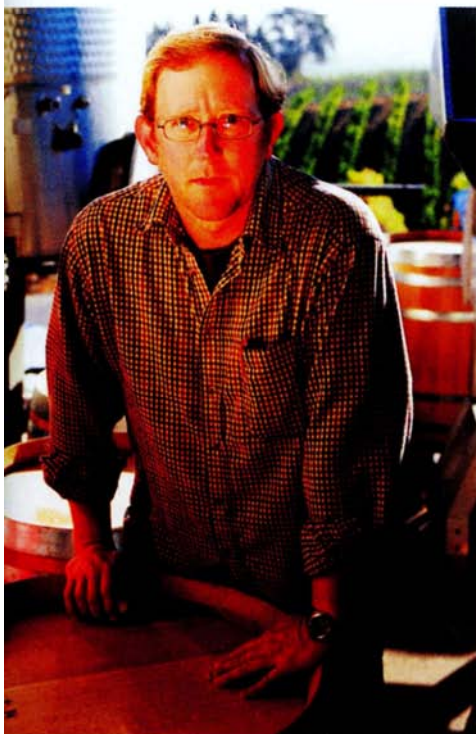
What first delighted him about the area was its east-west running valley, split by the Santa Ynez River, which channels chilly Pacific Ocean breezes and fog into the area. Most California coastal valleys run north-south, with mountain ranges blocking the marine conditions; Sanford found that the river canyon pulled fog into the otherwise warm valley, creating superb cool-climate growing conditions.

Other vintners have felt the same attraction, among them Victor Gallegos, director of winemaking for Sea Smoke Cellars, owned by Bob Davids. Sea Smoke has 40ha of vines planted, all Pinot Noir except for a bit of Chardonnay that’s grown for other producers. Vines cling to a bluff at 100m to 200m elevation, south-facing, and planted to 25 different blocks with 10 Pinot Noir clones, five soil types and four rootstocks. ‘It’s good at yield reduction, but borderline economical,’ Gallegos admits. ‘As an AVA, it’s the oddest place in North America to make Pinot Noir,’ Gallegos says. ‘It’s one of the coolest regions in southern California, yet it has the same latitude as Tunisia, with the same solar intensity and a semi-arid desert – there’s relatively no rainfall.’

The Pinots of Sea Smoke and its neighbouring producers, which include Arcadian, Clos Pepe, Gainey and Melville, tend to feature juicy black fruit, mineral and tea notes, firm natural acidity and youthful tannins that need bottle age to round out. ‘We’re not making Syrah here,’ Gallegos says, alluding to the lush, ripe, softer style of Pinot made in some other California regions. ‘We want complexity, elegance and varietal character.’

Gallegos’s neighbour Mark Tarlov is a Hollywood movie director. Tarlov formed an unusual partnership with Burgundy’s Dominique Lafon and Sashi Moorman, a young rock-star winemaker in Santa Rita Hills, to create Evening Lands Vineyards,

PHOTOGRAPH: CLAY MCCLACHLAN/CLAYPIX.COM



which produces Pinots from vines in the Eola Hills of Oregon's Willamette Valley (made by Lafon and Isabelle Meunier) and California's Sonoma Coast and Santa Rita Hills regions (made by Moorman).

The Occidental Vineyard, planted by the Dutton family for Steve Kistler of Kistler Vineyards, became available to Tarlov when Kistler didn't renew the lease. Tarlov bought it in 2005 and gave Moorman the task of making small-lot, expensive Pinots from the site; make them he has (see box, right). The Santa Rita Hills vineyard is in development.

Marginal Marin

Another film figure, *Star Wars* producer George Lucas, is seeking Pinot perfection in Marin County. Years ago, Lucas planted Chardonnay on his massive Skywalker Ranch near the town of Nicasio, west of Novato. But when Scott McLeod, director of winemaking for Lucas' pal Francis Ford Coppola's Rubicon Estate in Napa Valley, suggested that Pinot might be successful on the chilly, windy ranch, vines were planted – not as a rich man's folly, but a viable business investment.

'Here, we run out of season, and it's nearly impossible to get the grapes too ripe,' says McLeod. 'It's more like Europe (than California's traditional sites). It really dumps with rain here. Even in the summer, we average just 21°C to 27°C. There won't be any critical viticultural mass here because there are only a few areas where you get enough heat to ripen the fruit. But 20 years from now, I can't

COOL CALIFORNIA PINOTS: A DREAM DOZEN

Cobb, Coastlands Vineyard, Diane Cobb Block, Sonoma Coast 2006 ★★★★★ (18.5)
Delicate, floral and dry, with pristine red fruit, subtle pepper and underbrush. Refreshing and elegant, with unusual delicacy from California. Drink now–2018. **N/A UK; cobbwines.com**

Evening Land, Occidental Vineyard, Sonoma Coast 2006 ★★★★★ (18.5)
Fresh earth, minerals, blackberries and oak spice. The tannins are firm, the acidity bracing. The finish is extraordinarily crisp and lingering. Drink now–2017. **£125; Ten**

Flowers, Camp Meeting Ridge, Sonoma Coast 2007 ★★★★★ (18.5)
Tight and complex, with cinnamon, earthy minerals and herbs joining cherry and blackberry fruits. Ripe tannins and crisp acidity. Drink 2011–2019. **£50–£85; Fou, Han, MBW, WTR**

Freestone Vineyards, Pastorale Vineyard, Sonoma Coast 2007 ★★★★★ (18.5)
Christmas spice, earth, cola, graphite and dark red fruit. Full and deep, yet beautifully balanced and nervy. Built for the long haul. Drink now–2020. **£60; PrC**



Sojourn Cellars, Gap's Crown Vineyard, Sonoma Coast 2007 ★★★★★ (18.5)
Intense, yet precise pomegranate and cherry fruit with a soft mouthfeel cut by brisk acidity. Spice, violets and delicate herbs in the background. Drink 2011–2018. **N/A UK; sojourncellars.com**

Dutton Goldfield, McDougall Vineyard, Sonoma Coast 2007 ★★★★★ (18)
Crisp yet fleshy black cherry, cranberry and raspberry. Well oaked. Minerally, racy and great grip. Drink 2011–2018. **N/A UK; duttongoldfield.com**

Capiaux, Freestone Hill, Russian River Valley 2006 ★★★★★ (17.5)
Rich and full, with wild black raspberry, Asian spice and cola notes. Sturdy yet mature tannins and keen acidity keeps it fresh. Drink now–2016. **£22; VCL**



Dutton Goldfield, Devil's Gulch Ranch, Marin County 2007 ★★★★★ (17.5)
Dense blackcurrant, pomegranate fruit, Asian oak spice, graphite and leaves. Juicy though tightly tannic now. Drink 2011–2018. **N/A UK; duttongoldfield.com**

Goldeneye, Anderson Valley, Mendocino County 2006 ★★★★★ (17.5)
Pristine and polished, with bright dark cherry fruit, spice, earth and gentle herbal notes. Smooth tannins, pert acidity and a long finish. Drink now–2017. **£37–£50; F&R, Han, WFM, WTR**

Sea Smoke, Southing, Santa Rita Hills 2007 ★★★★★ (17.5)
Ripe cherry, floral, vanilla, truffle and pepper balanced by firm acidity and tannic structure. Closing citrus note. Drink now–2018. **N/A UK; seasmoke.com**

Sean Thackrey, Devil's Gulch Ranch Andromeda, Marin County 2007 ★★★★★ (17)
Complex, leafy, earthy aromas. Cherry, plum flavours, truffle and spice. Fresh finish. Inspires discussion. Great with roast chicken. Drink now–2016. **£57; Evy**

Hartford Court, Land's Edge Vineyard, Sonoma Coast 2006 ★★★★★ (17)
Intense, spicy wild-berry nose. Minerals, cola, dark plum, vanilla and forest floor. Tight, focused finish. Dense, chewy, fresh. Drink now–2017. **£28; Evy, Fel**

For full details of UK stockists, see p99

imagine not thinking of Marin for Pinot, Chardonnay and Riesling.'

Lucas has grape growing/winemaking neighbours, a few of whom make Pinots with finesse and focus. Among them, in this most marginal of California growing regions are the Pey-Marín Trois Filles Pinot Noir, made by Jonathan and Susan Pey (he's worked for Louis Jadot and Penfolds; she's a restaurant wine consultant) and Orogeny, a Pinot-centric brand in

Green Valley owned by Diageo, which is exploring other cool sites such as Marin.

It's an encouraging scene for Pinot lovers. 'California viticulture will only become more interesting,' says Tandem's La Follette. 'We're becoming more true to terroir expression, and coastal influence equals difference.' **D**

Linda Murphy is Decanter's US West Coast correspondent