THE EXTREMISTS OF THE EXTREME SONOMA COAST

The Fort Ross-Seaview AVA may be only three years old, but its ability to produce distinctive and thrilling wines has been recognized for far longer. **Anne Krebiehl MW** profiles the early pioneers and more recent producers who are brave enough to farm its inhospitable but rewarding coastal ridges

The instructions were clear: Drive on, even when the tarmac ends. The vineyards of the Fort Ross-Seaview AVA are really remote, made so not by geographical distance—Jenner and Healdsburg are just one and a half to two hours away—but by terrain. Fort Ross-Seaview clings to the inhospitable, crunched-up, forested coastal ridges of northern California, between Pacific Highway No.1 and Sonoma Valley, right along the San Andreas Fault. The roads winding through these ridges are dark in broad daylight, so shaded by giant redwoods and large madrone that light barely filters through. Where forests were logged, open pasture is dotted by giant valley oaks and craggy rocks. You pass more raccoons than other cars. Everywhere, the proximity of the great, cold, deep, and endless Pacific is palpable. Sea air constantly mixes with the smell of conifer. This is where the Pacific and North American Plates meet. This is where the earth moves. Ocean and shore combine in a way that both unsettles and compels. On foggy days, the forests are almost primeval. In brilliant sunshine, the views are breath-taking: of the Pacific and of small vineyards, laid out like giant picnic blankets down the sides of a slope, surrounded by Douglas fir and ranching pasture. The fruit of the vines is luminous and pristine. Pinot Noir and Chardonnay thrive. Syrah is less planted but of equal interest.

In January 2015, Fort Ross-Seaview AVA celebrated its third birthday. Of its 27,500 acres (11,128ha), just 506 acres (204ha) are planted to vines. Unusually, this AVA defines itself by altitude; it is all about elevation and topography. According to the AVA rules, vines must be planted between 920ft (280m) and 1,800ft (550m) above sea level. Linda Schwartz of Fort Ross Vineyard & Winery, who was instrumental in getting the AVA approved after an earlier attempt about ten years ago had fizzled out, explains: "What makes the Fort Ross-Seaview AVA so distinctive is its proximity to the Pacific Ocean. Its vineyards that cling to the steep coastal ridges form islands in the sky that float above the coastal fog. Our small but distinctive growing region was part of the very large Sonoma Coast AVA that runs from Santa Rosa in the south, to Carneros in the east, to Mendocino in the north, to the Pacific Ocean in the west, and encompasses many different growing regions." Indeed, the Sonoma Coast AVA, approved in 1987, covers very disparate regions across 750 square miles (1,942 sq km). Thus, the area that now constitutes Fort Ross-Seaview AVA, along with some more northerly areas,

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became known as the "True," or "Extreme," Sonoma Coast, to distinguish it from the very large, rather meaningless AVA in which it is still located and which makes a mockery of the word "coast." Both adopted terms are accurate, for it is indeed true and extreme. Likewise, it took extremists of a sort to plant vines there.

Furs, firs, and early pioneers

Fort Ross, which lends the name, was a small coastal colony and fortification established in 1812 by the Russian-American Company, which, with the help of Alaskan Alutiiq natives, hunted for sea otters on the Pacific coast. Russians had established a settlement on Kodiak Island, Alaska, in 1784 and ventured south. According to Fort Ross Historic Park, in 1790 a sea-otter skin was worth $100 in China, the equivalent of a Pennsylvania farmer's annual income at the time. The Russians' first foray to the Fort Ross area in 1809 yielded 2,000 sea-otter skins. Such bounty merited a permanent post on this land originally populated by Kashaya Pomo Indians. The area's relative inaccessibility by land was seen as an advantage. When the Russians sold the fort in 1841, few sea otters were left. Logging followed. Felled redwoods, prized for railways and construction, efficiently dispatched down coastal chutes, were transported by sea rather than by land. After the 1862 Homestead Act, the land was gradually populated by settlers trying to make a living by logging and sheep ranching.

Regina Martinelli, EVP of the Martinelli Winery in Windsor, is a direct descendant of the Dillons who owned land in the AVA area. She recalls, "The Dillons are my mother's family. They owned the Charles Ranch property and had been out there since the 1860s. The Homestead Act meant that while the government granted land, settlers had to pay taxes. But there is not a lot of grass up there, so you need a lot of land to feed sheep. Ranchers needed to sell off some land to pay taxes." The Dillon/Charles family, settlers from Pennsylvania, managed to hang on and acquire more land. The area remained sparsely populated. "My grandfather, George H Charles, was the second person to plant grapes out there after Mick Bohan in the late 1970s. It was 1980, and he planted Chardonnay," reports Martinelli. Today the Martinellis, whose main operation is in Russian River, still own land and both grow and make Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Is the area distinct enough to warrant its own AVA? "Absolutely!" exclaims Martinelli. "We've wanted this for so, so long. We've been calling it the 'True Sonoma Coast' since the early 1990s. The Sonoma Coast AVA as it stands right now is so huge and encompasses so many areas. We definitely need the AVA." The other pioneer, Mick Bohan, has handed over to his son George, who, like his father Mick, grows and sells grapes to some illustrious winemakers but makes no wine. One of his clients is Jamie Kutch of the eponymous winery. "In my experience from working with fruit from all parts of Sonoma, Fort Ross-Seaview definitely creates a distinctive and energetic wine," Kutch attests. "The powerful yet weightless wines of this small appellation are often some of the best California can offer."

By the 1970s, this remote area also attracted "back-to-the-land" hippies. Daniel Schoenfeld, who founded Wild Hog Vineyard and makes just 3,000 cases of wine a year, was one of them. He is admirably candid. "I started out as an ignorant, young man. I got this place back in 1973, when I was 23 years old. It was just raw land; there was nothing here. Roads were only open six months of the year. I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and just wanted to be out in the middle of nowhere. Over the past 40 years, my wife and I have built what you see." Their experience probably mirrored that of early settlers. Schoenfeld remembers, "By 1978 we had solar panels. We could run a couple of lightbulbs and a radio. When we got our first blender with 12 volts, we felt we were doing really well. We're still completely off the grid. Pacific Gas & Electric wanted about a million dollars to bring us electricity, and that was 40 years ago. We run the household and the winery on solar power, and if it ever rains, we've got a hydroelectric setup. We also have a generator for backup." The wooded coastal ridges, in non-drought times at least, qualify as temperate rainforest. Getting to Wild Hog Canyon involves crossing an iron sheet that bridges a gully between two dirt roads. Schoenfeld, starting as a home winemaker, planted vines in 1981 and started building the winery in 1986, earning his living with a heavy equipment business and as a professional musician. He now has 2.5 acres (1ha) each of Zinfandel and Pinot Noir. "It's not easy, but if you love what you do it's almost always worth it," he confesses. "We're very proud of our area; it's small but quite unique. Our AVA borders are drawn along the lines of the weather: It's a very extreme climate above the fog line. Often the fog sits on a ridge top, not on the vineyard. It's a little like having a refrigerator door open, blowing cold air. It's our extreme terrain. As you have noticed driving here, everybody's up on a ridge top because that's the only place you can grow. The ocean is a big part of our weather; we're only 5 miles [8km] as the crow flies from the Pacific. The recurring themes in our wines are pretty high acid and fruit with a lot of character."

Left: The Martinellis, whose ancestors on Regina's side were 19th-century settlers.
Middle: Daniel Schoenfeld's Wild Hog Vineyard, producing only 3,000 cases a year.
Right: Hirsch Vineyard, described by him as "an expression of the San Andreas Fault."

Photography courtesy of: (previous pages) Anne Krebiehl MW; (above left) Martinelli; (middle) Wild Hog Vineyard; (right) Hirsch

The Dionysian rhythm of life

Another disaffected townie was David Hirsch, founder of Hirsch Vineyards. "I was looking for a quiet place to retreat," he says, "so I thought I'd buy 1,000 acres [400ha], put a fence around it, build a house, and let everything else go to pot. This was just visceral. Even as a five- or six-year-old right in the middle of New York, I would get on my bicycle and ride to the woods. When I bought this in 1978," he recounts, "there was nothing. No house, no electricity, you had to get through five livestock gates to get here. Electricity came in 1983. We had to build 5 miles of power lines." Hirsch continued in his normal job. "I lived in Santa Cruz. I was in the women's fashion business, and because of that I went to France a lot. Along the way I developed a taste for Burgundy. I loved the culture, the food, the wine, the history. You would go to Volnay and you'd buy some wine from a guy and you'd tell him, 'I was in Givry,' and he'd say, 'What are they doing there?' It was very medieval; I thought I was in a movie. It was so innocent." But it took an outsider to tell Hirsch that his own land might be suited to grape growing. In 1980, Jim Beauregard of Beauregard Vineyards in Santa Cruz, Hirsch's friend and drinking buddy, came to visit the ranch. "He wanted to see the property, but at that time there were just sheep," says Hirsch. "We were right here, the sheep were milling around, this road was a disaster. Jim said, 'If you plant Pinot Noir here, this will be a world-famous vineyard.'" So, Hirsch planted his first 3 acres (1.2ha) of Pinot Noir the same year, with vines that Beauregard had left over from another job.

Little did Hirsch know then that wine was in his blood. "In 1985, I was still busy in the clothing business. I was in New York and saw these old aunts on my father's side of the family. They'd lived in the same place ever since I was a kid. When they asked what I was up to, I said I'd been having these fantasies about becoming a grape grower. I was 40 so said I was probably just going through this middle-age stuff. These ladies looked at me and said, 'Did anybody ever tell you that your father was a younger son and there was no position for him in the family vineyard and winery?' I was 40, and nobody had ever told me. Later on, I researched my family. My grandfather, who died before I was born, got his citizenship the first day he was eligible. We were Jewish, and the pogroms had started. I think that, when they came to the US, they just turned their back on the old country—they wanted to be Americans, so there was never any discussion. That was it: I heard that from my aunts, I got out of the clothing business, and I came up here. It was really 1990 when we started planting all of it."

Hirsch started selling grapes to the likes of Ted Lemon at Littorai and Bob Cabral at Williams Selyem, and the area gained currency. Fully aware of Burgundy's long viticultural history, Hirsch is clear: "Our focus is on learning and development. I appreciate how long it takes to become intimate with terroir. You cannot just spend money; you cannot just hire people. You have to live and work there. It's going to take a couple of hundred years. To me, it's liberating to realize you're just getting started, you're a kind of a pioneer. You don't have anything to prove. A lot of what we're doing is just sort of laying a foundation for the future. We're not an experimental station; we have to make money. But we're trying to remind ourselves not to fall in love with what we've been doing, even if it's been successful." The temple of the Odiyan Buddhist retreat is visible from Hirsch's vineyard. As the sun glistens on its golden roof, he says, "The Buddhists make blessings by launching flowers into the Pacific, believing this is where the earth dragon comes ashore. What I call the San Andreas Fault, they call the earth dragon. San Andreas really is the cause of everything that's going on here, including the weather. If you can imagine two rocks of this size moving against each other—the pressure, the heat, that energy permeates everything here; it gives the wine the tension that it has. In terms of soil, geology, and topography, you are basically looking at an expression of the San Andreas Fault. The land itself was not pushed up until a few million years ago. There is sedimentary rock and a lot of clay. We have some marine sediment, but the key factor is the structure. So, you have heavy clay, sandy loam at the other extreme, and rock—and you have all that in one acre."

Hirsch explains: "The AVA is not a solid geographical unit. All of these ridge-top vineyards have markedly different characteristics. What makes this area really exceptional is that we have relatively equitable weather during the ripening season.

The sites tend to ripen at a relatively slow pace so that all the flavor precursors have a chance to synthesize but won't burn off." Hirsch now farms biodynamically. "I think the new AVA is kind of interesting. It seems to me that the biggest obstacle we all face is what we did yesterday. It's so hard to be really alive in the moment and to figure out what to do. In many cases, what you do is what you did yesterday, but we're so conditioned, so comfortable in the routine, we don't open our eyes to new things. You have to be comfortable making mistakes. I made so many mistakes, it's hard to think of them all. All this sort of backs in to what makes great Pinot. It's the ugliness that's in it. Pinot, because it's the most beautiful, the most environmentally sensitive of all the major varieties, the most open to stimulus, it's going to have aspects that by themselves are not desirable. But when you put them into the mix, they become part of that suppleness, part of that layering that gives you that connection to the Dionysian rhythm of life, which includes death. You see what I am getting at? One of the descriptions of angels is that they're the better side of people who never had to suffer. And that is what Pinot is about. Pinot suffers. That's why these sites tend to be really fringe places, where all kinds of terrible things happen: hailstorms and fog in August. You don't grow great Pinot on the valley floor."

Walt and Joan Flowers, nursery-owning wine lovers from Pennsylvania, also came to the area in the late 1980s but did not start planting until 1991. They bought land on the Camp Meeting Ridge, so named because Russians and Native Americans met on the ridge to trade. Later, they added land on the Sea View Ridge and built a winery in 1997, realizing their dream of making their own Pinot Noir. In 2009, the estate was acquired by Huneeus Vintners to form part of their winery portfolio, which also includes Quintessa in Napa. Walking across the vineyard, estate director Greg Miller points to some vineyards that look like they were contour-planted but have in fact moved: "That's just the shifting of the land. That's the extreme nature here," Miller attests. "When you stand here in these vineyards, you see the remoteness, the purity, and precision. When people say 'Extreme' Sonoma Coast, it's for real." Miller is not sure whether the new AVA will make more sense to consumers. "When you say 'Sonoma Coast,' people can identify that." But he concedes, "There is a special quality to the wines here; you get brighter red fruit, acidity, pomegranate, structured tannin that's different." Does he think there is a certain Fort Ross style? "Well, I would say that everybody here is really holding back stylistically. I think this area really allows you to let the grapes do the talking. I know that sounds clichéd, but it's true. You reach physiological ripeness with lower sugar levels. You're getting this really bright, fresh acidity—it's driven, focused. You get structure, acidity, and the brightness of the fruit all in one package. I don't think it's a stylistic choice to be more elegant; that's just what we're getting. We're not shooting for low alcohol; that tends to be the way it goes. And that's wonderful—we like that. But you also get a story. There is a sense of adventure, of westward expansion and people who really took a risk. People took a chance, and you taste that chance, and that it paid off. To this day, it's trial and error. Perhaps we're learning things more quickly than we did previously. It's a matter of being patient."

An incredible place

Once these pioneers had proved what was possible, others, often with far deeper pockets, also moved in. Peter Kay of Peter Michael Winery says there was only one argument for buying land in the area: "quality." They bought in 1998, but "research, planning, permitting, and construction of infrastructure postponed the actual planting to 2006." Cleo Pahlmeyer, daughter of Napa's famous Jayson Pahlmeyer, now co-owns the Wayfarer Vineyard and recalls, "After establishing a very successful Napa winery in the 1980s, my father tried to buy a vineyard in Burgundy in the 1990s but failed due to French legal restrictions." The Pahlmeyer winemaker at the time was Helen Turley. (She is the reclusive owner and founder of the Marcassin vineyard—another that really put Fort Ross-Seaview on the map—and was contacted for this article but never responded.) Cleo recounts, "A property in the area came on the market, just 75 acres [30ha], and Helen brought my father to this farm called Wayfarer, where a couple grew fruit and vegetables. Helen poured some wine from her own Marcassin vineyard, and he just fell in love. He knew this was an incredible place; he could feel it. Helen said this was going to be the La Tâche of California." He purchased the property and by 2002 had planted 30 acres (12ha) of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. They first harvested Wayfarer in 2005 but blended it with Russian River fruit under the Pahlmeyer label. 2012 was the first vintage labeled as Wayfarer, released in the fall of 2014. In 2012, the vivacious Bibiana Gonzáles Rave came on board as vineyard manager and winemaker. She says, "I think we are just starting to sense what we are doing there. This is a unique site. We know that there are differences within our vineyard; there are Goldridge soils and sandy loams, but that area is really different from Annapolis, very different from Freestone, very different from Occidental. I know these areas and how different they are. Respect for AVAs may be low today, but 200 or 300 years from now it's going to be very high. It is our responsibility to show the world what the AVA is about." This is echoed by Hirsch's daughter Jasmine, who looks after the winery's marketing and sales: "Specificity in the origin of a wine is critical. It informs the drinker and teases out terroir, especially in the New World where we have so much to learn. The Sonoma Coast AVA is simply too large to be meaningful. The creation of the Fort Ross-Seaview AVA—which is very small and defines a very specific, unique area—is an acknowledgment of the diversity of geology, climate, elevation, and topography on the Sonoma Coast.

Left: One of the original Flowers vineyards, planted in the 1990s in view of the sea.
Middle: Wayfarer Vineyard, "a unique site," identified on the label from the 2012 on.
Right: Peay Vineyards in Annapolis, planted by brothers Nick and Andy Peay in 1998.

Photography (above left) by MJ Wickham, courtesy of Flowers; (middle) courtesy of Wayfarer; (right) courtesy of Peay Vineyards.

Toward the setting sun

North of Fort Ross-Seaview is Annapolis, an even cooler area, as yet without its own AVA. This is where Nick Peay and his brother Andy decided to plant vines: "I'd caught the bug, and I was going to make my own wine one day. I was going to have to find this piece of land. We were looking for open space." They scouted in Oregon and California and found the Ohlson farm near Annapolis. "We closed on it in November 1996, built a reservoir and prepped the land in 1997, and planted the first 30 acres [12ha] in 1998." Nick's wife Vanessa Wong, now winemaker at Peay, was the winemaker at Hirsch in 2002 and 2003. "We made our first Pinot for ourselves, for Peay, in 2002," says Nick, who also planted Syrah. "Nobody out here collected that fine-grained climatic data. We were hoping it was going to be Pinot-land, and it turns out it is. We also planted Syrah, because we were trying to make sure that this venture in this *terra incognita* was going to be successful." With complete agility, Nick talks clones, soils, history, and politics, and explains the movements of cold air in his Annapolis vineyards. "The elevation of the inversion layer changes with the weather, but it averages at about 1,000ft [300m]. Our vineyards are between 650ft and 825ft [200–250m], so we are always in that cold air mass. So, when you go farther south to Fort Ross, all the vineyard sites are higher. David Hirsch picks ten days before I do—that is just that many hours more in warmer air." In this even more marginal climate, the Peays are dedicated to expressing their site as clearly as possible. "We're still figuring things out over here," Nicks says. Despite being critical of AVAs in general and stating that "no AVA is perfect," he does not dismiss the idea that Annapolis, too, may get its own AVA one day.

Not all of the growers in Fort Ross-Seaview have put the new AVA on the label, believing that "Sonoma Coast" is more descriptive. Others embrace it whole-heartedly. No matter how different their stylistic approaches to winemaking may be, the Fort Ross-Seaview growers and winemakers agree that the area brings forth distinct fruit. Hovering somewhere between Winkler zones 1 and 2, these are marginal vineyards. "Pure, almost saline" is a common descriptor for both Pinot and Chardonnay. In addition to massal selections, Calera, Swan, Martini, and the Davis selections of Dijon and Pommard are mentioned again and again as clones for Pinot Noir; for Chardonnay, there is a lot of Hyde and Wente—drawing on, and nurturing, a truly Californian clonal heritage.

The wines made by Hirsch, Flowers, and Peay are so distinct, outstanding, and beautiful, they simply set a new standard for California. What we are witnessing in the creation of such smaller AVAs is California grappling with its very own viticultural wealth and identity. It's a crystallization of outstanding sites and areas. On the one hand, it's just part of a world that becomes ever more differentiated, ever more pixelated. On the other, it is the natural process of becoming intimately acquainted with a particular and, in this case, particularly striking part of the world—just as farmers have done across the globe for as long as mankind has settled, sowed, and harvested. Those who have challenged themselves to grow vines on these coastal ridges have deliberately chosen a difficult track—mostly without tarmac. They enrich California immensely. David Hirsch says it all: "There's so much energy, beauty, and challenge out here. It is very difficult to farm, but it attracts certain people. There is always western migration—just as plants have heliotropism, we have occidental tropism. Something is always calling us toward the setting sun." ■