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New West Sonoma Coast AVA to highlight 'best Pinot Noir' in USA

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With the official rubber-stamping of a new West Sonoma Coast AVA just weeks away, its vintners have been in London promoting what they describe as "California's Cote d'Or".

The new AVA currently includes 23 wineries spread over three coastal ridges to the west of Russian River, with around 1,000 collective acres primarily planted to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in elevated, cool climate sites.

The reference to Burgundy's 'golden slopes', where many of the most famous names in France are concentrated, was intended to emphasise the focus on terroir and small production shared by the producers that have been drawn to this marginal viticultural region.

"This is, in theory, where the best Pinot Noir and to a degree Chardonnay comes from in the US – and as [the vineyards] need to be at a certain height on ridges, most of the area that can be planted is planted – it's tough, with low yields, so it keeps big players out," Ken Freeman of Freeman Vineyard & Winery told Harpers at a masterclass on the wines at 67 Pall Mall in London.

The origins of the AVA trace back to 2011, when six wineries – Peay, Redcar, Freeman, Joseph Phelps, Littorai and Failla - formed a group "in response to confusion about Sonoma Coast".

They were driven by the common idea to better define a quality sub-region within that rambling AVA and "better promote" what is going on among the West Sonoma Coast wineries.

With soil studies and tastings undertaken to back up the proposed region with science, the growing group filed for a new AVA in 2015.

"Such a vast area really questions what an appellation is," said Andy Peay of Peay Vineyards, referring to the broad Sonoma Coast AVA.

"So we are trying to define what is unique about what is going on in West Sonoma Coast - we have certain things in common, cool climate, elevation up to 1,000ft, cooling morning fog, the ocean also cools, so we are cool climate maritime, which results in more balanced ripening for Pinot Noir, longer hang time and more phenolic ripeness in the skins," he added.

Freeman explained that with the AVA "technically approved", further sub-regions with West Sonoma Coast are crystallising out, with a Fort Ross/Seaview AVA already in place, and the northerly Annapolis sub-region, plus Freestone/Occidental in the south, pending official applications once the main AVA officially comes into force in around 90 days time.

With regard to the claim to hold the crown for US Pinot Noir, Freeman smiled and said: "OK, we are all marketers, but we just see that there is a tremendous amount of buyer and sommelier interest, and that they gravitate towards the wines because they love the complexity and the acidity, the elegance, that the climate and soils deliver."

The tasting showed a clear, individual imprint of site that the wines typically revealed, but also an overarching cool climate expression, with that elegance and complexity rooted in the primarily fine sandstone soils found across the West Sonoma Coast ridges.