Sonoma Discoveries

Wines from the Wild West Coast of Sonoma

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Shaped by the influences of wind, fog and cool days

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Ted Lemon, Littorai Wines

If you want to make wine on the very edge of North America, the coastal hills of Sonoma County are about as far west as you can go.

A handful of small-scale vintners are doing just that, plying their trade on the farthest edges of the continent, carving out cool-weather vineyard sites among the rugged coastal terrain, exchanging smaller yields for the kind of character and flavors that you just won’t find from winegrapes grown anywhere else.

In an effort to bring attention to their distinct growing region and winemaking styles, they have banded together as the West Sonoma Coast Vintners, establishing themselves among the world’s

premiere producers of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay wines and setting themselves apart from the vast–and often confusing–Sonoma Coast appellation.

The Sonoma County coast can be a dangerous and foreboding place, as anyone who has traveled the serpentine route along Highway 1 can attest. Jagged cliffs and impossibly steep ridges mark its boundaries. Rugged hillsides covered with thick stands of towering redwoods and other conifers are interspersed with golden grassland and ragged rock outcroppings. This is where the continent meets the sea, where the Pacific and North American tectonic plates have been grinding and churning up the Earth's crust for hundreds of millions of years, creating a chaotic mélange of rock and soil where vineyards of unique character now subsist. And subsist is what they do.

It is a landscape unlike any other, and certainly different from much of the Sonoma Coast American Viticultural Area (AVA), in which it is included. The Sonoma Coast AVA was created in 1987 and encompasses 500,000 acres, many of which are also part of six other AVAs. Critics say its expansive nature renders it meaningless as a guidepost for consumers who want to know the origins of wine they're drinking. A wine with the Sonoma Coast designation could very well have originated in the coastal area, from Freestone, Cazadero or Occidental. But it could also have come from Petaluma, Sonoma, Carneros or Chalk Hill, far-flung growing regions that share little in the way of climate, soil or history with the West Sonoma Coast.

West Sonoma Coast Vintners

For that reason, a small group of vintners banded together in 2011 to form the West Sonoma Coast Vintners (WSCV) to set themselves apart from the much broader Sonoma Coast and distinguish the West Sonoma Coast as one of the world's leading regions for cool weather Pinot Noir and Chardonnay wines.

"We got together to form an organization that can help consumers understand who we are and help define the region," said Ken Freeman, one of the founding members of the group, who owns Freeman Vineyards & Winery, with his wife, Akiko, the winemaker. He explained that when the Sonoma Coast AVA was formed it seemed to be put together with what was left over from other Sonoma County growing regions and didn't fit in an existing

appellation. “There was no rhyme or reason” that an appellation included areas 20 miles from the coast, said Freeman. Some vineyard land in the Sonoma Coast AVA abuts the Napa County line, others skirt the northern edge of San Pablo Bay.

Those who actually farm in a coastal area needed their own identity. “We all farm on or near the coast,” Freeman said of the WSCV members. “We include a lot of successful wineries and we were getting mixed signals from the market. There is a lot of confusion and we’re helping people understand who we are. We said if we create an organization, we are all going to be stronger

together than we are individually. We need to get the message out about this area and about the style of wines we're making."

Freeman describes that style as lighter, more complete and flavorful wines that are the product of being grown at higher elevations, under cooler conditions and sometimes marginal soils. These are vines – and winemakers – shaped by the coastal influences of wind, fog and cool days.

To formalize their unique growing region, the eventual plan is to establish the West Sonoma Coast appellation, but that is a lengthy and expensive process that is just getting started. "We're on a journey of discovery right now," said Freeman. "We're doing research on soil, history … we're still in the studying and fact-finding state."

The WSCV's first move was to hold a festival, "West of West," or WOW, to showcase its members' wines. The first festival was held in Sebastopol three years ago, and this year's sold-out event in August drew 1,000 visitors. It featured 40 WSCV members pouring wine and hosting dinners, lunches and seminars. Freeman said this year they took WOW on the road to New York City, where 500 members of the public paid $100 for a two-hour tasting, which also attracted 250 sommeliers. "That really speaks to the interest in our region," said Freeman.

In West Sonoma County, the ocean-influenced climate is considerably cooler than just a few miles inland and grape yields tend to be small. A typical vineyard produces one to two tons of grapes per acre. Travel inland a few miles and yields are two to three times higher. It's a harsh climate for growing winegrapes, but adversity builds character.

"There is so much interest in cool weather wines," said Freeman, "and we include some of the leading brands. These are wines that are sold at the best restaurants and are in the best cellars around the world."

Among the members of WSCV, the average vintner produces 3,000 to 5,000 cases per year, with grapes grown in vineyards at elevations that range from 400 to 2,000 feet. "These are artisan, low-yield operations," said Freeman. "There is a real sense of place and a real sense of personality in these wines. I think our organization is not just about wine, but we want to shine a light on the unique culture and history of the West County," he said.

Littorai Wines

Another founding member of the WSCV is Ted Lemon of Littorai Wines, a family-owned winery west of Sebastopol, in the rolling hills a few miles from the coastline. Lemon, who has received widespread acclaim for his Pinot Noir and Chardonnay wines, cites a number of reasons the West Sonoma Coast Vintners group was needed.

"It was ironic that you had some of the best Pinot Noir producers in California in this region … and yet there was no regional public identity," said Lemon, who learned the winemaking trade in France under the tutelage of such preeminent winemakers as Jacques Seysses, Aubert de Villaine and Jean-Marie Roumier. "This is a separate and distinct region and there are some well-known wineries who have received a lot of attention, but there was no well-known organization with a lot of attention being paid to it. We were kind of these people off growing grapes on Pluto. We were really in a parallel orbit." But Pluto is no longer a planet, and the West Sonoma Coast is no longer in a parallel orbit. The annual WOW event and a steady flow of press coverage are bringing attention to the region and its distinct characteristics.

What sets the West Sonoma Coast apart from other regions are the elements – and a recognition among its members that they are truly different. “There are a couple of things that are unique,” said Lemon. “The vast majority of these wineries are very small, family wineries. We get much higher rainfalls. There is less heat. It’s much more marginal grape growing. No one on the coast grows for volume.”

The other element of the WSCV, as Lemon describes it, “is to support the cultural environment of the West County. The goal is to preserve and protect the history and landscape and culture of the West Sonoma Coast. As a group we are very aware that we live in a landscape and culture that is not like the rest of Sonoma County … it’s important to us that we reach out to our neighbors that are family farms, and we care about the environment. Nobody in our organization is interested in turning our region into Napa Valley.”

Lemon’s personal winegrowing philosophy includes a blend of sustainable farming techniques drawn from what Littorai’s website describes as “the fertile cross currents of permaculture, agro-ecology and the agricultural philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, the father of biodynamic farming.” But none of those elements have a capital letter in front of them, nor does he care about being certified under any of those labels.

His overarching tenet comes from the traditions of the fine wines of northern Europe: “The site is primary and then it’s about the humans who farm it,” he said, sitting on a picnic bench near the crush pad, as the final load of grapes from the 2013 harvest was being sorted. “Creating wines that come from a place, that is terroir,” said Lemon, referring to the idea that the characteristics of a place, including soil, climate and locale all contribute to a vineyard’s unique qualities. “It’s the idea that there are places on Earth that are sacred. This is reflected in native traditions everywhere. And it is reflected in wine in this idea of terroir. This should be a reminder that the Earth is a special place and we should take care of it.”

A less tangible element of the West Sonoma Coast’s terroir is the wild nature of its landscapes: windswept, fog-shrouded canyons and golden hillsides glowing in the day’s final moments of sunlight. “To me that wildness is part of the terroir,” said Lemon. “Vines, unlike humans or animals, cannot get up and move. Whatever wildness it is that they are exposed is what they must become

adapted to … that is part of their terroir. That is what makes them unique living in that wild landscape."

Another unique dimension at Littorai is the way the vineyards are tended. "We try to promote an alternative vision for farming," said Lemon. "Viticulture has suffered from monoculture and it became a commitment for us to create what we call a wine farm." This involves what he calls "a modern rediscovery of biodynamic gardening," with a blending of permaculture and agro-ecology. It's a fertile blend of complex systems of sustainable farming, that could be summed up as an effort to bring nature and farming into a compatible balance that can be carried out for many generations.

Eight of the farm's 30 acres are kept in woodlands, and another 14 acres are used to grow hay and graze cows. They avoid fertilizers and use compost they make on the farm, using hay from their hayfields, cow manure and other materials. They use all natural yeasts, and practice companion planting that encourages "the overall agro-ecological health of the vineyard. It's about helping achieve a natural balance."

"It's experimental, but you can make it work," said Lemon, who doesn't preach about his way of farming, but invites visitors to explore it for themselves. And he is pragmatic about modern realities. "We are not going to give up petroleum entirely," he said. "But we're trying to do the various things that reduce the inputs that contribute to that footprint."

Freeman Vineyard & Winery

Just to the north is one of Lemon's neighbors, Freeman Vineyard & Winery. Winemaker Akiko Freeman may have a less lengthy enological resumé, but she has a genuine appreciation for the unique conditions that exist in West Sonoma County and contribute to the wines she is able to produce. "It is cool, so each berry isn't that big and each cluster is small and the juice inside has more skin contact and that creates more complexity and intensity," said Freeman, who is in her 13th year at the winery.

Hers was not a typical career path to winemaking. A native of Japan, she studied art history in the U.S. and was working in New York City at the Metropolitan Museum of Art when she met her future husband, Ken Freeman. Akiko followed Ken when his career brought him west, and she went to Stanford to receive a Master's in Italian Renaissance art history. She and Ken shared a love of good food and wine, and living in the Bay Area they spent many weekends tasting wines in Sonoma and Napa. "I was totally happy drinking someone else's wine," Akiko recalls.

Soon, they started dreaming of having their own winery.

"I always thought it was just a dream," she said. But then the dream got very real; they went on a three-year search of the West Coast from Santa Barbara to Mendocino for a small winery that could make their dream come true. "Every place we liked, we couldn't afford; and the places we could afford, we didn't like," she said. Then they chanced upon their current home: a forgotten winery property that had been neglected. "It was almost like a ghost winery," Akiko said.

But the couple set to reviving the facility, and it's a picturesque setting: a rustic, yet modern winemaking facility, with a wine cave set into a hillside, and surrounded by groves of redwoods. Specializing in Pinot Noir, Akiko said the timing of their first vintage was fortuitous. It coincided with the release of the film, "Sideways," which is widely credited with catapulting Pinot Noir into

mainstream popularity among wine drinkers. Pinot Noir consumption jumped 200 percent after the movie came out.

For the first seven years at the winery, Akiko worked closely with consulting winemaker Ed Kurtzman to craft their wines. She admits to being somewhat surprised at how good the wines were; after all, she has no chemistry background. "We thought we could make some pretty god wines, but we didn't think they would be this good. But with a good consulting winemaker and some great grapes … it turned out to be … yummy."

Even after Kurtzman turned over the reins to Akiko, he still consults and she will call him for advice when she gets nervous about how quickly or slowly a fermentation is taking place. "Pinot Noir is a finicky grape," she said. "The first thing Ed told me was 'be patient with the wine.'"

Being a quick study, she got up to speed pretty quickly and Freeman's vintages sell out regularly. "We try to make elegant wines, which are not over-ripe or over-manipulated," Akiko said. "We try not to do too much. We try to get the very best fruit and let the fruit speak."

Akiko had no formal training in enology or viticulture prior to embarking on her winemaking career, but her taste for fine Pinot Noirs was cultivated at a very early age in Tokyo. Her grandfather was a leading academic, whose work took him to London and where he developed a love for fine French wines. Akiko's father, who inherited a collection of vintage Pinot Noirs, initiated her into the world of fine wines at the age of nine. "I grew up drinking French Pinot Noirs," she said.

Many years later, she is very pleased with the circuitous route her life has taken. "I am grateful to my husband who put me in this job," said Akiko. "I didn't know I would enjoy this, but I do."

The personal connection with customers is something she appreciates, it creates the kind of bond she equates with being a loyal baseball fan (Akiko is a Red Sox fan, like her husband). "If we have a bad year, they cheer for us," she said of her customers. "And if we have a good year, they are happy along with us."

The emergence of the WSCV has been an added bonus. "Everybody in this group is doing it because they love it," said Akiko. "There is just not a bad winery in our group."

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