

The Dallas Morning News

A pinotage – from California?

In 1976, Fort Ross Vineyard owners Lester and Linda Schwartz moved to California from their native South Africa with no thought of making wine. He was an attorney. She, a musician who worked with the arts and international trade.

Twelve years later, they were looking to reclaim Lester's agrarian roots and stumbled upon property on back roads north of Jenner on California's Sonoma coast.

"U.S. 1 was closed," recalls Lester on a recent Dallas visit, "and we had to go around, above the fog." They fell in love with the ridge, built an unusual house there, and eventually decided to try grape-growing.

They figured out that pinot noir and chardonnay would thrive in their 44-acre vineyard, and they imported pinotage cuttings from South Africa, nostalgic for the popular pinot noir-cinsaut cross. The cuttings were quarantined in California for five years. The wait was worth it.

The Fort Ross 2002 Pinotage, one of only a handful produced in California, is a marvel. Deep inky purple, it gives off concentrated aromas of dark red fruit – dried strawberries, blackberries, black cherries – spiced with white pepper and infused with smoke. The fruit grows luscious, creamy and mouth-filling but not in a big-wine, jammy way. Rather, it's like dipping through layers of mousse, with dry tannins and nice acidity that roll to a chewy finish.

Wine Enthusiast calls Fort Ross "a lethal combination of terroir, clones, winemaking and, most importantly, the owners' passion." Lucky for Texas, the state is one of its first markets outside California. The pinotage is about \$34. Along with the other Fort Ross wines, it's at Mr. G's, Centennial, Pogo's, Central Market, Farpointe Cellar, and Wine Market and More.

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January 9, 2007