

James Laube Unfined

A DISCOVERY ON THE SONOMA COAST

Posted: 01:13 PM ET, February 20, 2007

Fort Ross Vineyard has found a groove. It's a relatively new brand of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir that wine lovers should pay serious attention to.

Linda and Lester Schwartz, who came to California from Cape Town, South Africa, in 1976, own the 44-acre vineyard. He is an attorney working in San Francisco and she works in arts administration and international trade. The couple resides in Piedmont, a suburb of Oakland.

In 1988, Lester discovered their property on a leisurely drive along the Sonoma Coast, north of Jenner where the Russian River empties into the Pacific Ocean. The property is located in the coolest of true Sonoma Coast sites, one ridge away from the Pacific Ocean. I'm not sure you can grow grapes any closer to the water.

In 1994, they began planting the property; Linda studied viticulture and the couple tried some long shots—Dolcetto, Nebbiolo and Zinfandel—only to discover that none of those grapes would ripen on their site. That led to grapes that excel there—Chardonnay (eight acres) and Pinot Noir (34 acres) and one that they hoped might succeed, Pinotage (two acres). Ed Kurtzman is the winemaker, and he is currently making August West's wines as well. He has also worked with Pinot at Bernardus, Chalone and Testarossa.

I tried the new wines last week, informally during a visit with Linda and in blind tastings for formal reviews. The new wines are excellent, and the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are both modestly priced. The **2003 Chardonnay** (\$32, 713 cases) is intense, vibrant, clean and structured, with lively acidity and a mix of lemon, butterscotch and green apple flavors turning rich and creamy. The **2004** (\$32, 264 cases) follows suit, with intense, vibrant, focused fruit. The **Reserve Chardonnay** (\$49, 234 cases) is a shade richer, very good, but I liked it less than the regular 2004.

Both the **2003 Pinot Noir** (\$37, 600 cases) and **Pinot Noir Symposium** (\$32, 688 cases) are rich, complex and impeccably balanced. The latter wine includes four percent Pinotage. The **2004 Sonoma Coast** (\$39, 953 cases) is fragrant and delicate, while the **Reserve Pinot** (\$49, 370 cases) offers complex earth, spice and berry flavors that are expansive and chewy.

The **2003 Pinotage** (\$32, 396 cases) is deep and flavorful and shows a touch more tannin than the Pinot Noir Symposium.

Fort Ross' lineup is impressive. The quality is terrific, the prices are more than fair and the case volume means the wines will be available, though I wouldn't wait too long. They are scheduled to be released within the next few weeks (www.fortrossvineyard.com).

Here is the link information: http://www.winespectator.com/Wine/Blogs/Blog_Detail/0,4211,937,00.html