

FORT ROSS

FORT ROSS-SEAVIEW · SONOMA COAST

~ LANDSCAPE: SOIL & CLIMATE ~

The Fort Ross vineyard, less than one mile from the Pacific Ocean, is the closest vineyard to the Pacific Ocean in California. We were told that the vineyard would be too near to the ocean, the weather too cold and the ridges too steep. These factors do add to the difficulty of farming – but the cool maritime climate and steep hillside blocks produce grapes of great vitality and intensity.

OUR VINEYARD

Fort Ross Vineyard is a necklace of 30 small mountain vineyard blocks, ranging in size from one-half to two acres. Each block has its own particular characteristics and is planted with rootstocks, varietals, and clones or field selections best suited to reveal the terroir, varietal typicity and clonal attributes.

During the growing season the vineyard is almost always in bright sunshine during the day, yet subject to the tempering influence of the fog that often hugs the coastline far below. Temperatures rarely drop below 55°F or rise above 85°F, the range in which grape vines are physiologically active. At night the ocean fog rolls up and over the vineyard only to recede back down to the ocean again with the morning sunrise, leaving the vines to do their best work in the long bright sunny days.

The yields are kept low. While most of the vineyard produces less than one to two tons per acre, on the rare occasions where weather conditions and berry set encourage higher yields, fruit is dropped to ensure concentration and full fruit flavors. Consequently, the vines have a yield and growing pattern that allows the berries to ripen slowly and evenly to complete physiological ripeness with increased varietal distinctiveness and desirable well balanced acidity

NATURAL VEGETATION & SOIL TYPES

The steep ridges of the Fort Ross Vineyard overlook the Sonoma Coast where the natural vegetation consists mostly of Redwoods, Douglas Fir, Coastal and Live Oaks, Madrone, Maples and grasslands. The vineyard is planted in 30 small blocks on about 5% of the property in those sections which were previously grasslands. The rest of the property is forested and far too steep. The predominant soils in the vineyard are the Hugo series and the Hugo Boomer Complex soils which are generally of well drained, gravelly loam. These soils are neither very deep nor nutritious, two factors that keep vine vigor in check and berry size small, both requisites for fine wine. The soils are underlain by weathered sandstone, shale and igneous rock and tend to be acidic. Before planting we added lime to raise the pH of the soil. We planted Pinot Noir in the leaner soils and Chardonnay in the richer soils. These steep slopes, ranging from 1700 to 1200 feet in elevation, contribute to keeping the vine vigor in check and the berry size small.

FARMING CHALLENGES: THE ELEMENTS

Fort Ross Vineyard is the closest vineyard to the Pacific Ocean in California and gets more rain than the Amazon Jungle. The average rainfall is 75” but can reach 125” per year. If it rains before we finish harvesting we have to abandon the grapes in our steepest blocks. The summers are dry and considered water scarce and the only source of water is our vineyard pond. To conserve the water we irrigate the vines with half gallon an hour emitters that were developed for desert farming conditions. We maintain a cover crop of native grasses between the vine rows that helps us gain access into the vineyard in the spring. Each year as the grapes begin to ripen we net each vine to protect the fruit from the flocks of birds as the vineyard is planted in a series of meadows surrounded by thick forests. Farming on the steep coastal ridges requires a great deal of skill. Wheel tractors are used in the flatter areas and crawlers on the steeper slopes and we must walk where it is not safe to use machinery. All harvesting is done by hand.