



Written by
Elaine Chukan Brown
4 Jun 2015

Fort Ross-Seaview, an AVA



See [West Sonoma Coast](#) - a guide for the other tasting articles in this series.

At the heart of the Fort Ross-Seaview appellation on the historic Bohan Ranch grows the first modern vineyard of the West Sonoma Coast. Planted in 1972, the Zinfandel still grows in the now-classic style known as [California sprawl](#), and still provides fruit for a vineyard-designated Zinfandel from Turley Wine Cellars.

'My family moved to the area in 1857', George Bohan says. 'We had a sheep ranch but the coyote population exploded. We would lose 240 lambs in four or five months. We couldn't get half the lambs on the truck to sell. So, my dad shifted to growing vines.'

Stand at the crest of Bohan-Dillon Road in the morning and you'll see the sun come up through a sea of fog below and to the east, eventually rising to light the ocean only a few miles away to

the west. The site, a mountain of uplifted seabed exposed by the San Andreas Fault, rises above the fog like the appellation.

Today Bohan grows mostly Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, but still has the Zinfandel, and a variety he calls 'that Inspector Clouseau'. When a 1.1-acre plot of Merlot on the site didn't ripen well enough he decided to graft it over to a variety he'd never heard of, Trousseau Noir, now purchased by Sandlands and Arnot-Roberts.

As early settlers such as the Bohans were willing to sell smaller parcels from their property, newer families wishing to retreat from urban life populated the region in the 1960s and 1970s.

By the early 1980s the Bohan vines had taken root. Other families also began planting vines. At the start of the decade another long-standing settler family, the Martinellis, and a more recent incomer David Hirsch, had begun to establish their now-signature vineyards.

'My father likes to remind people that the operative word in the expression New World is the adjective. We're all still figuring this out', says Jasmine daughter of David Hirsch. 'We have some of the oldest vineyards out here (see the image top right), and we're only 35 years in.'

While vineyards have continued to populate the region, the reality of mountain living has limited growth in the appellation. The area is not only remote, it's steep, as you can see from the image of Fort Ross Vineyard below.



The soils and climates of Fort Ross-Seaview

Defined as a mountain appellation in 2012, Fort Ross-Seaview sits atop the rolling crests of the tallest series of ridges in Sonoma's coastal range parallel to the Pacific Ocean. The natural undulations of the mountains leave only 555 of the AVA's 27,500 acres (11,130 ha) plantable.

Set directly beside the ocean and at an elevation of 920-1,800 ft (280-550 m), the mountains of the subzone host an unusual climatic concurrence. 'We grow vines under the influence of a maritime climate, a continental climate, and a climate of rainforest-like creek valleys that pull in the fog', Jasmine Hirsch observes.

To the east the continental land mass has a tendency to warmth. But the Pacific Ocean's Arctic current hugs the shore of California's North Coast, bringing with it cold temperatures from the north. The coastal range stands where the two powers overlap. The effect is a sort of slow breathing of wind through the area.

'In the summer, after several days of hot weather inland, it sucks in cool onshore winds from the ocean', explains Ross Cobb, who makes wine from Hirsch vineyards both for his family enterprise Cobb Wines and for Hirsch. 'Then it ebbs and we get warmer offshore winds.'

The temperature variation between onshore and offshore days can be significant. As a result, while frigid temperatures can affect the area, so can multiple days over 100 °F (37-8 °C). While Green Valley achieves the warmest (still relatively cool) overall degree days of the West Sonoma Coast, Fort Ross-Seaview reaches the highest temperatures.

The third influence, however, moderates these two others. Valleys filled with redwoods wrap the mountains of the Fort Ross-Seaview appellation. The trees are unique in that they create their own mesoclimate, maintaining a cool, consistent humidity, and moderating temperature variation. The effect is that lower-elevation vineyards that are closer to the forest tend to have less temperature variation.

Thanks to the interplay of these influences with topography, for vineyards close to the ocean, their precise aspect, their proximity to river valleys, and their elevation in general can have a significant impact on the vines.

Hirsch Vineyard proves an apt example. 'We have four different weather stations throughout the vineyard', Hirsch explains. The site spreads across two spines of a mountain ridge with the lower portions shielded from wind by a high point in the ridge to the west. The top of the vineyard stands in a continuous ocean breeze. 'We've seen as much as a 15 °F temperature difference between stations top to bottom in one day.'

Soils also have an impact on the microclimates within a vineyard. Darker soils or stones mean warmer temperatures for the vines. Thanks to the seismic activity of the San Andreas Fault that created the mountains of the West Sonoma Coast, Fort Ross-Seaview hosts the region's greatest variation in soils. Both alluvial and volcanic soils appear throughout the subzone. Bohan Ranch includes Franciscan series uplifted sandstone and mixed loam, while Hirsch ranges from bands of silty loam to incursions of eroded basalt. Throughout the region, soils are shallow and vines tend to be low in vigour.

'Where we used to grow the Merlot is full of dark stones. It's too warm for Pinot so we thought we'd try Merlot, but it didn't quite ripen', Bohan explains. Directly beside the old Merlot block are several acres of Pinot Noir planted in lighter mixed loam. This is the old Merlot block that has been grafted to Trousseau Noir, a block that shows exciting potential for experimentation in the region.

In the Old World, Trousseau thrives in both the hot temperatures of the Douro (where it is known as Bastardo) and the cooler climates of Jura, two extremes that seem to mirror the extremes of Fort Ross-Seaview's onshore-offshore winds. This map below shows the location of the AVA's vineyards.



Varieties of Fort Ross-Seaview

The mountain elevation and soil composition of Fort Ross-Seaview bring a rugged structure and a distinctly rocky and saline character to the wines made there, whatever the variety.

While Pinot Noir is the predominant variety throughout Fort Ross-Seaview, the high potential temperatures and direct sun exposure do not necessarily make it an ideal choice. More exposed and warmer sites could be better suited to less fragile grapes, including Bordeaux varieties. While Bordeaux varieties are few (and have struggled in some of the vineyards closest to the ocean), some sites that combine the warmth of hill-top exposure with protection from the ocean wind have proved to be warm enough to ripen Cabernet while maintaining enough cooling influence to make exciting wines.

Pinot Noir plantings depend on careful canopy maintenance to protect the thin-skinned variety from sunburn. But particularly warm vintages can still be challenging for the grape. Fort Ross-Seaview offers West Sonoma Coast's darkest flavours of Pinot Noir, with meaty and spice elements mixing through dark berry and mixed forest notes.

The appellation has so far hung its hat on Burgundy varieties, with Chardonnay plantings coming second to Pinot Noir. The region's Chardonnay demands as long in barrel as Pinot Noir, thanks to its pronounced structure.

Syrah is the third most planted variety of the subzone. The low-fertility soils do well at limiting the natural vigour of the Rhône grape while offering a feral, stimulating energy, and lots of earthy, meaty spice mixed with dark fruit.

Thanks to the higher dollar value of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, these two varieties dominate the appellation, but a few growers have sacrificed small sections to other varieties, including Trousseau Noir and Zinfandel.

Planted in the right location, Bordeaux varieties from Fort Ross-Seaview can be exciting, if rare. A small planting of Cabernet Sauvignon bottled by Enfield Wine Co shows the potential for a lean-bodied, complex, flavourful expression of the grape.

Some growers have experimented with Riesling but the cool humidity closer to the ocean has proved detrimental. Still, such experiments are exciting as they give us the chance to see what may eventually be possible in this very young region.

Fort Ross-Seaview is climatically unique for Sonoma County. While 2011 was a cold year for the North Coast of California, many of the 2012s from this subzone actually show more structural presence and more focused fruit expression than the 2011s. The 2013s, however, are the most exciting, with a nice balance of ageing potential shown through fruit and structure operating in harmony. Keep an eye out too for 2014s, which are showing good promise in barrel.

These 28 wines are grouped by grape variety and then ordered by descending score.

CHARDONNAY

- **Flowers, Camp Meeting Ridge Chardonnay 2012 Sonoma Coast**A lightly creamy palate, with mouth-watering acidity and a crisp mineral edge throughout. Gives a sense of concentrated yet delicate presence. (ECB)13.3% Drink 2015-2022
\$80 RRP 16
- **Flowers Chardonnay 2012 Sonoma Coast**With lots of lifted freshness, and a sense of delicacy through a reductive style – give this some air upon opening. Notes of flint, toast, and fresh citrus accents with spice throughout. Creamy mouthfeel, mouth-watering acidity, and an ultra-long finish. (ECB)13.4% Drink 2015-2028
\$95 RRP 16
- **Fort Ross Vineyard Chardonnay 2012 Fort Ross-Seaview**A sense of developed richness, a mouth-watering yet concentrated mid palate, a mountain mineral cut, and lots of length. Notes of apple blossom, almond paste, and citrus zest. (ECB)14.2% Drink 2015-2023
\$44 RRP 16
- **Hirsch Chardonnay 2012 Sonoma Coast**Spiced, saline aromatics followed by a creamy mid palate and a long finish. Notes of pear, mixed grapefruit and saffron with mineral undercurrents. A bit smudgy on the finish. Needs air upon opening. (ECB)13.5% Drink 2015-2023
\$55 RRP 16
- **Ramey Chardonnay 2012 Sonoma Coast**Fresh floral lift, with a creamy yet focused mid palate and an ultra-long, lightly creamy finish. Fresh, clean fruit, with mineral accents and delicate flavours. Will continue to evolve both in the glass and bottle. (ECB)14.5% Drink 2015-2019
\$40 RRP 16
- **Fort Ross Vineyard, Peak Chardonnay 2012 Fort Ross-Seaview**Creamy citrus with pear accents and a mineral cut. Mouth-watering acidity, clean fruit, and a bit of heat through the finish. A wine for someone that wants a richer (though not too rich) palate with both creaminess and acidity. (ECB)14.2% Drink 2015-2023
\$75 RRP 15.5
- **Martinelli, Three Sisters Vineyard, Sea Ridge Meadow Chardonnay 2011 Sonoma Coast**Notes of toast, clementine, lemon and baking spice with sea fresh accents. Good acidity and a long, drying finish. (ECB)13.7% Drink 2015-2019
\$63 RRP 15

- **Martinelli, Charles Ranch Chardonnay 2011 Sonoma Coast** Notes of apple blossom and spiced apple pie with savoury, saline elements and a sense of perfume. This is a breakfast Chardonnay. Would work with a side of bacon. (ECB)13.7% Drink 2015-2019
\$48 RRP 15

PINOT NOIR

- **Houndstooth Pinot Noir 2012 Sonoma Coast** Pretty red and blue fruit, with dried blossoms carried forward into the palate. Bright high-toned flavours with lifted acidity and beautifully integrated tannin. Nicely stimulating palate. Pretty, elegant, nice purity. This wine is a pleasure to drink, but with its bright, mouth-watering acidity it wants food. Develops in the glass. (ECB)13% Drink 2015-2022
\$45 RRP 17+
- **Fort Ross Vineyard, Reserve Pinot Noir 2010 Fort Ross-Seaview** High toned, mountain berry, white and alpine cherry with sea-fresh accents. A delicate presentation with a sense of concentration and fresh lift. Rugged and pretty, with a long spice finish. (ECB)14.5% Drink 2015-2025
\$65 RRP 16.5
- **Fort Ross Vineyard, Reserve Pinot Noir 2002 Sonoma Coast** Developed and pretty while delicate. Notes of violet and lavender, with accents of rose cream and light spice throughout. Light leather accents. Mouth-watering acidity, with persistent tannin and a long finish. (ECB)14.5% Drink 2005-2016
\$75 RRP 16.5
- **Flowers, Camp Meeting Ridge Block 15 Pinot Noir 2012 Sonoma Coast** Strawberry with black tea accents and a saline crunch. 100% whole cluster, this wine has more apparent tannin and structural presence than other Flowers Pinots. It will evolve well but needs time in bottle to open and unwind. (ECB)12.5% Drink 2018-2028
\$95 RRP 16+
- **Red Car, Estate Vineyard Pinot Noir 2012 Fort Ross-Seaview** Bright red fruit and spice, with a lightly savoury palate and a mountain rock crunch. Light bodied, with balanced acid and tannin, and a long finish with saline accents. (ECB)13.8% Drink 2015-2022
\$68 RRP 16+
- **Flowers, Seaview Ridge Pinot Noir 2012 Sonoma Coast** Strawberry blossom mixed through with a rocky character and savoury-saline accents. Persistent tannin, moderate but stimulating acidity, with a lingering finish. (ECB)13.9% Drink 2015-2022
\$65 RRP 16
- **Flowers, Camp Meeting Ridge Pinot Noir 2012 Sonoma Coast** Notes of wild cherry and blossom, cranberry and pomegranate, smudged with mace. Savoury accents, resolved tannin, with iron and saline finish. More structural presence than the Seaview Ridge Estate Pinot. (ECB)12.9% Drink 2015-2023
\$85 RRP 16
- **Flowers, Moon Select Pinot Noir 2011 Sonoma Coast** Raspberry and spice on a savoury, concentrated palate and lean frame. Creamy mid palate, mouth-watering acidity with an easy tannin balance and a long mineral finish. (ECB)12.4% Drink 2015-2020
\$85 RRP 16
- **Fort Ross Vineyard, Sea Slopes Pinot Noir 2012 Fort Ross-Seaview** Fresh, bright red fruit with integrated spice and conifer accents. Clean, elegant mid palate, easy mountain fruit character. (ECB)13.8% Drink 2015-2023

\$42 RRP 16

- Fort Ross Vineyard, Symposium Pinot Noir 2011 Fort Ross-SeaviewLighter, subtler aromatics than the Fort Ross Vineyard Sea Slopes Pinot. Wants time to open. Notes of mixed red fruit, ruby red grapefruit and saline crunch accents. Rugged tannin and still a sense of delicacy with lots of palate concentration. Wants time to open. (ECB)13% Drink 2017-2023

\$46 RRP 16

- Fort Ross Vineyard Pinot Noir 2011 Fort Ross-SeaviewMore present tannin and concentration, and darker red fruit than the other Fort Ross Pinots. Notes of conifer with mountain character, and spice throughout. Long finish. (ECB)13.5% Drink 2015-2025

\$52 RRP 16

- Fort Ross Vineyard, Top of the Land Pinot Noir 2012 Fort Ross-SeaviewFresh red cherry and berry with a rugged, rocky presentation. Lifted high-toned aromatics and flavour concentration. A softer, yet still focused, presentation than the other Fort Ross Pinots, with lots of mouth-watering length. (ECB)14.4% Drink 2015-2023

\$75 RRP 16

- Hirsch, San Andreas Fault Pinot Noir 2012 Sonoma Coast*The San Andreas Fault is Hirsch's flagship wine, pulling from parcels all around the vineyard.*

Notes of red berry and earth with orange and grapefruit zest, pink peppercorn and mixed spice. Persistent, tactile tannin and moderate acidity with a long spiced finish. (ECB)13.2% Drink 2015-2020

\$60 RRP 16

- Hirsch, West Ridge Pinot Noir 2012 Sonoma Coast*The Hirsch West Ridge Pinot takes from blocks only on the western ridge of the vineyard, primarily from block 7.*

With spiced floral aromatics, and a spiced conifer palate with rocky-saline mineral lines, the West Ridge is more brooding than the San Andreas, with more apparent drying tannin. Long spice-smudged finish with a structural focus, and lots of flavour concentration with still a lighter body. Very much a spice-focused wine. (ECB)12.8% Drink 2015-2020

\$85 RRP 16

- Hirsch, East Ridge Pinot Noir 2012 Sonoma Coast*The Hirsch East Ridge Pinot takes fruit entirely from blocks throughout the eastern ridge of Hirsch Vineyard.*

With fresh mountain berries and wild cherry, conifer and a loamy-rocky mineral mix, the East Ridge is also spice rubbed throughout. A tauter wine than the West Ridge, this wine needs air upon opening, and a bit of time in bottle. (ECB)13% Drink 2017-2022

\$85 RRP 15.5

- Martinelli, Three Sisters Vineyard, Sea Ridge Meadow Pinot Noir 2012 Sonoma CoastThe lightest presentation of the Martinelli Pinots, while still showing flavour concentration. Notes of red fruit with savoury accents, spiced throughout, and a long saline crunch. Shows elements of heat from the vintage. (ECB)14.9% Drink 2015-2025

\$63 RRP 15.5

- Martinelli Pinot Noir 2012 Sonoma CoastThis is a mountain-muscular Pinot with a lot of tenacity, and concentration housed in a lean frame. Notes of red cherry fruit and blossom with dark rocky accents and a saline crunch through the long finish. (ECB)15.5% Drink 2015-2020

\$50 RRP 15

OTHER RED

- Red Car, Estate Vineyard Syrah 2011 Fort Ross-SeaviewNotes of black and green tea, pine needles and resin, Italian herbs and smoke, mixed through a body of blue fruit. Structurally focused and dark. This wine is a bit muted and singular currently. Hard to tell if it will open

with time. Give it air in the glass. (ECB)12.7% Drink 2016-2023

\$55 RRP 16

- Tin Barn, Coryelle Fields Vineyard Syrah 2012 Sonoma Coast Notes of pine resin and evergreen with spearmint, coffee and cocoa on dark fruit, with apple and grapefruit pith accents through the finish. The dark notes show heat of the vintage. A little hot through the finish. (ECB)15.5% Drink 2015-2020
\$27 RRP 15.5
- Flowers, Sea View Ridge Block 19 Pinot Meunier 2011 Sonoma Coast Notes of red fruit and blossom, spice with lavender and gunmetal accents. Rock salt and iron accents throughout. Oak usage obscures the varietal expression - drinks like a light Pinot Noir. (ECB)13.5% Drink 2015-2020
\$75 RRP 15