

# FORT ROSS

FORT ROSS-SEAVIEW · SONOMA COAST

## ~ WINEMAKING IN THE VINEYARD ~

Fort Ross Vineyard strives to produce wine of purity and elegance that reflects the cool maritime climate and challenging terroir of the steep Sonoma Coast Ridges.

**WINEMAKING:** All Fort Ross Vineyard wines are made exclusively with Estate-grown grapes from the Fort Ross Vineyard on the Sonoma Coast. No grapes from other vineyards are brought in even if the yields are far less than usual.

To produce truly outstanding wine, farming practices enhance the winemaking. The crop needs to be balanced vine by vine and the overall yield kept modest. The canes should allow the temperate sunshine and ocean breezes to reach the bunches. Picking decisions are made and then halted if the grapes have regressed in their flavors. In the vineyard we aim to prevent problems rather than be reactive and do this by micro-management, vine by vine. There is a constant flow of information between Winemaker, Jeff Pisoni, and Owners/Vineyard Managers, Lester and Linda Schwartz. Throughout the growing season, the three walk the vineyard, evaluate the crop, taste the grapes from each block and harvest the fruit based upon flavor development. Single blocks are often picked several times to guarantee grapes with the desired acid balance and flavor components. To maintain the integrity of the fruit and avoid bruising or oxidation, all bunches are harvested into five-gallon buckets during the cool night and then gently transported to the winery in partially filled 1/2 ton macro bins. The 30 blocks and vineyard selections (clones) are kept separate to be used as distinct blending elements. In the winery the Pinot Noir grapes are destemmed except for selected whole clusters that are added to the lot. After a moderate cold soak the open topped tanks are warmed up, the juice is punched down with great discretion and the juice begins its primary fermentation. We use native yeast to start the fermentation and this is generally sufficient to take the wine through fermentation. The dry wine is then transferred into French oak barrels, on average about 30% new oak, 30% one year old oak and 40% neutral oak, so that the vibrant flavors and subtle nose are not overwhelmed by oak. Native malolactic strains spontaneously start the secondary fermentation. For the Chardonnay, we gently press the wine, then transfer into French oak barrels where it undergoes both primary and malolactic fermentation using wild yeast strains. We stir the lees once or twice a month monitoring the flavors with great care and stop when the Chardonnay has reached the desired richness. The wine is in barrel for 10 months unless we choose to extend the time until the following year. We bottle the Chardonnay without fining or filtration.

**WINEMAKING PHILOSOPHY:** Winemaker, Jeff Pisoni, seeks to achieve a sense of balance between concentration and elegance. “The fruit lends a certain weight and depth to the wine while the cool climate produces the beauty and elegance.” With minimal winemaking intervention Jeff strives to give the wine a sense of place. “I like to use native yeast for fermentation. Native yeast is from both the vineyard and the winery. The fermentation is slower but the results are more distinctive.” Jeff is very careful in his punch down regimen, constantly monitoring the developing flavors. “Early in the fermentation I punch down more to extract the gentle tannins. Later in the fermentation you need to avoid extracting the harder seed tannins.”

**CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL PROCEDURES:** Lester and Linda Schwartz seized the chance of developing a vineyard site less than a mile from the Pacific Ocean despite being mocked by academics who believed that the harsh coastal climate would not ripen grapes while the fog and rain would make the crop constantly vulnerable. To test their theories, they first installed a small trial vineyard with 18 different varieties of grapes and three different trellis systems. Then they began preparing the first blocks of the main vineyard that took them four years to be ready for planting. They chose rootstock suitable for the soil variations in the vineyard and two years later, when the rootstock was well established, they field grafted the budwood. In the cool coastal climate it took three more years before all the vines in each block were successfully grafted as the grafts needed hot weather to callous and grow. To give the growing vines adequate sun exposure, they developed a Vertical Shoot Position Trellis System that had three rather than two double foliage wires so that the canes would be kept erect and not shade the grapes and trap in moisture.