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# The West Sonoma Coast: The Region and its Wines

Unique Terroir

Proposed AVA

The Vineyards

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## Introduction

The West Sonoma Coast (also known as the “True Sonoma Coast” ) is a newly proposed viticultural area within the greater Sonoma Coast AVA<sup>1</sup>. It was conceived in 2011 by a small group of growers and winemakers known as the West Sonoma Coast Vintners Association (WSCVA). The WSCVA members seek to distinguish themselves from the more inland portion of the vast Sonoma Coast AVA, which is a distinctly different terroir. A petition to officially establish the area as a unique appellation was submitted by the WSCVA to the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) in December 2018 and is currently under review. If approved (a decision is expected before the end of 2019 or in early 2020) the area will become Sonoma County’s 18th appellation and will be recognized as one of Sonoma’s main attractions for top quality Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

In this report, we examine the unique characteristics of the proposed West Sonoma Coast AVA (WSC) starting with its special topography, soils and climate. The proposed WSC is a small and unique part of the 500 thousand-acre Sonoma Coast AVA and is a singular and spectacular area. It boasts a majestic coastline, high elevations, superb soils and ideal, although challenging, climatic conditions for producing premium Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Syrah. And the area hosts a coterie of talented young and veteran growers and winemakers who know how to produce premium wines that reflect the uniquely endowed growing conditions of their vineyards.

While the West Sonoma Coast is a newly proposed

<sup>1</sup> This large and amorphous AVA was established primarily at the behest of Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards, which wanted to include all their scattered vineyards into one boundary so they could use the “estate bottled” designation on their labels.

viticultural area, its modern wine history dates back to the 1960-70s. During this period explorers and adventurous vintners attracted to this wild area of redwoods groves and sheep farms purchased land and began growing grapes. The history of the area reads like a who’s who of Sonoma’s wine industry. The early pioneers established their vineyards in the Fort Ross-Seaview area of high coastal ridges, mountains, and dense redwood forests located within a few miles of the Pacific Ocean situated above the fog line. In the decades that followed new vintners in search of other coastal growing conditions planted their vineyards up the coast around the Annapolis area and down the coast towards Freestone, Occidental and the Sebastopol Hills. These three main regions are expected to constitute the new West Sonoma Coast AVA.

The report next examines the vineyards and viticultural practices of the West Sonoma Coast growing area. Many of the sub-regions of the West Sonoma Coast are on the fringes for successful viticulture, the edges of ripening for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Many of the vineyards are small scale and yields are low. Due to the scarcity of labor and remote and difficult locales of many of the vineyards and the high quality objectives of the winemakers, most operations have to be carried out by hand. Yet by following sound vineyard management practices, often based on organic and biodynamic principles, and employing the right rootstocks and clones, many growers of the area are producing outstanding grapes for their own wines or for neighboring wineries.

In the following section, the report provides an overview of the techniques and practices of the West Sonoma Coast winemakers in crafting Pinot Noir. They are fundamentally Burgundian and minimalist and involve great attention to detail. The section looks at all stages of the winemaking process and discusses the approaches adopted by the highly skilled winemakers of the region. While it can be said that wine is made in the vineyard, there is little doubt that in the West Sonoma Coast, like all regions of the world, winemakers have a significant role in defining the character of their wines. Thus there is a wide variety of Pinot Noir emerging from the area as a result of the location of vineyards and the hand of the winemaker.

The concluding section of the report focuses on the challenges and opportunities facing the growers and winemakers of the proposed West Sonoma Coast AVA. As of the publication of this report, the TTB was still reviewing the petition for the new AVA. The petition has received strong support from virtually all of the vineyard owners and winemakers in the area. However, the process hasn’t been without challenges. The main opponent to the new AVA has written negative comments that may extend the process. Also, because the TTB no longer allows new AVAs to partially overlap existing ones, the newly proposed West Sonoma Coast AVA boundaries leave out some of the WSC members located in the Green Valley, the Freestone Valley and the Sebastopol Hills, all of which lie within the Russian River Valley AVA.

Following the concluding section of the report, readers will find profiles of the wineries of the WSCVA and tasting notes and ratings of their wines.

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