

# The Press Democrat

## Napa winemakers tap Sonoma for pinot, chardonnay

LINDA MURPHY | JULY 23, 2019

Pinot noir has been called many things. The heartbreak grape. Temperamental. Finicky. Demanding. Untrustworthy. Difficult to grow and vinify.

Yet once in the bottle, pinot noir undergoes a personality transformation, showing a silky, supple, elegant, charming, multilayered and seductive side one can never get from a cabernet sauvignon or merlot.

Most California winemakers can't help but try to master pinot noir, embracing the challenge and reward for getting it right. Many a marketing piece proclaims that producing great pinot noir is akin to finding the Holy Grail. Sonoma County winegrowers and winemakers have sipped from that cup for years, enjoying near-ideal weather and soil conditions for taming the persnickety pinot. Overnight fog intrusion, late-afternoon marine and wetlands breezes, diurnal temperature swings of 40 degrees and more, and well-drained, sandy loam soil—all found in Russian River Valley, Sonoma Coast and Petaluma Gap AVAs (American Viticultural Areas)—provide possibilities for achieving pinot perfection.

Napa Valley not only has taken notice; some of its winemakers have taken action. The valley, renowned for its ripe, intense, pricey cabernet sauvignons, has produced pinot noir over the years, the vast majority of them from the Los Carneros region, which straddles Napa and Sonoma counties at the top of San Pablo Bay.

Bay breezes temper the daytime heat during the growing season, but while Carneros is considered cool for Napa Valley, it doesn't have the positive impacts of Pacific fog nor the full force of the bracing winds that shoot through the Petaluma Gap.

Not to be outdone by their west-side Mayacamas neighbors, Napa winemakers are increasingly shifting to Sonoma for pinot noir grapes (and coastal-influenced chardonnay, too).

Pahlmeyer of St. Helena owns a vineyard in Cazadero from which it produces pinot under its Wayfarer label. Hall Wines, with production facilities in St. Helena and Rutherford, created the Walt brand for pinot, even establishing a tasting room in Sonoma with another soon to open in Healdsburg. The Far Niente/Nickel & Nickel group purchased the Amber Ridge Vineyard in Russian River Valley in 2007 and launched the EnRoute brand for the purpose of producing pinot noir from Sonoma grapes. And Duckhorn Wine Company's Decoy and Migration labels include Sonoma-grown pinot noirs, too. ...

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... Andrew Delos, director of winemaking for the Far Niente Family of Wineries and Vineyards in Napa Valley (brands include Far Niente, Nickel & Nickel, Dolce and Bella Union), was the winemaker for the EnRoute winery in Sebastopol prior to his 2018 promotion to winemaking director for all brands.

He knows the Russian River Valley well having worked for MacRostie Winery and Pellegrini Family Vineyards.

"EnRoute was founded because the (company's) partners wanted to make pinot noir," Delos explained. "Far Niente made one in 1980, but it never went to market. Starting in 2003, Nickel & Nickel bottled a few vintages of pinot from the Dutton Ranch in Russian River Valley, and in 2006, we had the opportunity to buy the land that would become Amber Ridge Vineyard.

"During our search for land, we kept coming back to Russian River Valley," he added. "We love the area and planted our flag there. Carneros has some great sites, but Russian River Valley gives us more diversity in flavor and aromatics. The fog is a major factor in this diversity, as are the fine, well-drained Goldridge soils vs. the clay soils of Carneros."

In addition to Amber Ridge, the company also owns the Northern Spy Vineyard, in Green Valley of Russian River Valley, and leases three other vineyards in the region. ...

