

## California's Edgiest Wine Region: The Western Sonoma Coast

The grapes in Nick and Andy Peay's vineyards are in a precarious state most of the time. Quivering on the edge of the San Andreas Fault, shrouded in hours of chilly fog and subjected to steady Pacific breezes, it's a wonder these grapes can ripen at all. The Peay's and their winemaker Vanessa Wong are not alone in the Western Sonoma Coast's risky winemaking climate. In fact, they enjoy some highly regarded company including wineries such as Hirsch, Joseph Phelps and Littorai. I'm always impressed and slightly agog at winemakers who seek the outermost edge of anything; it takes certain boldness and, some might argue, insanity, to invite extreme challenges into your winemaking. Andy Peay admits there were more than enough naysayers when he and his brother started farming the coast. "Everyone said it was way too cold and that we'd never get grapes to ripen. In truth, we have had problems with ripening; some years are just really tough.

Bill Phelps, president of Joseph Phelps wines, agrees with Peay's assessment, noting that the Western Sonoma Coast wines exemplify a very cool climate style of chardonnay, pinot noir and syrah. "We would say we are truer to a Burgundian style; our wines are higher in minerality and not as plush on fruit. They tend to be more structured, lower in alcohol, and less extracted and fruit-dominated as wines from further inland, such as the Russian River Valley." Phelps is also one of the founding members of the West Sonoma Coast Vintners Association which includes wineries from Annapolis, Fort Ross/Seaview, Occidental, Freestone, Green Valley and the Sebastopol Hills. The WSCV was formed in large part to create a distinction between Western Sonoma Coast wineries and the remaining Sonoma Coast AVA.



The distinction was necessary given the massive size of the Sonoma Coast AVA, which includes some very inland turf. In 1987 California's Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau defined the region in a way that included more than 500,000 acres, including some vineyards over 30 miles from the actual coast. Given the jumbo sized geography of the official AVA, it can be reasonably argued that Peay and his neighboring winemakers represent the true Sonoma Coast—the coastiest of the coast, the edgiest of the edge, the coldest of the cold.

Political boundaries aside, Peay cites his main reason for heading so far west was the climate. "With our cool climate you retain acidity and don't accumulate as much sugar and you get phenolic development at the same time. In warmer places your grape sugars go up in a short period of time and things get out of balance." Peay's wines, much like those of his neighbors, possess intense flavors, femininity and elegance.

Despite being bundled up in the big Sonoma Coast AVA, these wines easily set themselves apart with a hallmark shivery intensity, something one might expect from wines made on the edge.

A Taste of the Western Edge: Syrah, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay

**2010 Cobb Pinot Noir, Diane Cobb Coastlands Vineyard.** This particular wine was also showcased at Pinot at Cloudy Bay in 2013—winning praise from critics and ranking in the top 5 of 40 wines tasted—silky, with a lingering finish, balanced, utterly feminine, holding court nicely between acidity, minerality and gorgeous high-toned fruit notes. Just sexy.

**2011 Freeman Akikos Cuvée Pinot Noir.** Dark forest floor, raspberry, pomegranate, cherry and cardamom. Wild strawberry married with clean, precise acidity and balance. Cerebral and refined, a wine to drink over dinner.

**2011 Hirsch Vineyards “San Andreas Fault” Estate Pinot Noir.** The actual San Andreas Fault rests a mere 2.5 miles from the vineyard that is used to create this wine. This fault line terroir lends a layered complexity to the wine. Pure elegance with notes of ripe cherry, violets and earth.

**2011 Joseph Phelps Chardonnay, Pastorale Vineyard.** These grapes grow a mere five miles from the Pacific Ocean, so ripening is always edgy. Delightful nose of lemon cream and tropical fruits with an almost juicy, savory acidity on the palate followed by a rich and lasting finish. Knockout tasty.

**2010 Red Car Estate Fort Ross-Seaview Syrah.** Utterly silky and concentrated with ripe blue fruits, layers of complexity, soft tannins and feminine structure. Light-bodied in appearance but packs a complex – marvelously rich palate. All the power of Syrah folded into a pair ballet slippers.

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