

West Sonoma Coast AVA – the ‘true’ Sonoma Coast and its influence on the development of Pinot Noir styles within California

Abstract

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Motivation & Objective

The complex and dynamic nature of American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) has always fascinated me, ever since I studied them in depth while preparing for the WSET Diploma exams. Unlike Old World wine regions, where appellations are based on a cluster of villages/ communes (communes of Left Bank Bordeaux, Barolo) or a dominant geographical feature (the Rhine in the Rheingau, valleys and tributaries of the Douro), winemakers in the United States could apply for an AVA based on different climatic or geographical bases.

The West Sonoma Coast AVA (WSC), recognized officially since 2022, caught my interest as a candidate to investigate further for a number of reasons: relative value to world-class Pinot Noirs, as a response to consumer trends for more lower alcohol wines and a warming climate (thanks to its more marginal climate), and as one of the most recently established regions known for producing fine Pinot Noir. (WSC also produces high quality Chardonnay, but this will not be discussed due to the limited scope of this thesis).

The purpose of this thesis is to examine why producers are looking to produce Pinot Noir in this more marginal climate, recent developments, and to measure the impact of WSC wines in terms of recent external investments and quantitative metrics.

Methodology

This is a study of WSC's development as a wine region, how it all began and arrive at the current state in the market, and how does it compare to its Californian peers.

First, the unique characteristic of the AVA is explored, in terms of the lay of the land, geology, soil, climate and growing season conditions. It is followed by a study into the region's pioneering producers, and what inspired them to start a winery in this part of the country long considered unsuitable (too cool) for viticulture by UC Davis academics. This thesis will further explore recent developments in the AVA, including new players, promotion campaigns, and critical acclaim in terms of style. Qualitative metrics – average price and online search rank in the last five years is also analysed and compared to a selection of other Californian Pinot Noirs from neighbouring regions.

Content

WSC is on the Pacific coast of California, within the Sonoma Coast AVA, occupying a narrow stretch of land and has the Pacific Ocean to its immediate West. There are 416 hectares under vine at the time of the petition of the AVA, but most likely there are more planted since then but still sparsely planted.

The San Andreas Fault defines the WSC geologically, resulting in a great diversity of soil types in the area, called the Franciscan Complex. WSC's climate is distinct from the far larger Sonoma Coast AVA, receives less degree days than Beaune in the growing season and cooling influences from the California current.

Vineyards started to develop through the 1980s and 1990s, and visionary producers increasingly gain attention. There is much investment into the region at the turn of the century, with established producers, mostly in Napa and Russian River Valley, also began projects in the WSC. This is also the same time where it was brought to a wider audience by the association In Pursuit of Balance, which has since ceased operations.

Wines from the WSC are often considered by wine critics as possessing a more restrained style, with tannins more in the background, contributing to a smoother, silkier style of wine. Quantitatively, wines from the region remains behind its Californian peers in terms of average price and online search popularity. Nonetheless, the gap is gradually closing, considering the WSC is a newer wine region compared to neighbouring AVAs.

Conclusion

WSC is a cool climate, maritime region in the western edge of Sonoma Coast that has quickly become a point of interest to wine connoisseurs for the quality of Pinot Noir produced.

Thanks to its cool maritime influences that are rarely observed in wine regions in the old world, it has established its reputation as a source of high quality, more restrained style of Pinot Noir that are already highly rated by critics. As a result, the best examples are comparable in price (but less so in popularity) to benchmark Pinot Noir bottlings in California, despite being an appellation with a shorter history.

There are higher costs and risks associated with managing vineyards in a marginal climate and hence the WSC is till sparsely planted, it has gained momentum in the 21st century, and perhaps the most potential in face of climate change in relation to other cool climate, Pinot Noir producing regions in the United States. While there is still work to be done in terms of pricing and popularity among consumers, there is still much room for WSC to further develop as a region, especially considering the warming climate and changing consumer tastes. In the end, it is the wine consumers who ultimately benefits from the increased diversity of choices available in the market.