

The pinot pioneers

By Jancis Robinson

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A quiet revolution has been taking place on the [California wine scene](#), driven by refugees from the worlds of finance and software development, and the power of online bulletin boards. For years, long hang time on the vines resulting in notable ripeness and alcohol levels of 15 per cent and above have seemed the goal of California wine producers, but more and more wines have been emerging that run counter to this paradigm. Although you can see the trend in some Chardonnays, the most obvious variety to display this novel freshness and delicacy is the red burgundy grape, [Pinot Noir](#).

In Burgundy itself, it is character rather than size that has always been celebrated. Red burgundy is notoriously unpredictable but gloriously eloquent at expressing minute differences in terroir. It is the tantalising nature of red burgundy that seems to have inspired a new generation of California vignerons to seek out sites with a chance of producing Pinots with fine red burgundy's delicacy and vivacity.

It takes some nerve, or perhaps blind passion, to sink substantial time and funds into making a style of wine that has yet to carve out a substantial place in the market. Most California Pinot is very unlike red burgundy. It tends to be dark crimson, notably sweet-tasting (from high alcohol and sometimes from residual sugar) and Pinot's delicate fruit flavours can often be occluded by the effects of new and/or heavily toasted oak. A few years ago, the California specialist of the dominant American wine magazine, *Wine Spectator*, Jim Laube, memorably produced a 16 per cent Pinot Noir as an example of top wine quality at a Masters of Wine symposium in the Napa Valley. Such potency is by no means unusual in California, whereas 14 per cent is exceptionally high in Burgundy.

In California's generally warm, sunny climate it has been very much easier to find vineyard sites suitable for the late ripening Cabernet Sauvignon than for the finicky, early-ripening Pinot Noir. The first wave of Pinot enthusiasts tended to seek out corners of the state that were aggressively cooled either by altitude, as in spots in Monterey such as Chalona, Mount Harlan and Santa Lucia Highlands, or by lingering foggy incursions from the Pacific such as Russian River Valley in Sonoma, the wind-cooled Carneros across the San Pablo Bay from San Francisco, and more exposed parts of the Central Coast region that extends south of Monterey to Santa Barbara.

But the new pioneers of delicacy are seeking out even cooler spots. The vast – too vast – Sonoma Coast appellation harbours many of them. The likes of the Coastlands and Hirsch vineyards and McDougall Ranch are within sight of the Pacific itself and about 1,000ft elevation. The even younger Alpine Vineyard, on a rocky slope scouted out at the beginning of this century in the Santa Cruz Mountains by Kevin Harvey of Rhys Vineyards, is at 1,200ft to 1,490ft. And Evening Land's Tempest Vineyard in the far west of the new, super-cool Sta Rita Hills appellation way to the south in the Central Coast is so new that it has yet to release its first, delicious vintage of Pinot Noir, the 2009.

Jamie Kutch's is one of the most romantic stories of these Pinot pioneers. Until 2005 he was a banker in New York but was deriving more and more of his pleasure from online discussions about wine in general and Pinot Noir in particular. By the time he and his girlfriend had taken the plunge to become California vignerons, his fellow bulletin board members had signed up to buy virtually his entire crop. He proposed to her by sending an engagement ring along the sorting belt with the freshly picked grapes. They live in San Francisco, rent space and equipment at a winery in Sonoma, and have leases on 15 acres in eight different vineyards, mainly on the Sonoma Coast. Last year Kutch produced a grand total of 2,100 cases of a dozen bottles of wine, of which he sold off 800 on the bulk market because the quality was not quite what he was seeking.



Kutch, McDougall Ranch 2009 Sonoma Coast Jamie Kutch's first vintage, 2005, was 16.3 per cent alcohol. This 2009 is 13.9 per cent. Go to www.kutchwines.com to join waiting list. For tasting notes go to jancisrobinson.com; for stockists see winesearcher.com

Jamie Kutch is clearly besotted by Burgundy and, sometimes with his friend Rajat Parr – who makes Sandhi's similarly burgundian wines – he travels to the region with "an arsenal of questions" for luminaries such as Jean-Marie Fourrier, Etienne de Montille, Jean-Marc Roulot and Christophe Roumier. His 2009s, only just over 13 per cent alcohol, are completely different from the California Pinot norm, being much racier and not remotely sweet. Like most of this new generation he believes in minimal intervention in the winery and that to retain freshness in California's climate it is essential to retain the acid-endowing stems by fermenting whole bunches rather than destemming and crushing individual grapes.

Kevin Harvey's path to Pinot finesse has been perhaps a little more comfortable and paved, if not with gold, then at least with a fortune acquired in Silicon Valley, where he is based. He too built up his oversubscribed mailing list for the 5,000 cases he produces from Rhys Vineyards via online exchanges with fellow burgundyphiles. He began by simply planting some Pinot vines in his backyard in the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountain ridge that separates Silicon Valley from the Pacific. To his surprise, the produce was delicious and surprisingly burgundian. He then went scouting for further, cooler, higher sites in the Santa Cruz mountains, which have a long history of making fine California wine upheld by the likes of Ridge and Mount Eden, and earlier in the decade planted four more vineyards up to 2,360ft, each one meticulously planned and designed on shallow soils and rocky bases, as like Burgundy's finest as possible. The fun for Harvey seems to be in identifying different terroirs and having his team do its damndest to express these in the winery he has built. Owning his own vineyards means that he is able to farm them biodynamically. There is no question of drifting pesticide sprays from neighbours in such isolated locations.

I have tasted only one Rhys wine, from the cellar of a burgundy lover in Washington who could hardly believe I was passing up her Grands Crus in favour of this native ferment, but I did not regret it for a moment.

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Jancis's delicate pinot picks

- Au Bon Climat, La Bauge au Dessus 2007 Santa Maria Valley
- Calera, Mills Vineyard 2006 Mount Harlan
- Cobb, Emmaline Ann Vineyard 2008 Sonoma Coast
- Copain, Kiser en Haut 2006 Anderson Valley
- Rhys, Alpine Vineyard 2006 Santa Cruz Mountains
- Sandhi, Evening Land-Tempest 2009 Sta. Rita Hills