

# russian revolution

CALIFORNIA'S  
RUSSIAN RIVER  
VALLEY IS  
PRODUCING SOME  
OF THE COUNTRY'S  
BEST PINOT NOIRS.



## Think elegant,

complex, sexy, mysterious, pretty, fickle, contradictory, and at times hard to comprehend. Sounds like a woman, right? Well it can also be said of Pinot Noir, the grape producing magnificent, truly fascinating wines from California's Russian River Valley.

The area got its name from Russian adventurers who established Fort Ross, on the Pacific Coast, near the Russian River in 1812. The adventurers were hoping to construct a string of trading posts, exploit the North American fur trade and keep the Spanish, and looming American presence at bay. The Russians finally left Fort Ross in 1842, but the Gold Rush brought thousands to California in the 1850s and the miners stayed, planting all sorts of crops, including grapes, throughout Northern California. By the 1890s there were 300 grape growers in what is now the Russian River Valley.

Pinot Noirs have been produced in this area for some time. Cecil DeLoach, a fire-fighter from San Francisco with a passion for winemaking, first planted his grapes in the Russian River area 1973. In 2003,

BY BOB ECKER



DeLoach Vineyards (left) was one of the early pioneers of Pinot Noir wine growing in the Russian River Valley region of California's Sonoma County.



**The Russian River Valley's growing conditions enhance the luxury of Pinot Noir grapes to develop stunning aromatics and flavors of strawberry, violets and cola enraptures a luscious, mouthwatering, medium-bodied and pretty wine.**

DeLoach Vineyards was purchased by the Boisset Family from Burgundy, France, when Jean-Charles Boisset fell in love with the Russian River Valley on his first visit to the area. He immediately recognizing the similarities between Sonoma County and Burgundy: each boast a confluence of river, mountains, and soil that is perfect for growing world-class Pinot Noir. "The Russian River itself is made up of all kinds of individual microclimates, there are many small growers, and they tend to be really conscientious," says DeLoach Vineyards winegrower Eric Pooler.

Of course, the 2004 film *Sideways* had an enormous impact on Pinot Noir. That singular movie brought the idea of Pinot Noir to the masses (while gently denigrating Merlot) and increased the awareness, enjoyment, and acceptance of Pinot Noir in America. Post *Sideways*, Pinot Noir sales skyrocketed. The public couldn't get enough of it. Restaurants, bars, shops and retail outlets all wanted Pinot. And winemakers and growers scrambled to fill the void. However, the noble Pinot

Noir grape, brought to this country from the Burgundy region of France, is notoriously temperamental.

Continued experimentation, knowledge, development, and craftsmanship have led to the understanding of how, and most importantly where, to produce exemplary Pinot Noirs. Today no region produces Pinot Noirs of such consistently high quality than Sonoma County's Russian River Valley. "The Russian River Valley is comparable to the Burgundy region of France because of its similarity of soil types and climate," says Denise Gill, General Operations Manager of Hop Kiln Winery. "This AVA is also blessed with the influence of coastal fog that protects the Pinot Noir grapes from some of the hot summer days and sunburn. These growing conditions enhance the luxury of Pinot Noir grapes to develop stunning aromatics and flavors of strawberry, violets and cola enraptures a luscious, mouthwatering, medium-bodied and pretty wine."

Granted AVA status in 1983, the Russian River AVA is one of the largest in Sonoma County. Located about 55 miles

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north of San Francisco, the Russian River Valley AVA is the largest single AVA in terms of acres planted to vineyards—15,000 out of a total 125,500 acres. Bordered by the chic town of Healdsburg to the northeast, Santa Rosa to the southeast, Guerneville to the west and Sebastopol to the south, gorgeous vineyards, and quirky little hamlets share winding roads with dozens of excellent wineries tucked between the numerous valleys and hills.

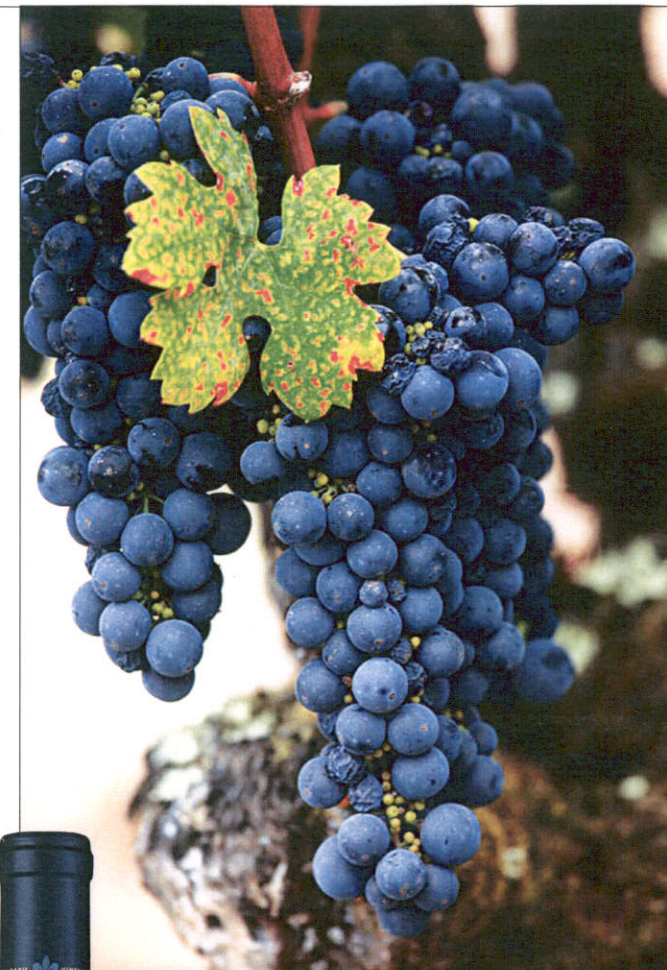
"The Russian River Valley is typified by a reciprocating climate," says Eva Dehlinger, Assistant Winemaker at Dehlinger Vineyards. "Our vines enjoy the moderating influence of cool coastal fog in the morning due to the proximity to the Pacific Ocean. As the fog burns off, the vines benefit from the ripening impacts of the sun. These growing conditions resulting in flavorful fruit that makes expressive wine. The Pinots tend to be engaging, bright and with succulent fruit."

The cooling breezes from the river and the ocean keep this area foggy and moist in the mornings, though it can occasionally get hot during long summer afternoons. Fifty-degree diurnal swings—perfect conditions for producing layered, textural grapes are not uncommon. "Making wine in the Russian River is to experience capturing the elusive feisty red head that we call Pinot Noir," says Tobe Sheldon of Sheldon Wines.

Many wineries in the Russian River Valley produce stunning Pinot Noirs, yet each will be slightly different from the next. Typical Russian River Pinots are medium ruby colored and combine complex notes of violets, slight smoke, cola, black cherry and mushroom with flavors of raspberry, caramel, bitter chocolate, earth and wood. Then an elegant and rounded, layered finish. Among the best are: DeLoach, Lynmar, Merry Edwards, Tandem, Rochioli, Joseph Swan, Williams Selyem, Gary Farrell, Hop Kiln, Benovia, J Vineyards, Sheldon, Russian Hill, D'Argenzio, Dutcher Crossing, Rodney Strong, Dutton Goldfield, Moishin, and Emeritus. Pinot noirs do need time to open up to fully be appreciated. The wines often change drastically—for the better—when left open for a few hours or even overnight. These Pinot Noirs are generally wonderful, nuanced wines that truly must be sampled.

"I believe that when you have a glass of Pinot from the Russian River you are able to enjoy more of the true terroir," says Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn, Food and Beverage Outlet Director of Joe Taber. "Many other appellations require more science and less purity to make a good glass of pinot, this is rarely necessary in the Russian River."

"The Russian River Valley's mild and soft gentle climate ripens this delicate fruit to produce some of the finest Pinot Noirs," said Ray D'Argenzio, Winemaker at D'Argenzio Vineyards. "I sometimes think of it as a woman. Elegant refined, classy, soft; you are kind and gentle to her she produces loving fruit." 🍷



**"OUR FINEST SELECTION"**

DeLoach Vineyards has been a pioneer of Pinot Noir wine growing in the Russian River Valley since the early 1970s. DeLoach is particularly known for its "Finest Selection level" wines, which are bottled only in years when the winemaker feels the quality represents "Our Finest Selection" (OFS). These wines are hand-made in small batches using the best fruit and the most exacting techniques to ensure perfection.

Also known for its dedication to the environment, DeLoach tore up its award-winning, highly-lauded vineyards after the 2004 vintage and replanted with cover crops designed to revitalize the soil. New vines were planted in 2006, and the first vintage grown with biodynamic farming techniques will be the eagerly-awaited 2010 vintage. In the meantime, DeLoach continues to produce world-class wine by partnering with winegrowers who are equally dedicated to and passionate about eco-friendly farming practices and the production of high-quality wines of distinction.