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# Marin County Pinot Noir

By Gerald D. Boyd
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Wine fans can count the number of prime sites in California known for distinctive Pinot Noir with the fingers of a single hand: Russian River Valley, Carneros, Santa Barbara County, and Monterey County. However, Marin County--an unlikely place known more as an expensive bedroom community to San Francisco than a wine region--is quietly rising to provide a fistful of five top Pinot Noir zones in the state.

Marin County is the scenic upscale piece of the Bay Area that forms a buffer between the bustle of San Francisco and the more laid-back lifestyle of Sonoma County, and it is moving slowly but steadily onto the California wine scene as an excellent place to grow Pinot Noir. Wine grape growing in Marin County can be traced back to the early 19th century, but following a vineyard growth burst in the late 19th and early 20th century, acreage today stands at less than 250 acres, mostly Pinot Noir, with small plots of Chardonnay, Riesling and Gewurztraminer.

But in Marin's size doesn't matter as much as quality. Premium Pinot Noir from Marin's Devils Gulch Ranch, a cool climate zone, impressed Jean-Charles Boisset, proprietor of DeLoach Vineyards, so much that he gathered DeLoach winemaker Brian Maloney and consulting winemaker Dan Goldfield together for a tour of Marin's vineyards. What struck Boisset, head of Boisset Family Estates, most about the Marin Pinot Noir he tasted was the bright acidity and focused fruit flavors of the Pinot Noirs of his native Burgundy.

Goldfield's years of working with Marin grapes helped Boisset settle on four different sites in Marin County: Stubbs Vineyard close to Tomales Bay, Chileno Valley Vineyard, north of Stubbs, Azaya Vineyard, in Nicks Valley south of Stubbs and Skyview Vineyard, the most distant from the cooling effects of the Pacific Ocean. The diversity of the soils and the individual vineyard's proximity to the ocean are factors that develop different acid levels, fruit intensity and characteristics, and textural elements in the Pinots; a site-specific diversity that is a distinct departure from the traditional expressions of the Pinot Noir grape.

And yet, it can be argued that there are threads of similarity in all Pinot Noirs, no matter where the grapes are grown. There is a ridge in western Marin County that separates vineyards with different soil profiles. "The place reminds me of Rully and Mercurey twenty years ago," says Boisset, calling up images of the two Burgundy sub-appellations. When Boisset

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was growing up in Burgundy there was a strong sense of tradition in the vineyards, but also a compelling move toward a more earth-friendly way of growing wine grapes.

The young Boisset soon became aware of a small movement toward green viticulture, including Biodynamics, that included prestigious estates like Domaine de la Romanee-Conti and Domaine Leflaive. Organic grape growing was just catching on and Biodynamics was, for many growers, still shrouded in mystery. Undaunted, Boisset became a firm proponent, applying more earth-friendly farming in DeLoach vineyards. Once the purchase of DeLoach was finalized in 2003, one of Boisset's first decisions was to convert the 17-acre estate vineyard to organic and Biodynamic farming. Today, growers selling grapes to DeLoach are offered incentives, as well as technical support to eliminate synthetic chemicals from their vineyards.

Even with the incentives, it was a challenge for many growers who were planting vineyards in west Marin. "But the quality is superb," exclaims Dan Goldfield. "Yields are very low compared to other places, about two tons per acre and sometimes one ton per acre and berry size is tiny." Goldfield added that most of the vineyards in western Marin are still young, many only in their sixth year of production, but "the wines have plenty of ripe blueberry flavors, with hints of lavender, but not plumy." Goldfield is a believer in the future of Marin as a premium region for Pinot Noir. "Marin will become prominent as a unique area among the cognoscenti, the sommeliers and true passionate Pinot devotees, much like Fort Ross and the true Sonoma Coast."

Among those who grasped early on the opportunity and challenge to help develop the potential of Marin as a newly-emerging wine region were Marin County residents, Jonathan and Susan Pey. The Peys, long-time wine industry veterans, had already joined the ranks of a small band of grape growers in west Marin, before Boisset and DeLoach recognized the potential in Marin for cool climate Pinot Noir. In 1999, the Peys released their first Merlot under the Mount Tamalpais label. "But after about a decade of hard work we saw that the climate was not consistently warm enough to full ripen Merlot," recalls Jonathan Pey. So they began exploring other cool climate varieties and by 2002 had released their first Pey-Marin Pinot Noir and then followed it in 2005 with Riesling.

The Peys, Jean-Charles Boisset and other winemakers high on Marin County grapes, believe the key to the promising quality of the wines is cool climate, close proximity to the Pacific Ocean, low yields and the collage of soil types, the result of countless earthquakes of the San Andreas fault zone that runs diagonally through Marin County. Collectively, these natural factors create a terroir that is especially good for cool climate varieties like Pinot Noir and Riesling. To date there is only one winery, Pt. Reyes Station, in Marin County (Pey-Marin wines are made at a contract winery outside the county and the DeLoach Pinots are made in Sonoma County). At last count, however, 20 labels, including DeLoach, Pey-Marin, Dutton-Goldfield and Sean Thackerey are buying Marin grapes.

And now with Boisset and DeLoach on board, the future for Marin County wines looks very promising. As Jonathan Pey reflects, "It's nice to see an historic and respected Burgundy producer such as Boisset come to west Marin after so many years of carrying the torch; it kind of validates our hard work. Maybe we weren't that nuts after all!"



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