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## Marin's wine industry tiny but growing

By Christina Mueller Welter  
Special to the Marin Independent Journal

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AS FAMILIES SIT DOWN to enjoy a Thanksgiving meal with loved ones this year, it's more likely than ever that a bottle of wine made right here in Marin will be on the table.

At 200 acres, Marin's wine industry is positively tiny compared with its behemoth neighbors, Napa (45,000 acres) and Sonoma (22,000 acres) counties, but it is growing as its wines gain recognition as comparable to those from Burgundy and the Sonoma coast.

It takes persistence, hard work and deep pockets to farm and process wine grapes in Marin. And Marin's been growing wine grapes since 1817, thanks to missionaries at the San Rafael Mission, according to Pey-Marín Vineyards of San Anselmo. By the end of the century, vines were planted as far south as Magnolia Avenue in Larkspur.

A long, Prohibition-induced hiccup saw the near fatality of Marin's wine industry, but a few families persevered and the industry experienced a slow but steady revival through the '70s and '80s.

It was, however, a "killer bottle of pinot" that really ignited interest in Marin vineyards, according to Mark Pasternak of Devil's Gulch Ranch. The man behind that bottle was Dan Goldfield, winemaker for Dutton-Goldfield in Sebastopol, and the grapes in that bottle came from Pasternak's Nicasio ranch. Goldfield's Marin County Hartford Court bottling in 1997 "convinced the naysayers that great pinot could be successfully grown and produced in Marin," Pasternak



Marin's wineries, such as Point Reyes Vineyard, are producing wines well-suited for pairing with holiday meals. (Steve Doughty)

says.

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It didn't take long for others to take notice. "My phone started ringing off the hook," Pasternak says, who promptly planted the second half of Devil's Gulch with pinot noir and a smidge of gewürztraminer. After that, the wine industry in Marin blossomed.

Steve and Sharon Doughty, who own Point Reyes Vineyards Winery, started with cabernet sauvignon vines at warmer Quail Hill Vineyard in Terra Linda some 30-plus years ago and now harvest pinot noir and chardonnay in cooler Point Reyes Station. Pey-Marín won acclaim for its riesling grown in western Marin. Other growers planted merlot, pinot noir, syrah and other varietals; in fact, pinot noir is well-suited to Marin's unusual terroir — the geography,

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climate and soil conditions that contribute unique qualities to a crop.

Stew Johnson of Kendric Winery grows 8½ acres of pinot noir and a half-acre of viognier at Cayetana Ranch to the west of Olompali State Historic Park. Johnson's site is east-facing, which means in summer, the grapes dry early in the day, but autumn is cooler, offering slow, gentle growth.

Many of the great vineyards of France's Burgundy region, with 20,000 acres, are similarly east-facing and have similarly challenging



Grapes growing at Point Reyes Vineyards Steve Doughty

soil and growing conditions. Perhaps this is why industry insiders favorably compare Marin wines with those grown 5,700 miles from here, and why the majority of the acreage in Marin is planted in Burgundy's famous grape, the notoriously thin-skinned, finicky pinot noir.

"Marin terroir is about microclimates more than soil," says Stephan Schindler, owner of Easkoot Cellars. "Since there is no granite or limestone here like in Burgundy, the summer fog works to build acidity while the warm autumn builds ripeness. This is the essence of Marin."

Working only with pinot noir in the Chileno Valley in northwest Marin, Schindler's passion is to tell the story of Marin's terroir with "classic" pinot noir.

"Marin is one of the few places in California — the U.S. even — where you can make these lighter-style wines," he says. "Easkoot wines tell the story of the Chileno Valley, its microclimate and its clones."

So, is there a "Marin style" of pinot noir? And does it go well with turkey and stuffing? "There's an elusive thread but not a definitive one," Pasternak demurs.

While many winemakers are looking to replicate the food-friendly, lower alcohol, leaner pinots of Burgundy, California is capable of producing juicy, fruit-forward, somewhat higher alcohol pinot noir and of harvesting at the right time to capture the fullest flavor of the grape.

The great houses of Burgundy are beginning to take notice. In 2003, the Boisset wine family of



Pt Reyes Vineyard Steve Doughty's silver medal winners at 2011 California State Fair. Steve Doughty

Burgundy's Côte de Nuits purchased DeLoach Vineyards. DeLoach, known for its Sonoma wines, partnered with landowners in Marin to produce a series of Marin pinot noirs and a chardonnay, released earlier this year.

DeLoach's winemaker Brian Maloney, originally from Tomales, affirms the Burgundy taste connection but sees a deeper connection to Sonoma Coast wines.

"Marin offers the same high quality — elegant and dense but not too heavy — as wines from farther up the coast," he says.

The comparisons to Sonoma and Burgundy will continue; these regions are far better known than Marin and offer an insight to the character and flavor inside a bottle of Marin-grown wine.

Growing wine grapes here continues to be a grand experiment. Known for its eponymous olive oil, the 550-acre McEvoy Ranch planted about 7 acres in grapes five or so years ago.

"We've got about a third in pinot, a third in syrah and a third in grenache, mourvedre, alicante bouschet and viognier," among others, says McEvoy's head gardener Margaret Koski-Kent. "We're experimenting."

The first grape harvest was in 2009, but McEvoy has not yet released any wines and it may be a few years before we are able to taste the fruits of its labor.

Goldfield calls making wine in Marin "high risk, high quality, high personality." This year's harvest was particularly difficult but that's no anomaly; because of the small amounts of wine produced and years when there's little or no harvest, many Marin wines are sold only by the winery with a few available at local restaurants.

Marin growers are dedicating more acreage to wine grapes, diversifying their plantings and as a result, are attracting new winemakers. With 13 wineries now operating in Marin and Marin grapes used in more and more bottlings, Marin's wine footprint is still small but growing — more reason to drink local this holiday season.

### HOLIDAY PAIRINGS

DeLoach Stubbs chardonnay: Great with crab and crab dip, soft cheeses, simple sweet potatoes  
 DeLoach Marin County pinot noir: Try with sturdier meats such as lamb or prime rib  
 Kendric Marin County pinot noir: Try with cranberry sauce and pear mushroom stuffing; or with brown baking spices such as mace in apple pie  
 Dutton Goldfield Devil's Gulch Vineyard pinot noir: Available dinner at the Buckeye Roadhouse  
 Point Reyes Vineyard blanc de noir: Beautiful with oysters stuffing  
 Easkoot Chileno Valley pinot noir: Great with tofu spring rolls with mango, kale salad, herbed stuffing or Cowgirl Creamery Red Hawk cheese  
 Pacheco Ranch, Marin County Estate Bottled cabernet sauvignon: Try with filet mignon or prime rib with horseradish cream sauce

### STOP BY AND SIP

- Point Reyes Vineyard, Point Reyes; noon to 5 p.m. weekends through May 31; noon to 5 p.m. Fridays through Mondays, May 31 through to Nov. 14; 800-516-1011; <http://ptreyesvineyardinn.com>
- Pey-Marín, Olema Inn, 10,000 Sir Francis Drake Blvd., Olema; noon to 4 p.m. daily; 455-WINE; [www.marinwines.com](http://www.marinwines.com)

### TASTING LOCALLY

Many local restaurants and wine shops offer Marin wines, including Buckeye Roadhouse in Mill Valley, 123 Bolinas Wine Bar and Restaurant in Fairfax, Picco in Larkspur, Ludwig's Fine Wines in San Anselmo and Whole Foods Markets.

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**Pam Strayer** · ★ Top Commenter · Oakland, California  
 It would be nice if some of them would be certified organic in their viticulture.  
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**David Donery** · Works at Town of San Anselmo, CA  
 Although the grapes aren't from Marin, the Kendric Syrah (2007) is out of this world, and Stu is a great guy.  
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