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Sonoma Wine Producers We Love

Thanks to its patchwork quilt of varied soils and microclimates, Sonoma County's million-plus acres grow heat-seeking Cabernet and Merlot as easily as they do heat-shy grapes like Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir. Located an hour north of San Francisco, the county is hemmed in between the Pacific and the Mayacamas Mountains, which funnel ocean-driven fog. The prestigious Russian River Valley turns out world-class Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, as does the Sonoma Coast region. Warmer regions such as parts of the Alexander Valley and Knights Valley turn out polished Cabernet and Merlot, along with some lush Chardonnays. Dry Creek valley is ideal for Zinfandel. Sonoma Valley produces perhaps the most diverse wines, with firm reds coming from hillside vines and cool-climate grapes thriving in the valley's southern end.



Flowers Sea View Ridge Vineyard in Sonoma.
Photo courtesy of Flowers Vineyard and Winery

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Sonoma Wine Producers A-L

Alysian

Gary Farrell sold his namesake Russian River winery in 2004 with the intention of slowing down. But this meticulous Pinot wizard can't seem to help himself. Three years later he debuted Alysian, which delivers benchmark Russian River Pinot Noir and Chardonnay sourced from a handful of stellar vineyards.

Benovia

Joe Anderson and Mary Dewane purchased an established vineyard along Sonoma's Westside Road (the Park Avenue of Pinot addresses) to create this ambitious Russian River winery (they've since accumulated other vineyard sites). Their second savvy move was partnering with talented Hartford Court veteran Mike Sullivan; he crushed Benovia's first vintage in 2006.

Buena Vista Winery

Founded in 1857 by a Hungarian nobleman, California's oldest premium winery has had its ups and downs over the years. But Buena Vista is on an upswing

now, with a range of quality single-vineyard Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs from the cool Carneros region and an ambitious new owner, Boisset Family Estates.

Dutton-Goldfield Winery

Steve Dutton's late father was one of Sonoma's best-known grape growers, supplying fruit to many of the region's most esteemed wineries from the family's Dutton Ranch. While the Dutton family still sells most of its grapes, Steve and winemaker Dan Goldfield (Hartford Court, La Crema) cherry-pick some of the top Chardonnay and Pinot lots for their joint venture.

Flowers Vineyard & Winery

Walt and Joan Flowers planted their first Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in 1991 on the foggy Sonoma Coast. They were among the first to see the area's potential for great vineyards—especially on high ridges on the fog line. Their lush Chardonnays and refined Pinots gave the district credibility and remain among its stars.

Gallo Family Vineyards

Gifted winemaker Gina Gallo and her vineyard manager brother Matt redefined global giant E. & J. Gallo by teaming up to create this higher-end Sonoma label. Anchored by the Sonoma Reserve tier, which features bottlings from every key Sonoma subregion, the portfolio gains luster from three single-vineyard wines and, at the top, two acclaimed estate cuvées.

Hanzell Vineyards

Though a lot of California Chardonnays and Pinots are all about instant gratification—i.e., they offer loads of sweet fruit and oak but fade quickly—Hanzell's wines start to bloom only after many years in bottle. Shy when released, these long-lived, Sonoma-grown wines, made since 1957, reward those with patience.

Hirsch Vineyards

Before he got into the wine business for himself, in 2002, David Hirsch sold his grapes to a notable list of Sonoma's top winemakers. He has spent nearly three decades decoding the wild jumble of different soils in his extraordinary Sonoma Coast vineyard, and the expertise he gained in the process made the winery's site-specific cuvées—sumptuous Pinot Noirs and a Chardonnay—instantly famous.

Jordan Vineyard & Winery

Jordan produces just two wines each year. Winemaker Rob Davis worked with the legendary André Tchelistcheff to craft the Sonoma estate's first Cabernet in 1976; more than 30 years later, he still favors a muscular, old-school style. Meanwhile, the Chardonnay has taken on a brighter, more elegant cast, thanks to a recent move to Russian River Valley fruit.

Kendall-Jackson

This Sonoma-based megabrand maintains impressive standards despite its size. Almost all grapes come from 15,000 acres of estate vines amassed by the company's late founder, Jess Jackson, which gives winemaster Randy Ullom unusual control over quality. Best known for its Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay, the KJ portfolio includes many great single-vineyard offerings.

La Crema

Elizabeth Grant-Douglas was apprenticed to Melissa Stackhouse for years before taking over her boss's job as La Crema's winemaker in 2010. Under Stackhouse, La Crema rebuilt its reputation for superb Chardonnay and Pinot, while turning out large quantities of each. Grant-Douglas continues to source from cool-climate vineyards, a key to La Crema's continued resurgence.

Laurel Glen Vineyard

In the 1980s, Patrick Campbell's structured Sonoma Mountain wines helped prove that Napa's neighbor could produce top-tier Cabernet, too. In 2011, Campbell sold Laurel Glen to Bettina Sichel, who enlisted star consultant David Ramey and organic viticulture guru Phil Coturri to put their stamp on the wines, which are made from grapes grown on a single 16-acre estate.

LIOCO

Buddies Kevin O'Connor (former sommelier) and Matt Licklider (ex-wine importer) launched this Chardonnay- and Pinot-focused project in 2005. Their LIOCO wines (the moniker is a mash-up of their surnames) are sourced from premier vineyards in places like Anderson Valley and the Sonoma Coast, and reflect the duo's shared passion for minimalist winemaking (low to no barrel aging, wild yeasts) and old vines.

Louis M. Martini Winery

This Sonoma producer started out making jug wines in 1933, with quality rising over the years. The biggest jump occurred after Gallo bought the winery in 2002, leaving Michael Martini in charge of winemaking. Thanks to his talent and Gallo's deep pockets, the wines are rock solid, and top cuvées—such as the Lot No.

1 and Monte Rosso Cabernets—are world-class.

Lynmar Estate

Lynn Fritz grew grapes for other Sonoma wineries before founding Lynmar Estate in 1990. But it wasn't until winemaker Hugh Chappelle arrived in 2004 that this Russian River label broke into the ranks of the region's top producers. Chappelle left in 2010, yet Lynmar's cool-climate wines continue to possess the same expressive flavors and elegance that made them famous.

Sonoma Wine Producers M-Z

MacMurray Ranch

MacMurray Ranch takes its name from a stunning western swath of the Russian River Valley that was once owned by actor Fred MacMurray (of My Three Sons fame). The ranch, now owned by Gallo, provides a portion of the grapes for MacMurray's Pinot-focused portfolio, which includes bottlings from some of California's top Pinot regions and Oregon's Willamette Valley, along with some cool-climate whites.

MacRostie Winery & Vineyards

Steve MacRostie's wines come from a prestigious region (Sonoma Coast) and get all of the TLC associated with high-profile labels—yet they remain under the radar. MacRostie started making Sonoma Coast Pinot and Chardonnay with purchased fruit; in 1997 he planted his own vines on Wildcat Mountain and added Syrah to the mix. Although MacRostie sold the winery in 2011, winemaker Kevin Holt remains.

Merry Edwards Winery

Merry Edwards first made wine under her own name in 1997, focusing on small quantities of cool-climate Pinot Noir, plus a Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. Edwards has honed her craft for nearly 40 California vintages, with early experience at pioneering wineries such as Mount Eden and Matanzas Creek. Her background shows in her bold, supremely balanced wines.

Murphy-Goode

Though Murphy-Goode has been part of Jackson Family Wines since 2006, the Murphy family still maintains the vineyards, and David Ready, Jr., son of an original partner, makes these tasty, large-volume wines. The portfolio contained just white wines in the pre-Jackson years; now some reds are in the mix.

Peay Vineyards

There's just one Peay vineyard, a 51-acre site spreading over a dramatic ridge at Sonoma's northwestern edge. Its cool, windy climate makes ripening grapes a nail-biting exercise for winemaker Vanessa Wong and the Peay brothers, Nick and Andy, who planted their vines in the late '90s. The payoff comes in vibrant, expressive wines with an emphatic sense of place.

Ramey Wine Cellars

As winemaker for boutique producers like Chalk Hill, Matanzas Creek and Rudd, David Ramey wowed both critics and his peers. For the past 17 years he has run his own Sonoma outfit. His exceptional single-vineyard Chardonnays have become collectors' favorites; his Cabernet and Syrahs show equal finesse.

Ravenswood

When Joel Peterson started making Zinfandel in the 1970s, most Americans knew it only as a sweet pink (a.k.a. blush) pour called White Zinfandel. Peterson's evangelism for bold, full-throttle Zin helped sway a generation of wine drinkers and created a wildly successful megabrand, now owned by wine giant Constellation. Site-specific Zins top the broad portfolio.

Rochioli Vineyards & Winery

The Rochioli family had been farming for decades when they began making wine under this Sonoma Valley label in the mid-'80s. Joe, Jr., and Tom Rochioli now run the show. It can take years to get on the winery's mailing list for their Burgundy-inspired single-vineyard reds and whites, but luckily their other offerings are more widely available.

Sebastiani Vineyards & Winery

Although the Sebastiani family sold its Sonoma winery back in 2008, winemaker Mark Lyon stayed on. His wines showcase the region's diversity, as he specializes in matching grape to place. Sebastiani's Zinfandel from Dry Creek, Chardonnay from Alexander Valley and Pinot from the temperate Russian River region offer high quality at wallet-friendly prices.

Simi Winery

Although other Sonoma wineries are older than Simi, none of them kept operating straight through Prohibition, as Simi did, thanks to a legal loophole. Today its entry-level Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon make two reliable, well-priced choices, and Simi's excellent small-production wines (crafted by skilled winemaker Steve Reeder) are well worth the step up in price.

Williams Selyem

Only the most determined (and deep-pocketed) fans are able to get their hands on one of Williams Selyem's single-vineyard Pinot Noirs, old-vine Zinfandels or Chardonnays—these coveted bottlings show up mostly at auction or on posh restaurants' wine lists. Happily, the Russian River Valley estate's winemaker, Bob Cabral, produces five more-accessible, multivineyard wines.

Woodenhead Vintners

Thoughtfully made small-production North Coast Pinot and Zinfandel are the focus at Nick Stetz and Zina Bower's Woodenhead Vintners. Stetz's soulful wines reflect many of the light-handed Burgundian techniques he picked up while working as assistant winemaker to Burt Williams of Williams Selyem.

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