

A Pause for Pinot: New Faces in California Pinot Noir

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We've tasted more California Pinot Noirs this year than ever before, including dozens from new producers. Here we've sifted through the newcomers to profile some of the most promising. While there is a unique story behind each project, one thing is clear about the producers in this group—they have a lot of previous wine experience. Some are grapegrowers turned winemakers, others have been successful with other grape varieties (including some prominent Napa Valley Cabernets). Most of their wines are made in small quantities, but are worth searching for.

ARISTA

Arista was founded by six members of the McWilliams family in 2002, but the family's first venture in wine began 12 years ago when they purchased a 40-acre vineyard in Alexander Valley, growing Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. But Pinot Noir is the McWilliamses' true passion. Currently, Arista makes Pinot from six different vineyards, but by 2010 bottlings should include grapes from the winery's own 12-acre Pinot Noir vineyard on Westside Road in Russian River Valley (where Rochioli and Williams Selyem are neighbors), developed with the help of vineyard specialist Ulises Valdez.

| Score | Wine | Price | Production |
|-------|---|-------|------------|
| 90 | Russian River Valley Mononi Vineyard 2005 | \$54 | 200 cases |
| 89 | Anderson Valley Ferrington Vineyard 2005 | \$54 | 200 cases |
| 87 | Russian River Valley Longbow 2005 | \$48 | 600 cases |

ASTON

Aston is a new label from Fred Schrader and winemaker Thomas Brown, the team behind the stunning Schrader Napa Valley To Kalon Cabernets; a third principal is Chuck Sweeney of Vine Cliff. The 40-acre Sonoma Coast estate is planted with 15 acres of Pinot Noir, composed of three different clones on two separate sites. Like the Schrader Cabernets, the Aston wines carry the clonal selections on the labels. "We don't just [list the clones] because we think it will be cute, we do it because we find there's a distinct difference between the clones," says Schrader. The project is expanding; this year, an additional 10 acres was planted to more Pinot Noir along with Chardonnay and Syrah. The new venture is called Boar's View, a nod to the neighboring vineyard of Marcassin (French for "wild boar").

| Score | Wine | Price | Production |
|-------|---------------------------------|-------|------------|
| 90 | Sonoma Coast Clone 777 2006 | \$65 | 450 cases |
| 89 | Sonoma Coast Clone 115/667 2006 | \$65 | 225 cases |

FAVIA

Winemaker Andy Erickson (Screaming Eagle, Ovid) and his wife, viticulturist Annie Favia (Screaming Eagle, Abreu), first made a Pinot Noir together in 1996 with the intention of starting their own label, but it didn't happen right away. "We wised up and decided to buy a house and start a family before starting a wine label," says Erickson. Instead of selling the wine, they gave it away to friends and served it at their wedding. Yet in 2003, the couple resurrected the idea of a joint label and debuted that year with two wines, including a Russian River Pinot Noir. Favia gives the couple an opportunity to make small lots of wine from unique vineyard sites. "We get to play around," says Erickson. "We love Pinot Noir, and we love Russian River Valley." Current releases also include small lots of two Amador bottlings (one Syrah and another Rhône-style blend) and two Napa Valley Cabernet Franc-based wines.

| Score | Wine | Price | Production |
|-------|---------------------------------------|-------|------------|
| 88 | Russian River Valley La Josefina 2005 | \$65 | 275 cases |

FOURSIGHT

The name refers to the four family members behind this project as well as to their efforts to look ahead to future generations. It started when Bill and Nancy Charles planted a 15-acre vineyard in Anderson Valley near Boonville in 2001. The Charleses first sold grapes to Navarro, Schramsberg and Papapietro Perry, keeping only enough to make one barrel of Pinot Noir for themselves. "We were consistently impressed [with our wines]," says daughter Kristy Charles, also executive director of the Anderson Valley Winegrowers Association. Along with fiancé Joseph Webb (a wine-business grad), she took the plunge with her family to debut their label, sourced solely from their estate vineyard, with the 2006 vintage.

| Score | Wine | Price | Production |
|-------|---------------------------------------|-------|------------|
| 91 | Anderson Valley Charles Vineyard 2006 | \$46 | 425 cases |

FREESTONE

Joe Phelps originally wanted to find a new place to grow Chardonnay, to expand a portfolio that includes some of the best-known Cabernet-based wines from Napa Valley—the Insignia and Backus bottlings. But when the winemaking team examined the 100 acres they purchased in the Sonoma Coast near the town of Freestone in 1999, they found it better suited to Pinot Noir (currently about 80 percent is Pinot and the rest Chardonnay). Now Joseph Phelps Vineyards and Freestone are separate entities. The Freestone winery was completed in 2007, with a focus on "regional winemaking," explains director of winemaking Damian Parker.

| Score | Wine | Price | Production |
|-------|-------------------|-------|-------------|
| 90 | Sonoma Coast 2006 | \$75 | 2,700 cases |
| 89 | Sonoma Coast 2005 | \$75 | 600 cases |

KEEFER

Marcy Keefer and her late husband, Robert Keefer (a former nurse and doctor, respectively), purchased their Russian River Valley property in 1985, planting 30 acres of Pinot Noir and 20 acres of Chardonnay in 1988. The vineyard supplies grapes to Failla, Kosta Browne and Siduri, among others, but, explains Marcy, "We ended up with an acre that wasn't planted to anything, so we decided to plant the Swan clone of Pinot Noir. We didn't plan on selling it, and when we got the fruit we decided [to make our own wine]." The 2006 bottling is the initial release. Son Craig Strehlow is winemaker.

| Score | Wine | Price | Production |
|-------|---------------------------|-------|------------|
| 90 | Russian River Valley 2006 | \$42 | 143 cases |

KOKOMO

Erik Miller cut his wine teeth in the cellars of Belvedere and Amphora before founding his own brand in 2004, named after his Indiana hometown. Kokomo focuses on Sonoma-grown wines, and Miller purchases grapes from seven different vineyard sites there. The Pinot Noirs have been most impressive—rich and full-bodied, with complex flavors.

| Score | Wine | Price | Production |
|-------|--|-------------|------------------|
| 91 | Sonoma Coast Winemaker's Reserve Peters Vineyard 2005 | \$45 | 220 cases |
| 88 | Sonoma Coast Winemaker's Reserve Peters Vineyard 2006 | \$45 | 300 cases |

LA ROCHELLE

La Rochelle was founded in 2002 by members of the Mirassou family after the Mirassou brand was sold to Gallo. Steven Kent Mirassou acquired it from family members in 2005 and moved the operation to Livermore, where he also runs the Steven Kent Winery, a Bordeaux-grape specialist. La Rochelle (named for the French port city where the Mirassou ancestors lived) focuses solely on Pinot Noir, made from more than a dozen vineyards in nine appellations. Most of the wines come from Santa Lucia Highlands. Tom Stutz is winemaker.

| Score | Wine | Price | Production |
|-------|---|-------|------------|
| 92 | Santa Lucia Highlands Garys' Vineyard 2005 | \$52 | 231 cases |
| 90 | Santa Lucia Highlands 2005 | \$38 | 364 cases |
| 88 | Monterey 2005 | \$24 | 238 cases |
| 88 | Santa Lucia Highlands Sleepy Hollow Vineyard Block A 2005 | \$38 | 146 cases |

PAUL MATHEW

Winemaker Mat Gustafson's path to Paul Mathew includes 20 years in the restaurant business (as sommelier, manager and wine buyer) and retail sales, along with stints in wine cellars. "Even the jobs that I thought were a total waste of time ultimately added up to me being a winemaker," notes Gustafson. Paul Mathew was founded in 1999 with business partner Paul Sloan, but Gustafson took over the brand in 2002, focusing on Pinot Noir, his favorite grape. He is also winemaker at Dutton Estate.

| Score | Wine | Price | Production |
|-------|---|-------|------------|
| 91 | Russian River Valley Ruxton Vineyard 2006 | \$35 | 218 cases |
| 88 | Russian River Valley TNT Vineyard 2006 | \$35 | 272 cases |