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California's Coolest New Pinot Noir Appellation

On Wine: Jay McInerney

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IN 1992, the year before they founded their influential winery, Littorai Wines, Ted Lemon and his then-fiancée, Heidi, traveled the length of the West Coast, from Walla Walla, Wash., to Los Angeles, looking for terrain suitable for Pinot Noir. Trained in Burgundy, with a two-year stint as the winemaker for Domaine Roulot under his belt, Mr. Lemon was looking for sites cool enough for Burgundy's signature red grape. They found something special in the Anderson Valley, a remote corner of Mendocino County, Calif., better known for cannabis than for grapes (the marijuana industry in Mendocino County is an estimated \$6 billion). "We did not find greatness," Mr. Lemon recalled of their tasting of the few local Pinots available. "But there was a purity of expression in the best of them that really resonated with us."

Twenty-two years later, the Anderson Valley is still sparsely populated and ruggedly beautiful. It's also arguably California's coolest new Pinot Noir appellation—literally and figuratively. Fifteen years ago, the Russian River Valley was the ne plus ultra of Pinot appellations. Today, many of California's most influential Pinot makers, like Eric Sussman of Radio-Coteau and Kevin Harvey of Rhys Vineyards, have flocked to this narrow valley, some 15 miles long.

Waking up one recent morning in the Boonville hotel, at the southern end of the valley, I found the small town shrouded in fog. As I walked out into the courtyard, a tall tousle-haired figure emerged from the mist—winemaker Wells Guthrie, who told me this misting was a daily occurrence. "The marine layer gradually recedes up the valley toward the Pacific over the course of the day," he said. Indeed, by the time we finished breakfast, the fog had retreated, following the Navarro River up to the deep end of the valley, moderating the heat.

The weather is one reason the Anderson Valley is so well suited for Pinot Noir, which gets too ripe in California's warmer regions. The grape ripens in the early fall, at about the same time as another crop. "We're always competing with the pot growers for pickers," Mr. Guthrie said.

Mr. Guthrie was working as a tasting coordinator for the Wine Spectator in the mid-1990s when he "fell in love" with Mr. Lemon's newly launched Littorai Wines, including a Pinot Noir from Rich Savoy's Deer Meadows vineyard in Anderson Valley. Mr. Guthrie spent two years apprenticing in the Rhône Valley before returning to California and taking a job with winemaker Ehren Jordan at Turley Wine Cellars. In 1999, Mr. Guthrie founded his own winery, Copain Wines. He bought grapes from all over California, and made a name for himself with big, brawny Syrahs that scored high with critics.

But he became increasingly infatuated with Pinot Noir and he found that his palate was changing. The wines he was making didn't have the finesse of the Northern Rhône he loved, nor of Mr. Lemon's Pinots. "My old wines started to seem dumb and clunky," said Mr. Guthrie. In 2004 he visited Burgundy and was deeply impressed by what he saw and tasted. "My idea of ripeness changed," he told me as we drove from Boonville toward the cooler end of the valley. Mr. Guthrie started picking earlier to achieve more finesse and increasingly sourced his grapes from the Anderson Valley, dropping contracts in warmer areas.

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The move wasn't popular with devotees of his old style. He lost half his mailing list in 2006 after getting low scores from the Wine Advocate, but he gradually became something of a cult hero among sommeliers and Burgundy lovers. As we drove north, he pointed out the Savoy Vineyard, source of the renowned Littorai Pinot. We eventually pulled into a driveway below a steep hillside vineyard, where Ernest Kiser, a cheerful septuagenarian, greeted us. Mr. Guthrie has been buying grapes from Mr. Kiser for over a decade, and they are the source of his best-known Pinot Noirs. When we climbed out of Mr. Guthrie's Jeep, the air was distinctly colder than it had been in Boonville. If one wanted to make big, ripe, alcoholic wines, this probably wouldn't be the place to do it. The deep end of the valley is a marginal climate for ripening grapes, so much so that Mr. Guthrie has lost two vintages to frost. But he's of the belief that complexity in Pinot is achieved when the grapes struggle to achieve ripeness.



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Mr. Guthrie's winery is located in the Russian River Valley, home to some of Sonoma's most famous Pinot Noirs, but he thinks his acreage there is too warm for Pinot. He's actually ripped up the Pinot vines around the winery to plant other varieties.

Burt Williams, the man who put the Russian River Valley on the map as the winemaker at Williams Selyem, migrated to the Anderson Valley after selling his interest in his namesake winery in 1998. He planted a vineyard on a hillside in the deep end of the valley. He dubbed it Morning Dew Ranch, for reasons that became obvious when I hiked the rows of glistening vines around 10 a.m., with winemaker Jason Drew, who buys some of his fruit from Mr. Williams.

Mr. Drew, the proprietor of Drew Family Cellars in nearby Elk, Calif. (population 208), is another cool-climate seeker who made his name with his Syrah and eventually found his way to the Anderson Valley. When I first encountered him, more than a decade ago, he was making Syrah and Pinot in the Santa Ynez Valley, hundreds of miles south of Mendocino. In 2004, he bought property on the Mendocino Ridge, which sits between the Anderson Valley and the coast. He started buying and vinifying Pinot from several vineyards in the valley, when the appellation was still little known. "Now it's getting really hard for outsiders to buy fruit," he said. "I get calls every week from people who want to buy grapes."

Among the recent arrivals who have contributed to the valley's cred among Pinotphiles is the team from Anthill Farms, a collective of young winemakers who met when they were all working as cellar rats for Williams Selyem a decade ago and who now have day jobs at other wineries. Webster Marquez, Anthony Filiberti and David Low are based in Healdsburg, Calif., and buy Pinot grapes from a variety of cooler Northern California sites, including several vineyards just above the town of Boonville.

Tempting as it is to make generalizations about Anderson Valley Pinots, Mr. Lemon points out that singularity is what Pinot lovers look for—the specific expression of a particular site. "There are dramatic differences in wine styles from vineyard to vineyard, from the valley floor at Boonville to the valley floor at the deep end and up and down the hills," he said. Pinots from the Anderson Valley have some common characteristics: They are likely to be medium-bodied, more savory than sweet, and closer to the red- rather than black-fruit end of the spectrum.

And yet, tasting the different vineyard bottlings of Littorai or Copain or Drew Family Cellars is a lesson in the concept of terroir—the belief that the best wines are unique expressions of their particular place of origin, that a Kiser Pinot is different from a Pinot from Burgundy, or the Sonoma Coast, or even from the vineyard just down the road.

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