

Taking root

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When the fog is thick and blustery along Highway 1 near Jenner, it's hard to imagine that just a few miles up from the sea is warmth and sun. But this defining anomaly is exactly the point of the new Fort Ross-Seaview American Viticultural Area, established last January as a separate 27,500-acre chunk of the sprawling Sonoma Coast AVA.



Kent Porter / PD

Fort Ross Vineyards and Winery owner Linda Schwartz on the deck off the tasting room above the Pacific Ocean on the rugged Sonoma County Coast.

The wooded and mountainous acreage within Fort Ross-Seaview is savagely remote. That the few affected vineyard owners and wineries persisted in their quest to carve Fort Ross-Seaview out of a perfectly marketable but much larger AVA is symbolic of their willingness to put up with a lot out here — the hard, steep farming, the low yields, the cold and lonely, drippingly wet winters.

Linda Schwartz of Fort Ross Vineyards is among the hardy who took up the cause of establishing a separate AVA. Her vineyard, up a little less than three miles from Highway 1 on Meyers Grade Road, is the closest to the ocean. She now has the first regularly open tasting room in the new AVA as well.

“The Sonoma Coast (appellation) most people accept is political, not viticultural,” she said. “It's one of those fairytale stories, because everyone's happy now and very pleased that the AVA is going to be clarified.”

Though the total acreage of Fort Ross-Seaview is vast, vineyards occupy but a scant 500 or so acres, all above the fog on a contiguous 920-foot elevation line, with some rising to 1,800 feet. The ocean is as close as half a mile and no farther than 2½ miles away, but because of the elevation, above the fog during the peak growing season, the vines get the sun they need.

The combination of coolness and sun that distinguishes this ridge-top appellation make it especially ideal for pinot noir and chardonnay, though smaller amounts of zinfandel, petite sirah, syrah and pinot grow, too.

“It's a really unique climate,” said Daniel Schoenfeld of Wild Hog Vineyard, one of the few physical wineries in the AVA. “It's extreme, it's really rugged, but that's what makes us what we are and helps the grapes to create some real character.”

Schoenfeld, a former professional musician, came to Fort Ross-Seaview in 1973 as a back-to-the-land hippie. He started planting grapes in 1980, experimenting first with half an acre of zinfandel and half an acre of gewürztraminer, which didn't like the climate and has since been grafted over to more zinfandel. In addition to petite sirah, which he blends into his zin, he tends to 3 acres of pinot noir with a small corner of syrah.

Around the time Schoenfeld arrived, Michael Bohan was planting the first 2 acres of

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post-Prohibition-era grapes three miles east of Fort Ross, between Seaview Road and Creighton Ridge. He planted more in 1974 and started selling the grapes in 1976.

He was followed in 1980 by David Hirsch, considered one of the most important figures in the Fort Ross story, and the co-petitioner with geologist Patrick Shabram in 2003 for creating the Fort Ross-Seaview AVA.

The Fort Ross name comes from the outpost set up by Russian fur trappers 200 years ago, their southernmost outpost in the Pacific Northwest until 1841. Today it's the site of Fort Ross State Historic Park, a reconstructed version of the fort built on a jut below tiny Seaview, once a stagecoach stop. Fort Ross and Seaview roads intersect to the north.

Schwartz and her husband, Lester, a trained geologist and lawyer, came in 1994, preparing the land themselves before planting grapes in 1998, sharing a fence line with Flowers Vineyards & Winery (first planted in 1991) to the north of their 1,000-acre property, only 50 of which is planted.

“We just worked really hard, went to bed early and planted,” she said. “We put in about 18 different varieties but the only ones that could function were from Burgundy. They had the purity of flavor and brightness and vibrancy.”

They planted carefully north to south so the wind would go through the grape rows instead of knocking them down.

“We can get up to 125 inches of rain a year here,” she added. “In summer there's not enough water. It's extreme, all extremes. Being so close to the ocean, we don't leach away minerality, so we have structure, and being above the fog, we can ripen the fruit.”

They are relentlessly pro-active in the vineyard, ensuring grape bunches aren't covered by leaves or too close to one another, as every ounce of sunshine and wind is crucial for even ripening. This equates to meager tonnages, averaging from half a ton per acre to two.

Still, extreme conditions managed right produce extremely complex wines. Along with Fort Ross, Bohan, Wild Hog, Hirsch and Flowers, other notable growers in the Fort Ross-Seaview AVA are Failla, Marcassin, Martinelli, Pahlmeyer and Peter Michael. Fruit from the Precious Mountain Vineyard on Creighton Road goes to Williams Selyem.

“What'll be interesting over time,” noted Hirsch, one of the few to live and farm full-time in the AVA, “is if we maintain a good balance between farming the land and winemaking.”

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