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The Pride of Mount Tam

W. Blake Gray | Photo: Lauren Tamaki | July 14, 2016

After years spent in the shadows of big, fruity reds, Marin's pinot noirs are having a moment.



Before I tell you about Marin County pinot noir, and why it's special, and why nobody appreciated it a decade ago, and why it's fast becoming a fetish for wine lovers in the Bay Area, I want to break one of my rules of telling wine stories.

Normally, I hate stories that begin, "I'm standing in the middle of..." Yeah, yeah, you went to Champagne, bully for you, pal. But this particular story is just so Marin County.

I'm sitting on the edge of a hot tub; of course I am. I'm surrounded by vintners in a semicircle like it's a pagan ritual. Cowboy-hat-wearing ranch owner Mark Pasternak paces barefoot on the wooden porch as a friend of his chops up a barbecued pig in the next room. I worry about Pasternak's feet, but it's his porch, his splinters. If only somebody were drinking wheatgrass juice.

So here we are, having just tasted 25 Marin County wines, and I'm asking why Marin's pinot noirs are trendy now. Why sommeliers want them on their wine lists. What, exactly, has changed? Is it global warming?

Bolinas-based winemaker Sean Thackrey nails it with a sentence: "What you call 'quality' isn't something we said 20 years ago was quality."

One of the biggest trends in California wine in the last decade has been the dialing back of ripeness. Fruit bombs are still popular, but a lighter style of red wine has blossomed as an alternative. What once seemed like a niche has, thanks to the growing influence of sommeliers, become an important movement.

"With Marin at its best, you get that density that you love from California pinot, but the alcohol levels aren't that high," says Dutton-Goldfield winemaker Dan Goldfield, who has been making Marin pinot longer than almost anyone else. "The best of Marin, they're not fruit bombs. There's more mushroom and *animale*"—a French term that in reference to wine roughly translates as "gamy"—"out of these wines. It's a real cold place."

The first California commercial grape growers in the 1800s, and also after Prohibition, wanted a big, reliable crop, so they planted in warm, dry areas: Napa, Lodi, Fresno. Vines were slow to come to cooler areas because they wouldn't yield as many grapes. This didn't really change until the 1990s, and by then most of the best parts of Marin for viticulture were covered by houses. The foggy chill in Marin that makes you bring an extra layer to go hiking on Mount Tamalpais prevented the county from taking a major role in California wine.

Now, the story of Northern California grape growing is the reverse of its history: a push into cooler areas,

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including many that may have been incapable of producing wine a generation ago. Finally there is an audience for the kind of wine Marin County not only can do well, but must do. Global warming may have played some role, as even a small temperature increase can make a difference in farming a climate-sensitive crop like wine grapes, but the more important development has been farming techniques better suited to producing a smaller crop of better-quality wine grapes.

Grapes take longer to mature in cool, foggy spots. A farmer in Fresno might finish picking all his wine grapes by the first week of September, while in places like Marin County it's not unheard of to harvest in November. This can be risky for the farmer, as heavy rain late in the season can ruin the crop. But grapes that take extra months to fully ripen often develop more complex flavors. Risk versus reward is a major trade-off in deciding where to plant a vineyard.

The best pinot noir is now believed to come from the most marginal areas, where the grapes barely ripen before the vines shut down for the winter. That's Marin: as marginal as California winegrowing gets. In 2005, when the rest of California was celebrating what was at the time the state's largest grape harvest, Pasternak got just four and a half tons of grapes from his entire 18-acre vineyard on Devil's Gulch Ranch—about what premium farmers expect from a single acre.

Moreover, the grapes from Marin County aren't magazine pretty. "When the fruit comes in, it looks terrible," says Jeff Restel, associate winemaker for Dutton-Goldfield. "If you didn't know where it was from, you wouldn't expect anything from it. I have to tell people at the winery to respect it. That's the most expensive fruit we have."

In 1990, the first time he tried to sell his grapes to make red wine (he had sold some for sparkling wine), Pasternak couldn't give them away. "I called [winemaker] Tony Soter, and I called Rochioli [winery], and I called all the usual suspects," Pasternak says. "I said, 'I've got some Marin County pinot noir. For free. Do you want it?' I called all these people who said, 'Marin? Not interested.'"

Pasternak and a few other growers persisted, but the Marin wine scene a decade ago was tiny. The top wines as rated by the *Wine Advocate* and *Wine Spectator* were typically big-bodied with a high alcohol content. This is what Thackrey means: The best wines Marin could make were not then considered "quality."

Now, though, as sommeliers push a lighter style of wine, Marin pinot is finally finding vindication. "I like the wines," says Shannon Tucker, general manager and wine director at the Mission's Foreign Cinema. "They're balanced. They're elegant. They show true coastal characteristics."

People with money have noticed. For years, Dutton-Goldfield and Thackrey were the biggest names in Marin pinot. Then Burgundy-born Jean-Charles Boisset, owner of Napa's Raymond Vineyards, became a fan; his DeLoach Vineyards is making a Marin pinot. And McEvoy Ranch, which is owned by the heirs of the *San Francisco Chronicle* founder, makes two Marin pinots.

The biggest name, however, comes from outside the wine business. *Star Wars* creator George Lucas likes merlot, so he originally ordered that grape planted at his Skywalker Vineyards in northern Marin. "George brought it to the dinner table with Francis [Ford Coppola], and Francis said, 'What are you going to do with it?'" recalls Scott McLeod, a winemaker for Coppola at the time. Merlot needs more sun than pinot; McLeod convinced Lucas to expand with pinot noir, even though it wasn't his favorite, and found himself with a new job as Skywalker Vineyards' winemaker.

"George is really committed to the integrity and the honesty of the project," McLeod says. "He gives us carte blanche to do that. He knows he's got something special. Wine will never be his first love. But he's from Modesto—he's a self-made man and picked grapes when he was in high school."

Skywalker Vineyards makes almost 1,000 cases of wine annually, and Lucas's name has helped earn distribution throughout the country. That's not the case for most Marin pinots, which are tiny-production and far more likely to appear in San Francisco restaurants than anywhere else in the world.

"A lot of people have never had a Marin pinot noir before," says Jeremiah Morehouse, wine director at Restaurant Gary Danko. "That definitely helps when you talk about the Goliath that is Sonoma pinot noir. Marin pinot noir is more of a David. Because of the lightness of the style and the more delicate flavors, they're a lot more versatile. There are not many reds that pair well with vegetable-based dishes. As we get into the spring and the summer, we're going to get a lot more of that kind of dish. Marin County pinots, with that lighter style, are perfect for it. They're not heavy or syrupy. They have that kind of delicacy."

Fortunately for Marin pinot, "delicacy" can now equal "quality"—and you don't need to be sitting in a hot tub full of vintners to experience it.

Made in Marin

Where to find some of the county's best bottles.

Pey-Marin "Trois Filles" Marin County pinot noir 2013

Ripe cherry with good length and intensity. \$40 at *Brix 26 Wines*, (415) 409-4295, or *Golden Gate Wine Cellars*, (415) 337-4083

Dutton-Goldfield Devil's Gulch Vineyard Marin County pinot noir 2012

Medium-bodied and spicy. One of the best-known Marin pinots, it frequently appears on San Francisco wine lists. \$68 (for the 2013) from *Wine Stars*, *Santa Rosa*, (800) 883-1838

Terrien Marin County pinot noir 2014

Lean and dry with some minerality. Though not sold retail, it can—when available—be found on wine lists like the one at the Progress.

Easkoot Chileno Valley Vineyard Marin County pinot noir 2013

Just 12.5 percent alcohol, this is one of the lightest pinots you'll find, but it's fruit-driven. The 2014 is sold for \$35 online at [ludwigsfinewine.com](http://www.ludwigsfinewine.com) (<http://www.ludwigsfinewine.com/index.asp>).



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Easkoot Marin County rosé of pinot noir 2015

Light and pretty, with delicate berry flavors. Sold out at the winery; look for it on wine lists at the Slanted Door and Terzo.

Originally published in the July issue of San Francisco

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