

TO SONOMA

In the western hills of Sonoma County, a group of winemakers is creating wines that are wholly different from the big, ripe and opulent wines for which California has become known. These wines are grown and made in cooler climates, with a deep respect for old-world traditions and a desire to break with the dominant stylistic trends in California. These winemakers are crafting energetic wines that pulse with vibrant, savory and mineral-driven aromas, and ultimately an authentic sense of place that is truly unique.

The hills and valleys of the Sonoma County American Viticultural Area (AVA) produce some of America's most renowned wines, including established producers of Pinot Noir and Zinfandel in the Russian River and Alexander Valleys, as well as the esoteric and cool-climate wines being produced on the Sonoma Coast. It's a widely varied wine growing region, with a great diversity of microclimates and soil types. For winemakers Pax Mahle (Wind Gap), Duncan Meyers (Arnot-Roberts) and Leo Steen, a big part of what allows them to create wines so true to the unique Sonoma County sites where they're grown is the ample time they spend on their bicycles exploring both the rural roads and trails of Sonoma County.

For Duncan Meyers, it's the intimacy between a rider and his surroundings that makes his time on a bicycle such an integral part of his winemaking knowledge. "Growing up in Northern California has allowed Nathan [Nathan Roberts, Duncan's partner in Arnot-Roberts] and I to explore and discover hidden gems that could only be noticed from the saddle of a bike. The ability to feel the changes in climate and soils as you

ride has helped us develop a keen sense of our surroundings and has informed our understanding of the variety of *terroirs* that we have here on the North Coast of California."

Pax Mahle made his reputation crafting some of California's most sought-after Syrah—under the Wind Gap label—enormous broad-shouldered wines that brought in some big scores from the wine press. After a time, though, he tired of this style, and even of his own wines. Seeking to make wines more true to their Rhone origins, wines that go well with food and don't leave you feeling clobbered, Pax sought out the cool vineyard sites of the Sonoma Coast. "The intent is really to allow these cool sites to stand alone as a true expression of the varietal from these fringe sites." For Pax it's the world's greatest cool growing regions that best express *terroir* and the wine in a way that is true.

For Mahle, riding the roads and trails of Sonoma County—as well as some of the world's greatest appellations in France—has given him a sense of the nuances that exist in the region where he's making wine, and how it compares with those old-world regions. "I'd say riding my bike makes me a better winemaker. You see more of the land, understand the aspects, notice climbs that would go unnoticed in a car, and feel the cooling effects of the microclimates in and around the area you are riding through."

2009 Majik Vineyard Syrah

A cool-climate classic with subdued aromatics of crushed stone, smoke, herbs, saffras and wintergreen. The acidity and spicy zing dominate the palate with flavors black pepper, fennel and the faintest hint of red currant. The wine is lithe

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and pulses with an energy that reflects its ample acidity. \$40

2010 Crown's Gap Chardonnay
A substantial departure from your commonplace California Chardonnay experience. This wine is a blend of Chardonnay fermented in stainless steel, neutral oak, as well as in concrete fermenters; the resulting wine is aromatically wild, with aromas of beeswax, wet stone and citrus. This wine spent 18 months in neutral oak to tame its over-the-top acidity, and yet, it's still edgy. Flavors of lemon, pear and limestone appear between a zesty finish and a rounded mouthfeel that's a product of the time spent in oak. \$40

ARNOT-ROBERTS WINE

Arnot-Roberts, the partnership between Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Roberts, has developed a reputation as one of the best cool-climate Syrah producers in California, and has become one of the darlings of the wine *cognoscenti*. These are aromatic and savory wines with alcohol percentages often in the neighborhood of 11%. Duncan and Nathan worked with warmer-climate Syrah when they too, along with Pax Mahle, came to appreciate the cool climate potential of the Petaluma Gap along the Sonoma Coast. In addition to their choice of cool sites, Arnot-Roberts adhere to natural wine production methods by not destemming their grapes during crush and lightly crushing the fruit by foot in order to release small amounts of juice, to initiate fermentation without any manipulation by the winemaker.

2010 Arnot-Roberts, North Coast Syrah

Beautifully dark, yet elegant aromatics of dried violets, spice, herbs, and earth to match its dark-purple hue. This Syrah has an acidity and zing that almost feels like effervescence on the tip of your tongue, and is layered with savory elements of smoke, black olive, pepper and loads

of minerality. A beautiful wine that shows what California can produce at under 12% alcohol. \$40

LEO STEEN WINES

Originally from Denmark, Leo Steen came to California in search of great wines as a wine director for the highly regarded Kong Hans Kaedler of Copenhagen, Denmark's only Michelin star restaurant. The California wine bug bit him and he stuck around. As a winemaker, Leo is most interested in providing an experience that is unique, and so sought to produce a wine outside the popular lexicon of California—which often includes, Pinot Grigio, Pinot Noir, Sauvignon Blanc and, of course, Cabernet Sauvignon. Leo landed on Chenin Blanc, a food-friendly, crisp varietal that can be seen as a

classically noble wine, as is often the case in Europe and elsewhere. In California it has long been viewed as a wine to blend with others. Leo set out to change that and presents a single-varietal Chenin Blanc crafted from 31-year-old vines in the warmer Dry Creek Valley of Sonoma County.

2011 Leo Steen Wines, Chenin Blanc, Saini Farms Vineyard

A white wine that eschews fruity flavors for depth and complexity, this Chenin Blanc displays a substantial backbone of minerality throughout its aromatics and palate. Aromas of wet stone, straw and lemon zest. More than three months of aging on the lees in French oak barrels has given the wine a rounded character. Subtle pear and pineapple flavors backed with substantial minerality. \$18]p[



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