

Celebrating three small, passionate Pinot Noir producers in Anderson Valley

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It strikes most wine drinkers at some point in their wine paths: Pinot passion. The multi-dimensional, seductive aspects of this finicky, oft-loved grape are difficult to avoid. And, when it happens, all you can do is succumb to its wiles and enjoy the comfort it brings. Northern California's Mendocino County, a wine region rich with redwoods, coastal climate and definitely Pinot Noir, has birthed three disparate yet dedicated wineries, proudly wearing their Pinot passion like a badge of honor. And created some gorgeous wine.

Comptche Ridge

Comptche Ridge, a chilly area in Mendocino County, held appeal for the Weir Brothers even in their youth. Mark and John Weir visited the region from San Francisco as children in the 70's but, looking for a place to raise their families, settled in the small town of Comptche in the mid-1990s. They purchased a turn-of-the-century property with natural ridge clearings – think windy and cool. Although untested and daring, they bravely planted Pinot Noir on these ridges in 2000, saw the results and then planted more in 2005, for a total of eight acres.

This tiny winery makes one wine per vintage, a blend of their eight acres of estate vineyards. The 2012 vintage produced only 45 cases. Since their ranch lies "off the grid," their wine is made at Anthill Farms Winery in Healdsburg, California (Sonoma County). Wines high in acid and long on bright, red fruit are what define the Pinots from Comptche Ridge. comptcheridgevineyards.com

Lichen Estates

Doug Stewart, winemaker and proprietor of Lichen Estates, has ridden a wine roller coaster since 2000. Raised in Sonoma County surrounded by vineyards, he caught Pinot passion and bought land in Mendocino County in 2000, back when a 203-acre farm cost less than a condo in San Francisco. He launched his first winery, Breggo, in 2005 and admits he'd "never fermented anything on purpose prior to starting Breggo." But with a background in organic products and business savvy (not to mention an enthusiasm for adventure), the success of this brand took off. Stewart was a pioneer in Mendocino single-vineyard designate wines and caught the attention of the scoring publications. And, after only five years in business, a wealthy buyer. In 2009, amid the uncertainty of recession and not enjoying the stress of debt, he received and accepted an offer to sell the Breggo brand – but not the 30,000 vine meter-by-meter organic vineyard planted in 2008. Fast forward to 2012, after Greg and his wife moved to Healdsburg, California, and developed a new business plan for Lichen Estate, which involves both sparkling wine and Pinot Noir. These young vines are what grace the Pinot Noir he produces now, in 2012 and 2013 in his garage. Pretty stellar for garage-produced grog. lichenestate.com

Waits-Mast Family Cellars

Husband and wife team, Brian and Jennifer, fell in love with Mendocino while they were falling in love in the early 2000s. Weekend getaways from San Francisco and exploration of the wines sealed the relationship with this area and each other. In 2005, they tried their luck at the winemaking game, taking a few seminars. "Most of it was over our head, but we tried to learn as much as possible and eventually made the transition from wine geeks to wine producers," Brian Mast said. They purchased grapes from vineyards in various Pinot Noir regions in northern California, including Anderson Valley in Mendocino County. The studies paid off. In 2009, the Waits Mast 2007 Pinot Noir from Wentzel Vineyard was named in the San Francisco Chronicle's Top 100 Wines. They continue to source grapes from five reliable vineyards, mostly from Anderson Valley — all independent and relatively small – for their portfolio of site-specific Pinot Noirs. waitsmast.com

These three passionate Pinot makers should be on your watch list. The wines might be tough to find... you won't discover them on grocery store shelves; however their websites might enlighten. But be careful, their passion is contagious.

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Jennifer and Brian Mast



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