



Course Correction

THE NEW WEST SONOMA COAST AVA FULFILLS MANY A SOMMELIER'S NEEDS

IN MAY 2022, the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau approved the new West Sonoma Coast AVA, raising a key question: Why do we need yet another Sonoma County appellation? Wasn't 18 of them enough?

The answer is that West Sonoma Coast was badly needed to correct previous mistakes. Due to its name, the sprawling Sonoma Coast AVA (established in 1987) suggests that it encompasses only coastal terroirs. Yet it's home to growing regions as far from the Pacific coast as Dry Creek Valley, Alexander Valley, Chalk Hill, and Knights Valley.

In the January 2011 issue of *The Sommeliér Journal*, the precursor to this publication, an 11-page article titled "Sonoma Extreme" included the first published map of a prospective West Sonoma Coast, its boundaries conceived

by a group led by Andy Peay of Peay Vineyards, Ehren Jordan of Failla Wines, and Red Car Wine co-founder Carroll Kemp. At the time, Peay often used the term "True Sonoma Coast" to describe their proposal, while Kemp occasionally called it "Extreme Sonoma Coast."

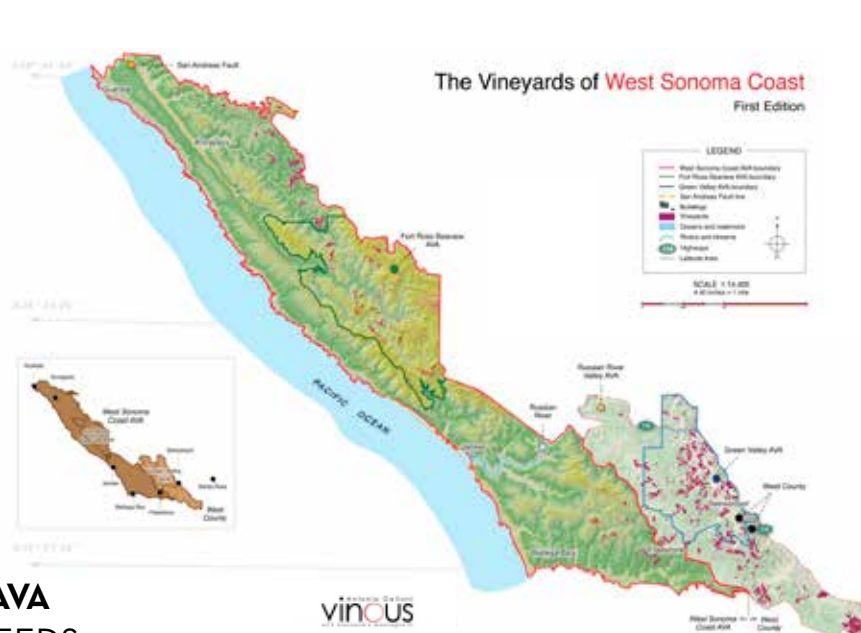
These vintners' understanding of the cooler-climate area—where, as recently as the 1980s, many industry pundits didn't believe it was even possible to ripen winegrapes—was as visceral as it is intellectual, a matter of farming close enough to the ocean to smell the briny air and feel its constant chill, whether the vines in question were shrouded in lower fog banks or bathed in light on high, remote mountaintops. For them, the achievement of a West Sonoma Coast AVA carries emotional weight.

Peay recently summarized what the

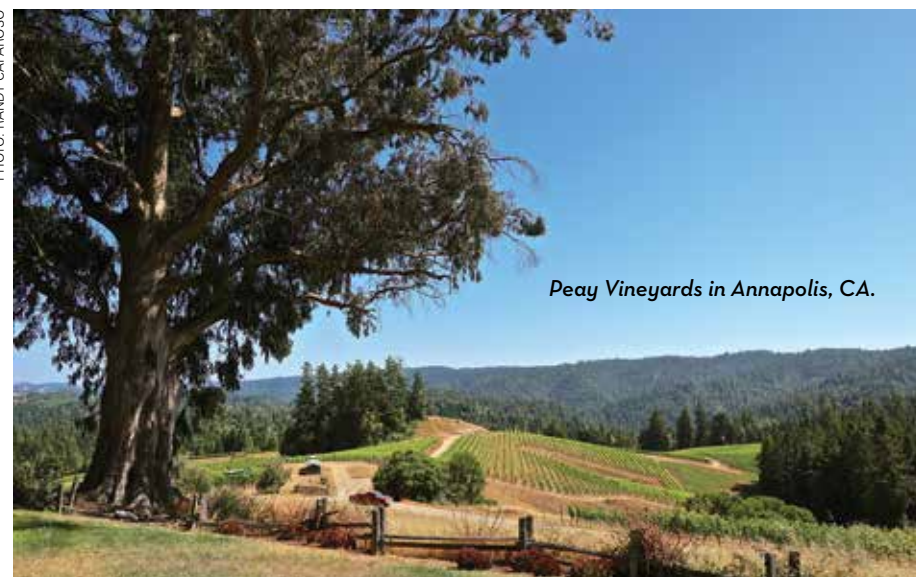
new AVA should mean for the restaurant industry: "This is a critical step in differentiating unique wines grown along the actual coast of Sonoma County," he said. "Due to the [vineyards'] proximity to the cold Pacific Ocean and [their] placement on the ridges along the San Andreas Fault, the wines express a strong sense of place. Consumers looking at a restaurant list will be able to associate West Sonoma Coast with wines that are complex and intriguing, with bright acidity [and] a harmonious balance of fruit, floral, and earth aromas."

Peay has an unimpeachable case for this pervasive "sense of place." When I visited Peay Vineyards in April 2021, he poured me a battery of Pinot Noirs, Chardonnays, and Syrahs that were stunning in their delicacy as well as their acid-mobilized minerality and wispy fragrances reflecting the surrounding redwoods and Douglas firs, not to mention the Pacific Ocean barely 4 miles away. On the same trip, I sat with Jordan behind tall bales of hay that protected us from the wind whistling in from nearby Bodega Bay and tasted Failla wines that showed similar structure and aromatics.

You can find a map of the new AVA at westsonomacoast.com. "Maritime" is a good adjective to describe its demarcations; you can also use words like "marginal" or, indeed, "extreme." In short, this is where winegrowing is pushed to the edge, and the sensory qualities in the resulting wines balance on a comparable precipice, boasting many of the attributes valued most by sommeliers today. It's an appellation that, for once, truly lives up to the implications of its name. **SJ**



MAP COURTESY OF WEST SONOMA COAST VINTNERS



Peay Vineyards in Annapolis, CA.