

# Wine Spectator

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## James Laube's 20 Favorite Sonoma Pinot Noir Producers

*James Laube*

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There are hundreds of makers of Pinot Noir in California today, from Santa Barbara to Mendocino. But Sonoma remains the mother lode for this varietal in the Golden State, producing excellent wines, in diverse styles, from vineyards across the region. James Laube spotlights 20 wineries excelling with this challenging grape.

### ASTON

**Look for: Sonoma Coast, \$65**

This remote vineyard tests the northernmost boundary of the Sonoma Coast. Thomas Brown oversees winemaking for this label, Fred Schrader's first of two Pinot projects, the second being the forthcoming Boar's View vineyard near Marcassin. At \$65, the 2007 and 2009 Aston bottlings share the Schrader style of opulence; 2008 was declassified.

### AUBERT

**Look for: Reuling Vineyard and UV Vineyard, \$80**

After years of making extraordinary Cabernet Sauvignons in Napa, Mark Aubert is now focusing on Sonoma Coast Pinots. Aubert's wines are uniformly dark, elegant and concentrated.

### CHASSEUR

**Look for: Sonoma County and Sonoma Coast, \$30 to \$40**

Vintner Bill Hunter's strength is in a handful of small-lot, single-vineyard bottlings from western Sonoma County. The wines age well and reflect a consistent, polished house style.

### DEHLINGER

**Look for: Goldridge Vineyard and Russian River Valley, \$45 to \$50**

Tom Dehlinger was one of the first to master Pinot Noir in California. More than 30 years later, his wines are still defining the category, capturing the essence of Russian River from his estate property. His daughter Eva is easing into the role of winemaker.

### DONUM

**Look for: East Slope, West Slope, Russian River Reserve, \$80 to \$85**

This label unites the talents of Anne Moller-Racke, who has farmed grapes in Carneros for 30 years, and winemaker Kenneth Juhasz. The Carneros vineyard is subdivided into four bottlings, while Russian River's Nugent Vineyard supplies two. The Carneros wines are loamier, the Russian Rivers brighter.

### MERRY EDWARDS

**Look for: Coopersmith, Klopp Ranch, Olivet Lane, \$57 to \$60**

Merry Edwards' work with Pinot dates to Mount Eden in the 1970s. Her five single-vineyard wines come from sites near the winery and emphasize bright acidity and vivid berry pie flavors.

### FAILLA

**Look for: Keefer Ranch, Hirsch Vineyard, Occidental Ridge Vineyard, \$45 to \$65**



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Winemaker Ehren Jordan and his wife, Anne-Marie Failla, started their label in 1998. They focus on wines that represent the duality of ripeness from cool-climate sites, including the estate vineyard on the Sonoma Coast.

#### **PAUL HOBBS**

**Look for: Ulises Valdez Vineyard, Hyde Vineyard, Russian River Valley, \$45 to \$75**

Paul Hobbs' winemaking résumé is long and varied, but under his eponymous label, which he founded in 1991, he consistently makes Pinots that are sophisticated, polished and layered.

#### **KISTLER**

**Look for: Kistler Vineyard and Natalie Silver Belt Vineyard, \$80 to \$90**

Though better known for his Chardonnays, Steve Kistler has been making Pinot Noir since the early 1980s. Of late, there's been a focus on key vineyards (including Kistler's own), with a shift toward more elegance and finesse.

#### **KOSTA BROWNE**

**Look for: Kanzler Vineyard, Keefer Ranch, Amber Ridge Vineyard, Koplen Vineyard, \$72**

No one has achieved at the level Dan Kosta and Michael Browne have, creating scores of outstanding and classic-rated wines since their first release in 2000. The 2009s are yet another can't-miss lineup of 11 different bottlings; the appellation blends of Russian River Valley and Sonoma Coast are just as expressive as the single-vineyard wines.

#### **LITTORAI**

**Look for: B.A. Thieriot Vineyard, Hirsch Vineyard, The Haven Vineyard, \$65 to \$75**

Ted Lemon worked in Burgundy before founding Littorai in 1993. He brings a Burgundian pursuit of terroir, crafting finally detailed wines, including 12 bottlings in '09.

#### **LYNMAR**

**Look for: Terra de Promissio Vineyard, Quail Hill Bliss Block, Quail Hill Lynn's Blend, Quail Hill Old Vines, \$70 to \$120**

The 2007 and '08 vintages started Lynmar's dramatic turnaround; 2009 validated the quality, with the estate Quail Hill Vineyard anchoring a lineup of 13 wines. Credit the vineyard and Bibiana González Rave, who brings a new approach to winemaking to the 65-acre estate.

#### **MARCASSIN**

**Look for: Blue-Slide Ridge Vineyard, Three Sisters Vineyard, Marcassin Vineyard, \$75 to \$125**

Superconsultant Helen Turley has narrowed her focus to her own label, and Marcassin is now based on its estate vineyard, which helped defined the true Sonoma Coast. Its wines exhibit excellent richness and polish; Blue-Slide Ridge and Three Sisters are being phased out after 2010.

#### **MARTINELLI**

**Look for: Zio Tony Ranch, Lolita Ranch, Bondi Home Ranch Water Trough Vineyard, \$60**

This grower-turned-winemaking family went to Helen Turley for guidance and refined its style, with ripe, full-bodied offerings from estate and other vineyards. Brian Kvamme replaces Turley; her last vintage with Martinelli was 2010.

#### **PETER MICHAEL**

**Look for: Le Caprice, Ma Danseuse, Clos du Ciel, \$95 to \$110**

Peter Michael is heeding the call of the coast, and the result is a trio of brilliant debut Sonoma Pinots from the steep estate vineyard. Nicolas Morlet displays the same deft touch with these wines as he does with the Moulin Rouge Pinot from Santa Lucia Highlands, the winery's Chardonnays and Les Pavots red.

#### **MUELLER**

**Look for: August Recher, Cuvée X, Tempi, \$35 to \$39**

This family-owned winery is essentially a one-man show, and Robert Mueller is a master, making precise wines known for their subtlety and smooth texture.

#### **PAPAPIETRO PERRY**

**Look for: Russian River Valley, Mukaida Vineyard, \$46 to \$75**

Papapietro Perry is the Williams Selyem of the 2000s—a pair of home winemakers who keep getting better. Winemaker Ben Papapietro brings out the distinctive qualities of Pinot Noir vineyards better than most, with 10 expressive bottlings.

**ROCHIOLI****Look for: Little Hill, West Block, River Block, \$72 to \$100**

Rochioli set the original benchmark for Russian River Valley Pinot Noir and its estate vineyard is still one of the best at demonstrating the region's potential. Father Joe's gamble on Pinot has paid off, with son Tom directing winemaking of five brilliant bottlings.

**SIDURI****Look for: Russian River Valley, Sonoma Coast, Keefer Ranch Vineyard, \$29 to \$48**

Adam and Dianna Lee defined the modern Pinot Noir formula, crafting multiple bottlings but owning no vineyards of their own. There is much to admire in their lineup of dozens of wines from all over the state every year, including plenty of highlights from Sonoma.

**WILLIAMS SELYEM****Look for: Westside Road Neighbors, Eastside Road Neighbors, Bucher Vineyard, Allen Vineyard, \$49 to \$78**

The variety among Bob Cabral's dozen Pinot Noirs is a plus. The lineup of single-vineyard bottlings includes many names that helped put Sonoma on the map, including Allen, Rochioli, Hirsch and Precious Mountain, and extends into Mendocino as well.

*Senior tasting coordinator MaryAnn Worobiec contributed to this story.*