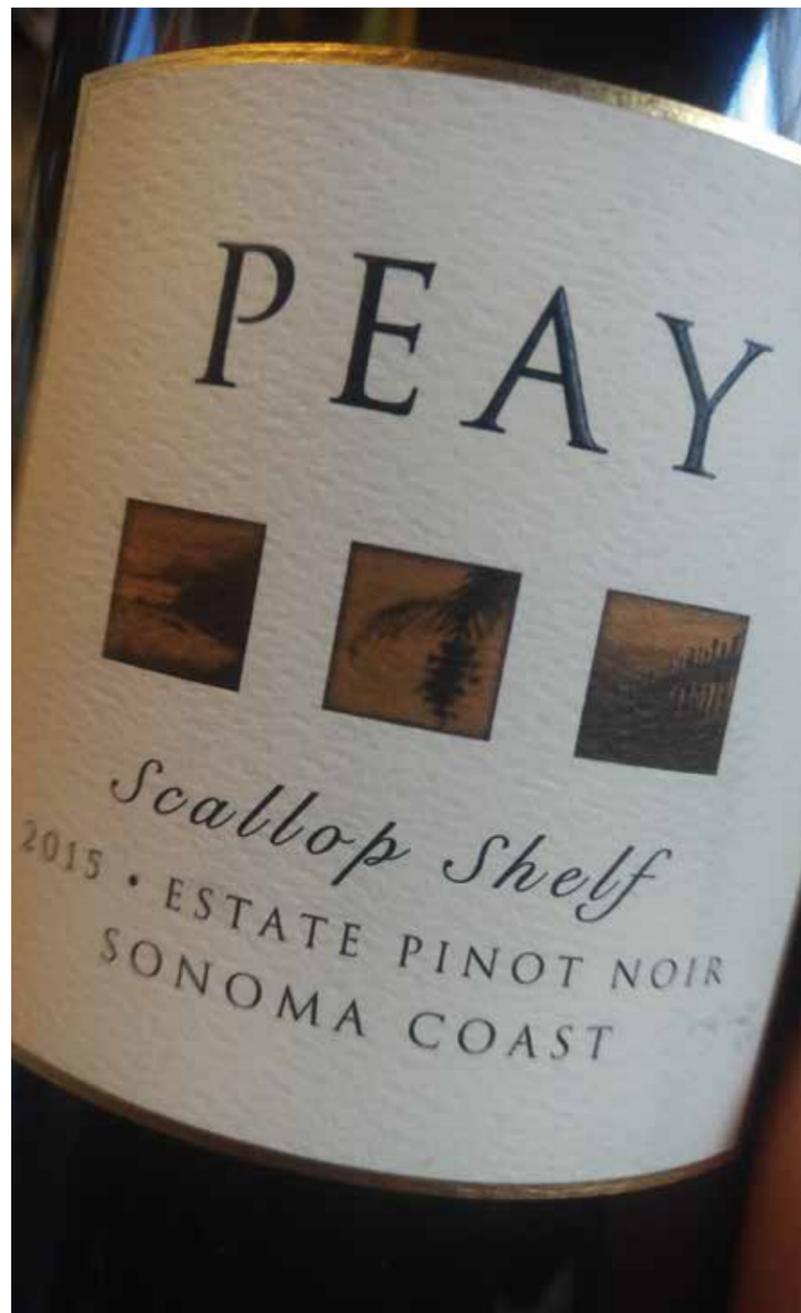


# Peay Vineyards: Arresting new expressions of California's dynamic wine landscape

The latest releases from the Peay family vineyards are wines of uncommon brightness and verve that encapsulate the qualities of the new, cool West Sonoma Coast AVA, says Anne Krebiehl MW



Whoever tastes Peay Pinot Noir blind would be hard pushed to associate it immediately with California; there is too much verve, too much brightness, too much slenderness for the usually more sun-warmed offering. Yet those who have explored California's rugged and remote north Sonoma coast will find this landscape reflected in their glass, even when the wines are shown on a cold November day in London (by Justerini & Brooks, the UK agents). The Pinots carry a certain wildness; they hold within them that briskness of the cold ocean and all of those brilliantly lifted coastal notions: the smell of conifer, occasional eucalypt, of forest floor, of tiny, tart red berries, and salty breeze. There is something visceral and eternal about them.

That California does this kind of freshness is no longer news. The In Pursuit of Balance movement did a lot to change perceptions in its five short but effective years from 2011 until 2016. But winemaking style is only one element; the other is what nature gives: climate, topography, and soil. Defining such things takes its own sweet time, especially when officialdom and applications for American Viticultural Area status are involved. Fort Ross-Seaview AVA got there earlier, but now a similarly distinct new AVA is about to be ratified: West Sonoma Coast. The Peays were among a small group of winemakers, which also includes Littorai, Redcar, and Failla, that got together to distinguish themselves—and their cooler climate—from the much larger Sonoma Coast AVA and Fort Ross-Seaview AVA by applying for their own AVA in 2018. Certainly in terms of quality, if not quantity, it highlights arresting new expressions of California's dynamic wine landscape.

Photography by Anne Krebiehl MW

## A snapshot of the AVA

Andy Peay explains: "Peay wines are a good snapshot of the overall character of the AVA. They express site due to their location along the coast of the Pacific Ocean. The lack of hot weather keeps the components of the wine in balance, so the fruit expression does not dominate the wine as it may in warmer inland areas of Sonoma County. This allows winemakers who choose to emphasize complexity of aromas to feature earth, tea, citrus, and other floral and tart fruit notes that can work in harmony to paint a complex and beguiling picture."

Peay Vineyards lies within the fog layer at an elevation of 600ft (183m), and is thus cooler than the vineyards of the Fort Ross-Seaview AVA, which stipulates elevations for vineyards clearly above the fog layer (between 920ft [280m] and 1,800ft [550m]). The temperature of the Pacific on the northern California coast ranges from 52°F (11°C) to 55°F (13°C) year-round, and a break in the coastal range means that cold ocean air can get to the Peay Vineyards deep in the forests, 4 miles (6.5km) from the sea, just south of Annapolis. "You find nervy acidity and silky tannins in most of our wines that provide a frame to deliver density and depth of flavor without fatness and heaviness. Within the West Sonoma Coast AVA, there are regions lying in higher-elevation, warmer areas that can exhibit darker tones and perhaps more fruit and/or lower acidity, but this is all within a fairly narrow band, because the Pacific Ocean is the refrigerator for all of us in the WSC AVA, moderating temperatures and sending us all fog and wind throughout the growing season," Peay continues. "The Gualala River is the channel that brings in cold air," he explains, referring to the Wheatfield Fork of the Gualala River. "We don't really get out of the low 70s [Fahrenheit, or low 20s Celsius], even on the hottest day ever, and we only get rain as a little spritz in October. Our west-facing hills are cooler than the east-facing ones." Their harvests don't start until late September for Pinot Noir, early October for Chardonnay, and even into November for Syrah. "We need this extra time," Peay emphasizes, noting that the vines don't usually flower until the first week of June. The wind always affects fruit-set, so yields are low, at around 1.6–1.7 tons/acre.

The wines have always been made by Andy Peay's sister-in-law, Vanessa Wong. She is married to Andy's brother, Nick Peay, who looks after the vineyards. Wong is a UC Davis graduate who worked in Bordeaux and Burgundy, as well as for Peter Michael and Hirsch in California. Andy Peay runs the business and sells the wine. All three agree on their stylistic aims: "With more freshness, more acidity, we can be more expressive of the site, not over-encumbered by the sun," Andy says. They are also clear that they do not want to produce more than 7,000 cases annually. With their 52 acres (21ha) of vineyard, of which 35 (14ha) are planted to various clonal selections of Pinot Noir (667, 777, 828, Calera, Swan, Mount-Eden, and Pommard), they are in a "happy stasis" of between 5,000 and 6,000 cases annually, which allows them to work with the dedication they want. Almost all the production is estate wine, with a little fruit purchased in Anderson Valley, but they also have a second label called Cep, which is not marketed internationally. The Pinot is vinified in about 30 different batches each year, which are used to make the three estate blends called Ama, Scallop Shelf, and Pomarium, the rest going into their Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir or declassified. There is also a Chardonnay, a Syrah, and a Viognier.

Nick, a loquacious intellectual, and the more worldly Andy both credit their parents. "They mostly drank European wines, and that set our palates, I guess," Andy says. Initially, Andy wanted to be a chef, but he majored in English and economy before working for Cain on Spring Mountain, while Nick majored in Eastern history. Neither brother, then, was predestined for his current way of life, but somehow they knew they wanted to make wine. "We were in pursuit of a location where it was cold, so we did not have to struggle with the California sun," Andy recalls. "In August 1996, I came across this ranch and apple orchard. Nobody had ever planted grapes out here. We were looking for a place on the edge. In the 1990s, the varieties we were most interested in—Pinot Noir and Chardonnay—were in much warmer spots. We were looking for florality, earthiness, more tea notes, not just fruit." Their first vintage was in 2001. And the wines beautifully satisfy those original objectives. Few other California wines are so distinct, delicious, or visceral.

## TASTING NOTES

### Peay Estate Chardonnay Sonoma Coast 2011 (12.7% ABV)

The hazelnutty smoke on the nose has a lactic edge but is bright with lemon that, with a little air, becomes really zesty and lifted. The creamy palate has a lovely texture, and the finish adds notions of tangerine. Andy Peay calls this an "apocalyptic vintage," with "9in [23cm] of rain in three days. The grapes were at 19° Brix [11.2% potential alcohol], the bunches were tight, and the botrytis was sensational," he remembers with a shudder. "We declassified so much." The wine was fermented with native yeast, completed malolactic fermentation, and was aged in 25 percent new barrels. Andy Peay reckons that the tangerine notes on this wine, atypical for their Chardonnay, may be an echo of that botrytis.

### Peay Estate Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 2016

An initial whiff of wild raspberry shows gorgeous lift before morphing into rose petal and cranberry. The slender palate brims with red-fruited tartness, is snappy, delicate, fresh, and vivid. The last scribble of my note reads "translucent and pure."

### Peay Estate Ama Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 2016

The nose opens with smoke, peat, and a suspicion of tar. There are alternating notions of potpourri and rhubarb, along with a lactic edge and a hint of licorice. The body is fuller, more concentrated, has grip. Succulent cherry resides at the core, while super-fine tannins extend their hold well beyond the finish. "Ama" means the land of the Pomo Indians, the natives of this part of California.

### Peay Estate Scallop Shelf Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 2015 (13% ABV)

The nose is a caress of gentle cherry, Darjeeling leaves, peony petal, and blood orange peel. Aromatically, this is a standout that beguiles from the get-go. This is sinuous and slight, slender but profound, structured around a fine web of tannins, very fine and bright. Purity and grace are inherent, lasting and touching. Wow. "Scallop Shelf" refers to uplifted seabed within the younger Goldridge series (the Pliocene sediments atop the Mesozoic Franciscan bedrock formations) that constitute the loamy, well-drained vineyard soils.

### Peay Estate Pomarium Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 2014 (13.6% ABV)

Smoke and peat appear on the nose, before an earthy cloud scented with both amarena and morello cherry takes over. The cherry also clings to the relative heft on the palate, but highlights of blood-orange flicker alongside dried rose-petal notions. The palate is velvety and totally resonant. "Pomarium" honors the 130-year-old apple orchard planted by the Petersons and Ohlsons, the Scandinavian settlers who first farmed this land. Some apple trees still stand there.



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