





acres mostly planted to pinot noir and chardonnay.

“Kosta Browne is always searching for great vineyard sites throughout California to continue raising the bar for world-class pinot noir and chardonnay, and Cerise Vineyards’ pedigree of clones and prime terroir was a pursued and longing choice for the winery,” said Dan Kosta, co-owner of Kosta Browne.

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The deals parallel the growth in the pinot noir sales at the retail level, driven in some part by Meiomi Wines, which produces a more popular, sweeter style developed by vintner Joe Wagner. The varietal had an 11 percent growth in dollar sales in the 12-month period ending Aug. 7 through supermarkets, drugstores, convenience stores and other retail establishments tracked by IRI, a Chicago-based market research firm.

Pinot noir sales were the highest among a set of five top varietals that included chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, merlot and pinot grigio. It also had the highest price per case at \$115.80.

“There’s a market for us... We see steady growth,” said Ted Lemon, whose Littorai winery has become synonymous with premium pinot noir sourced from grapes from both the Sonoma Coast and the Anderson Valley. His wines reflect his Burgundy training, with polished tannins and mouthwatering vibrancy. Never over-ripe or soft, they have firm structure that allows them to improve for years in the cellar.

“I don’t see any difference in the Littorai clientele on the preference for Sonoma Coast to Anderson Valley,” Lemon said. His winery is based in Sebastopol.

The recent activity in Anderson Valley is a boon to Mendocino County’s winemaking industry, which had an \$87 million grape cash crop in 2015. That represented about 8 percent of the overall North Coast crop for the four-county region, which is still dominated by Napa and Sonoma counties.

But it didn’t use to be. The greater region used to be referred to as “Sonapacino” (a mashup of Sonoma, Napa and Mendocino) in the 1960s. That was before the American fine wine movement took off, led by Robert Mondavi in Napa County and later Jess Jackson in Sonoma County, said Rob McMillan, founder of Silicon Valley Bank’s wine division.

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“They kind of got stuck in the production mentality with the big wineries there,” said McMillan, referring to such Mendocino County wineries as Fetzer Vineyards and Parducci Wine Cellars. “They missed out on the premiumization trend largely.”

But the reputation has grown in recent years, primarily driven by Anderson Valley, a 15-mile stretch between Boonville and Navarro touched by fog and breeze from the nearby ocean, but also featuring a milder climate, where temperatures rarely climb above 100 degrees. Temperatures in some areas, such as the east end, can vary as much as 50 degrees in a day. It also produces chardonnay and Alsace-style white wines.

“A small isolated area that marches to its own weather and cultural drummer,” Lemon said in describing the Anderson Valley, which also has a hippie culture dating back almost 50 years.

Some note the recent popularity has been driven by vintners such as Lemon and Dan and Margaret Duckhorn, who founded Goldeneye Winery in Philo in 1996 to make a pinot noir that could rival the acclaimed merlot they made at Duckhorn Vineyards in the Napa Valley.

But even before that, there were signals. In 1982, for example, the French Champagne producer Louis Roederer announced it would build a sparkling wine facility in Anderson Valley near Navarro. Roederer continued its investment in the valley by buying a 40-acre parcel in Philo in 2011 through foreclosure. It uses the land and facility to showcase its still wines under the Domaine Anderson brand, which produces about 6,000 cases annually.

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“What made us come to the Anderson Valley in the first place is if you wanted to make a sparkling wine that looks and tastes like Champagne, even though it’s in California, you need to be able to get your base wine balance of not only ripeness, but also acidity,” said Arnaud Weyrich, vice president for production and winemaker at Roederer Estate Inc. “If you go a little too cold, then you may not be ripe and too acidic. But if you go too much inland, then it’s too ripe and it becomes flabby. The one that is extremely sensitive to that heat index is the pinot. Pinot doesn’t like to be rushed.”

One major advantage the valley has is its bucolic beauty and small-town feel. It’s also something of a tourist destination, with a diverse food scene that features a top craft brewer, Anderson Valley Brewing Co. in Boonville, as well as cidermakers and well-regarded cheesemakers, such as Pennyroyal Farm. There are fewer limousines and vans and more visiting families and couples along the highway, many venturing to the coast and Highway 1.

“Once people come up here, they fall in love and want to come back,” said Paula Viehmann, hospitality manager at Goldeneye, which itself was recently purchased by TSG Consumer Partners, a private equity firm based in San Francisco.

Still, the number of visitors has not appreciably climbed, even as the valley's winemaking reputation has been elevated, especially because the trip can be a three-hour car ride from San Francisco.

"The car traffic has not followed that trajectory" of sales, Stewart said.

The area is still known primarily for its small wineries and growers. There are 30 wineries and 28 tasting rooms and the median vineyard size is a relatively small 11.5 acres, according to the Anderson Valley Winegrowers Association.

It's personified by wineries such as Foursight Wines, a family-owned winery that produces wines that are vegan- friendly and are made through natural winemaking practices. For example, a 2013 pinot noir Foursight vintage was produced with grapes crushed in a wooden-basket press, and the punch-down of the solids was all done by hand.

"We have a whole lot of normal people who make wine here who don't have the financial fortune behind them," said Kristy Charles, a co-owner with her winemaker husband, Joe Webb, and her parents.

Even with the recent rise in sales transactions, vintners said there is not a lot of new land to develop, particularly as the valley is only a few miles wide. It has a little more than 2,500 planted acres.

"It's hard to find new acreage in Anderson Valley. There's not a lot of acreage to start with," said Mike Needham, a North Coast grape broker for Turrentine.

From 2000 to 2015, pinot noir acreage in Mendocino County climbed from 1,563 acres to 2,695 acres, especially as nearby areas such as Potter Valley and around Ukiah grew, Needham said. The recent buying trend is primarily spurred by the cheaper value of the land compared to Sonoma County, where top spots can now go for \$150,000 to \$200,000 an acre.

The bigger players, however, may help the overall promotion of the area if they put more of their marketing might and financial resources behind it, focusing on some of the top small producers, McMillan said.

"I think it's their time. It's the smaller wineries at Sonoma and Napa that made the brands of Napa and Sonoma take off."

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