SOMM CON

CALIFORNIA WINEMAKERS SHARE REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOIL AND FLAVOR PROFILES

Retrolitting



The panel from left to right, back row: Laura Taffe Balderelli, East Coast Sales Manager, Ancient Peaks Winery, Paso Robles, CA; Noel Basso, winemaker, Oak Ridge Winery, Lodi, CA; Meridith May, Publisher, *The Tasting Panel*, representing Westwood Estates; Wes Hagen, winemaker, J. Wilkes, Santa Maria, CA; Steve Rogstad, winemaker, Cuvaison, Carneros, Napa Valley, CA; and Fred Delivert, winemaker, Tolosa, Edna Valley, CA. Front row: Jon Emmerich, winemaker, Silverado Vineyards, Napa Valley; and Lars Leicht, moderator and VP/Communications & Trade Relations, *The Tasting Panel*.

story by Courtney Schiessl / photos by Nick Klein

Lations Leicht, VP/Communications & Trade Relations for *The Tasting Panel*, provided a dictionary definition of terroir as he kicked off the "Domestic Terroirists" seminar he moderated at SommCon D.C., held at the Westin Georgetown June 23–25. "Terroir: the complete natural environment in which a particular wine is produced, including factors such as soil, topography, climate, or the characteristic taste and flavor imparted to a wine by the environment in which it is produced," it said.

Terroir is a concept that stems from and is largely associated with the Old World, but in recent years, it's also been adopted in the New World. "As Americans, we are retrofitting the concept," said Leicht, "[and] thank goodness we are." While attendees tasted through seven different wines from across California, the winemakers on the panel discussed how terroir influenced each one.





J. Wilkes 2017 Chardonnay

Santa Maria Valley

"Wines of character, wines of place" is the J. Wilkes motto, but winemaker and brand ambassador Wes Hagen wouldn't necessarily call his work terroir-driven. "I believe 'domestic terroir' is an odd term," he said. "Terroir has to include a cultural phenomenon and influence. I prefer the word 'typicity.""

The late Jeff Wilkes founded the J. Wilkes label to highlight two sub-AVAs of the Central Coast: Santa Maria Valley and Paso Robles Highlands. Rather than making vineyard designates, then, Hagen crafts appellation-level wines from varieties like Pinot Noir, Pinot Blanc, and Chardonnay—though he likened the Santa Maria Valley to a French wine region best known for still other grapes. "It's the Loire Valley of California—underpriced and underappreciated and if you don't know what's going on, you're missing out," he said.

Despite its location at the same latitude as Morocco, the Santa Maria Valley is classified as Region 1A. The cold maritime influence in this transverse valley extends the growing season for balanced Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs. In the J. Wilkes 2017 Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay, the fruit is mellow and soft on the nose but ripe on the palate. Bursting with juicy lemon and pear, it's clean, with a balanced, savory finish.



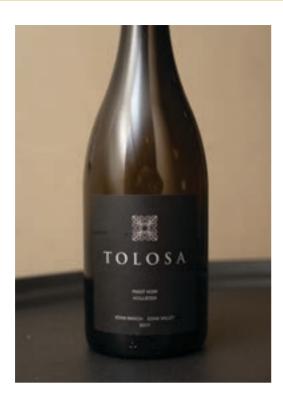
Cuvaison 2017 Chardonnay Coeurtina

Carneros

Spilling into both Napa and Sonoma counties, the boundaries of the Los Carneros AVA mark it as unique. "It was the first AVA based on research rather than political boundaries," said Steve Rogstad, winemaker for Cuvaison, located on the Napa Valley side of the region.

But Carneros is special for other reasons as well. With vines planted in shallow clay soils above the San Pablo Bay, it benefits from windy afternoons and fog that cools and moisturizes the land. It's the perfect setting for cool-climate takes on Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, which have ample opportunity to "show their place readily," in Rogstad's words.

Cuvaison plants Chardonnay in the peaks and valleys of its 190 planted acres. The Coeurtina, which relies on the Dijon 548 clone, is aged for 16 months in 50% new French oak to develop opulent aromatics of tropical fruit and a rich, creamy palate with a fine line of acidity.



Tolosa 2017 Hollister Pinot Noir

Edna Valley

The Edna Valley is located halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, where it often goes overlooked by American wine drinkers. "Our goal is to prove that Edna Valley has a spot on the California map of Pinot Noir," said Tolosa winemaker Frederic Delivert. The transverse valley is shadowed by a coastal ridge, which creates a mild climate that averages around 70 degrees Fahrenheit during the summer. The mountains trap this marine influence, allowing Pinot and other grapes to achieve ripeness at lower Brix levels for more balanced, lower-alcohol wines.

The Edna Valley is home to 60 different soil types, ranging from sedimentary to volcanic. Delivert cherishes the diversity: "I get more paints to make my painting," he said. Most of Tolosa's vineyards are planted to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Because the Hollister Pinot Noir comes from a small, low-yielding block, its availability is limited. A small amount of new French oak yields a wine with candied, juicy red fruit and a dry, savory finish.



Westwood 2016 Legend Sonoma Valley

The aptly named Westwood Legend 2016 is the first cuvée to be made by the iconic Philippe Melka for the winery. Distinctly vineyard-focused, it's a blend of varieties from the estate-owned 23-acre Annadel Gap Vineyard at the northern end of Sonoma Valley, located on the eastern edge of the Mayacamas Mountains. Here, fog nestles into the vines each morning, allowing the grapes to develop slowly before it blows out with the evening wind.

The Westwood team uses Demeter-certified Biodynamic practices in the vineyard to farm primarily Rhône and Burgundian varieties in soils similar to those of the Russian River Valley's Gold Ridge. The Cabernet-dominant 2016 Legend is blended with Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre and aged in 56% new oak. The result shows dark fruit layered with chocolate and sweet spices, plus a touch of mint and black pepper on the nose. It's a big, round wine, with grippy tannins on the generous body leading to a well-balanced, lingering finish.



Oak Ridge 2017 Old Soul Cabernet Sauvignon

Oak Ridge is the oldest continuously operating winery in Lodi, but it got a new lease on life in 2002, when it was purchased by the Maggio family. With an eye toward quality, the Oak Ridge team takes a hands-on approach to every aspect of viticulture and winemaking.

"Being a family-owned winery, we control everything from when vines are planted to when grapes come into the cellar," said winemaker Noel Basso. Some 2,500 acres of vineyard cover a huge range of soils and temperature levels. Thus Basso keeps his finger on the pulse of each variety on each plot that Oak Ridge farms (much of which is still sold off to other clients).

The Old Soul Cabernet Sauvignon is picked relatively early to retain acidity and aged in both American and French oak. Though it is concentrated with a core of strawberry and raspberry, it also shows notes of pine and coconut that lead to a round, soft finish.



Ancient Peaks 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon

Santa Margarita Ranch, Paso Robles

With 11 new sub-AVAs as of 2014, it would be difficult to assert that Paso Robles is homogenous. Take Santa Margarita Ranch. Set apart from the other sub-appellations, it's the southernmost AVA in Paso Robles and one of the coolest, with direct influence from the Cuesta Grade allowing cool ocean air to flow over it (for more on the area, see page 94).

Almost entirely overlapping with a working cattle ranch owned by three families, it is also home to only one vineyard: Santa Margarita. With its range of distinct soil types, including an ancient seabed, it was discovered by the Mondavi family in the 1990s, who saw its potential and planted vines that were then taken over by the Santa Margarita Ranch owners, who formed Ancient Peaks.

Cabernet Sauvignon is the most important variety grown here, producing structured, serious wines. In this instance, fresh and sun-baked black fruit takes on a meaty, smoky edge on both the nose and palate, adding dimension on top of depth.



Silverado 2015 Mt George Vineyard GEO Cabernet Sauvignon

Coombsville, Napa Valley

"We do have identifiable terroir here," said Jon Emmerich, winemaker at Napa Valley's Silverado Vineyards. "This shows specifically through the mid-palate texture in all Coombsville wines." Though the Silverado GEO hails from the newest AVA in Napa Valley, Coombsville, it's sourced from one of the region's oldest vineyards, Mt George. Vines were first planted on the gravelly slopes of this dormant volcano in the 1800s.

The second-coldest Napa Valley AVA after Carneros, Coombsville features a combination of sunshine and lower temperatures that yields wines with intensity, structure, and acidity. The 2015 GEO is incredibly complex, revealing layer after layer of ripe black cherry, cocoa, tobacco, and coffee on the nose. The palate is big all around-big tannins, big acidity, big flavor. While the finished wine may not be the result of terroir alone, Emmerich is a faithful believer in the concept. "Anything we do is terroir," he said. "Of course, human intervention has an effect, but at their core, the wines produced from Mt George have one common theme: a unique vineyard site. This is as true now as it was when Henry Hagen made wine from it 150 years ago."

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