



## MACMURRAY RANCH

*Healdsburg, California*



MacMurray Ranch is one of at least two dozen wine brands owned by the E. and J. Gallo Winery, the enormous, family-owned company that accounts for one out of every four bottles of wine sold in America. The name derives from Gallo's purchase of actor Fred MacMurray's 1,400-acre ranch on Westside Road outside Healdsburg, in 1997. (Gallo also makes pinot noir under its Gallo Family and Frei Brothers Ranch labels, the latter of which, acquired by Gallo in 1977, marked Gallo's entry into the ultra-premium segment of the California wine business and the beginning of production operations in Sonoma County.) The MacMurray Ranch itself, devoted mostly to genteel horse ranching during the actor's lifetime, was planted to 428 acres of grapes after 1997, including 236 acres of pinot noir, but the name, like Frei Brothers before it, is used to brand a range of wines, some of which have little or no relation to the ranch site.

### WINEMAKING NOTES

As of 2006, there were five MacMurray Ranch pinots. A Russian River Valley bottling is built from Los Viñedos del Rio, the Louis M. Martini property Gallo acquired when it purchased Martini in 2003, and from some MacMurray Ranch fruit; the Winemaker's Block Selection consists of block selections from MacMurray and Del Rio, made in small, 1.5- and 2.5-ton stainless steel open-tops; Sonoma County is anchored with fruit from Gallo's Two Rock Vineyard on the

west side of Highway 101 near Cotati, plus a bit from MacMurray Ranch; Central Coast depends primarily on fruit from Gallo's Olson Ranch, where the Arroyo Seco and Santa Lucia Highlands appellations meet. The Russian River and Winemaker's Select wines are made in the small-lot winery at Del Rio; the Sonoma Country and Central Coast wines are made in the huge Frei Brothers facility on Dry Creek Road. A fifth MacMurray Ranch pinot is its Sta. Rita Hills bottling, sourced from several non-estate vineyards in that AVA—Gallo owns no vineyards in the Santa Rita Hills—including the Gaia Vineyard that was known before 2006 as Ashley's (see **FESS PARKER WINES**). This cuvee is made at Bridlewood Estate Winery in Santa Ynez, which Gallo acquired in 2004.

The winemaking wizard behind this impressive portfolio made in three sites, the combined volume of which aggregates to more than 40,000 cases and the suggested retail prices of which range from \$16 to \$55 a bottle, is Susan Doyle, originally from Tasmania, who worked in two of Australia's pinot-friendly regions (Tasmania and the Yarra Valley) before transitioning to California, where she started with Greg La Follette (see **TANDEM WINES**) when he was making wine at Hartford Court in 1994. Doyle also has responsibility for the aforementioned Frei Brothers and Gallo Family pinots. The former is anchored with fruit from Gallo's Laguna North Vineyard in Green Valley and with a bit of MacMurray Ranch fruit; the latter is anchored with Two Rock Vineyard grapes, plus fruit from one block at MacMurray Ranch. The two wines made in the ex-Martini facility and the Sta. Rita Hills wine generally follow the consensus protocol; the others are fermented in large tanks. All MacMurray Ranch pinots, however, are barrel-raised; so far at least, there has

been no resort to barrel alternatives like wood chips. They are also based, across the board, on impeccably farmed fruit grown in the heartlands of California's best pinot appellations. The entry-priced Sonoma Coast bottling represents very good value; the high-end wines play in the same league as some of California's most respected producers.

#### TASTING NOTES

2005 *Central Coast* (tasted in 2007):

Luminous pinkish ruby; cherry and strawberry dominate both nose and palate; hint of pencil lead and grip, and some flowers; simply and attractively structured; relatively lightweight; varietally correct; short-to-medium strength.

2005 *Sonoma Coast* (tasted in 2007):

Slightly darker and blacker than the Central Coast wine, with earthier, more minty and less berry-driven aromas; bright and moderately complex on the palate with savory notes and white pepper; lively; medium-length; an excellent value.

2004 *Russian River Valley* (tasted in 2007): Medium-deep, almost brick red; spicy and briary on the nose; caramel, saltwater taffy, and bayberry on the palate; almost creamy texture but bright nonetheless; caramel makes the wine taste very ripe; considerable length and medium weight.

2005 *Sta. Rita Hills* (tasted in 2007):

Brilliant, medium rosy-magenta; clove-scented and briary aromatics; simultaneously lifted and heady; very ripe fruit, warm mouth-feel, blueberry, black cherry, and pepper; warm and long with some minerality and grip.

2005 *Russian River Valley Winemaker's Block Selection* (tasted in 2007): Medium-deep ruby; bright cherry fruit aromas plus barrel-derived vanilla; attractively fruity attack, then sober and tightly knit; very

persistent cherry eau-de-vie; long and attractive.