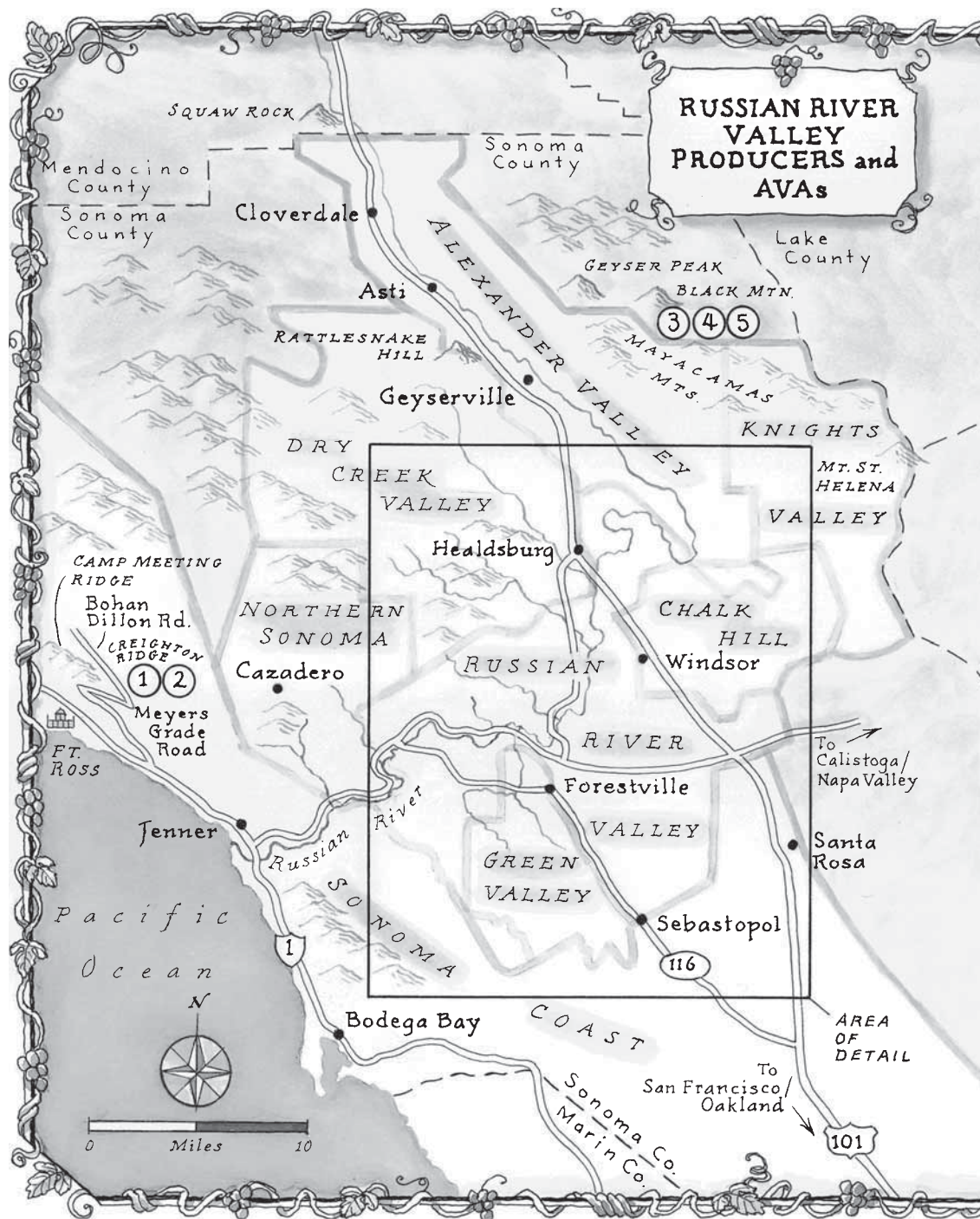


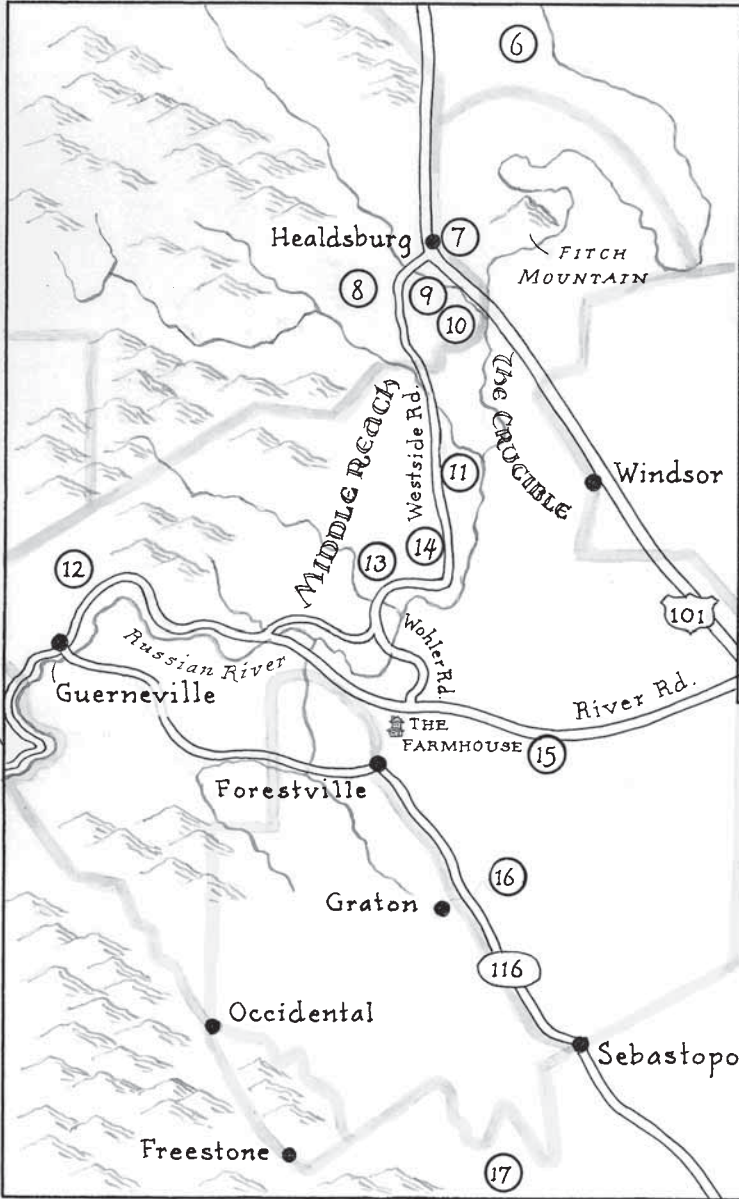
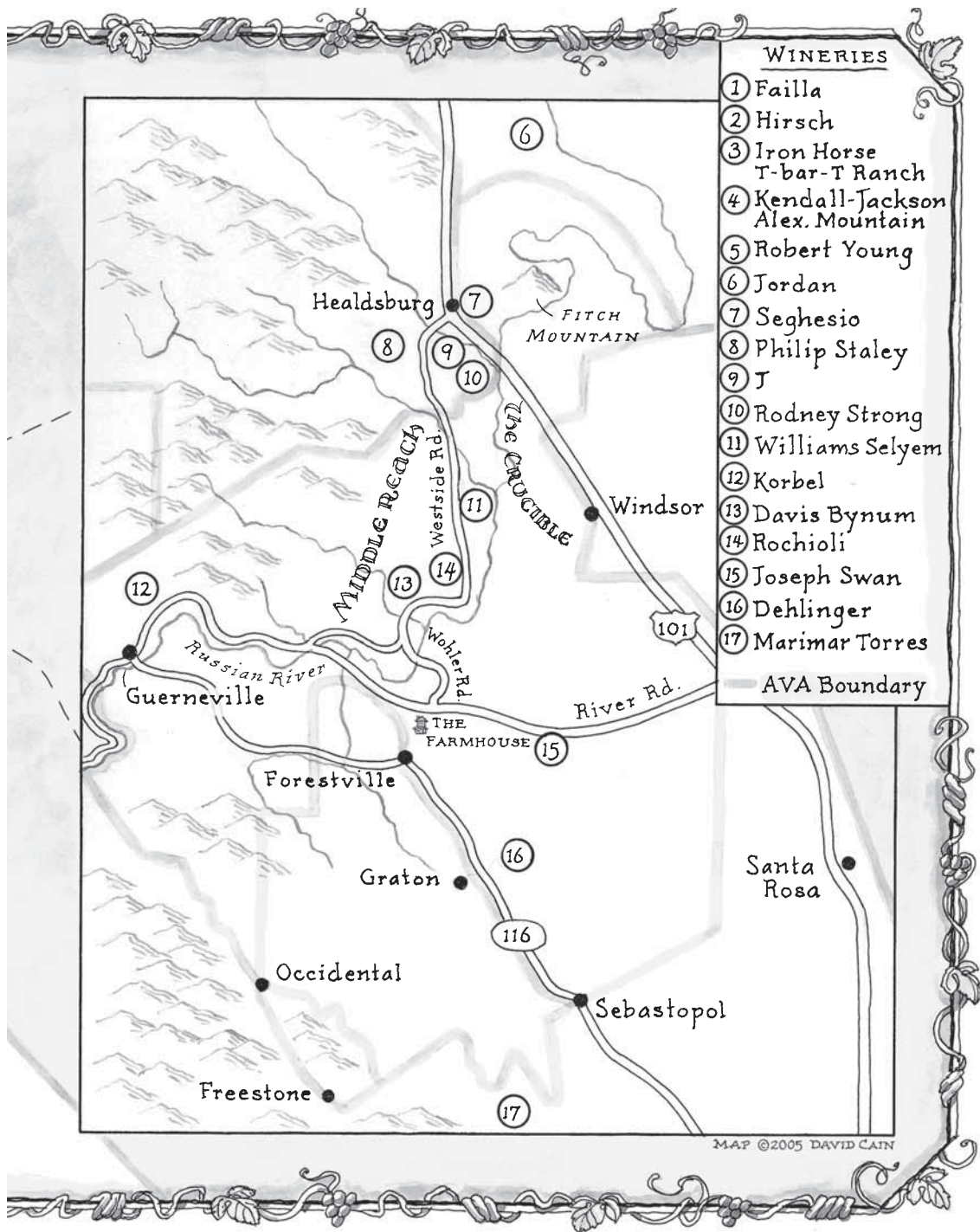
A Wine Journey along the Russian River



STEVE HEIMOFF

RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY PRODUCERS and AVAs





- WINERIES**
- ① Failla
 - ② Hirsch
 - ③ Iron Horse T-bar-T Ranch
 - ④ Kendall-Jackson Alex. Mountain
 - ⑤ Robert Young
 - ⑥ Jordan
 - ⑦ Seghesio
 - ⑧ Philip Staley
 - ⑨ J
 - ⑩ Rodney Strong
 - ⑪ Williams Selyem
 - ⑫ Korbel
 - ⑬ Davis Bynum
 - ⑭ Rochioli
 - ⑮ Joseph Swan
 - ⑯ Dehlinger
 - ⑰ Marimar Torres
- AVA Boundary

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7

Pinot Noir Comes to Westside Road

Rochioli's vineyard was indeed hallowed ground for Pinot Noir. The vineyard is located in the heart of a stretch of the Russian River Valley known locally as the Middle Reach, a term used by the mining companies not to indicate the river's geographic midpoint but to indicate the section that contained the richest deposits of gravel. It is also the most famous part of the appellation for the quality of its Pinot Noir. But if the Middle Reach is California's emerging Côte de Nuits, it was a long time coming.

For years, the "experts" had derided Pinot Noir, claiming that it was impossible to successfully grow it in California. Some considered California's climate too hot; others (particularly the French) believed that its soils were entirely unsuitable because they did not contain large amounts of the limestone that undergirds Burgundy. ("You can steal our vines, you can steal our methods, but you can never steal our terroir!" I was once told by a famous Burgundian *vigneron*.) Besides, it was once argued, Pinot Noir was not commercially viable. Even as far back as 1896, Eugene Hilgard, the agricultural genius who started the University of California's work in viticulture and enology, was warning grape growers against trying it. "No price that is likely to be obtained at present would justify" the effort, he wrote.

Even a mere generation ago, wine critics arched their eyebrows and pinched their noses when it came to Pinot Noir. "Thin-flavored and simple," sniffed one. "Deplorable," snapped another. And those were Cali-

ifornia wine writers, who might have been expected to show a little patriotic sympathy.

Europeans were even more savage in their attacks. The dean of British wine writers, the urbane, silver-haired Michael Broadbent, in the 1970s decreed that California Pinot Noir was “not to be compared with burgundy.” Not content with this categorical injury, he added a gastronomic insult in describing it as “stewed.”

Certainly, there was little to make Pinot Noir interesting, except to the most extreme fanatic. “In the 1970s, Pinot Noir had been written off in California,” recalls Forrest Tancer, who made it at Iron Horse’s Green Valley property from a vineyard earlier established by Rodney Strong but later acquired by the Sterling family, into which Tancer married. “There was a lot of miserable wine. I used to joke about ‘eau de rubber boot’ Pinot Noir.” Rubber boots—stewed—pretty much the same thing!

Fortunately for us—perhaps unfortunately for them—some wine-makers are attracted to Pinot Noir like moths to a flame. Every Pinot Noir story is a personal one, and here is mine.

I did not care much for it, at first. The earliest note in my tasting diary that mentions Pinot Noir concerned a 1979 Monterey Vineyard Classic California Red from the Central Coast. It was a “heavy, warm” wine, I wrote, but then, it cost all of three dollars. It is difficult, if not impossible, today to imagine a California vintner mixing Pinot Noir with Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel, which was the composition of that long-ago mutant.

The next mention was Edmeades’ 1983 Opal, a proprietary wine from Mendocino County’s Anderson Valley, which at least had the virtue of being 100 percent Pinot Noir. But it continued the theme of cranky unconventionality by being, as the label boldly stated, a “dry white” (actually pink) wine. It cost four dollars forty cents, pretty fancy in those days for

a rosé, much less one from Mendocino. Again, it is difficult to imagine anyone today making a rosé of Pinot Noir, because a red Pinot Noir (odd phrase) brings so much more money than a blush wine ever would. (Even as I write this, however, the notorious “grape glut” of the early 2000s is resulting in a sea of rosé wines made from all sorts of unlikely varietals, as vintners try to figure out new ways of repackaging old grapes.)

I mention these two oddities only to underscore the awkward position held by California Pinot Noir back then. It was sulky to grow, finicky to make, not understood by consumers, and, consequently, hard to sell. Distributors didn’t want to touch it. Although California Pinot Noir from stalwarts such as Almaden, Beaulieu, and Paul Masson had been staples on restaurant wine lists in the 1940s and 1950s, by the 1970s it was harder to find. By then, a new culture of cuisine and wine appreciation, influenced by Pinot-bashing critics, largely short-circuited whatever progress the varietal had previously made. A sommelier who wanted a nice Pinot Noir for the wine list would get it from the only place in the world where that grape made good wine: Burgundy. Besides, as everyone then knew, the coming red varietal in California was Cabernet Sauvignon.

The first true, red California Pinot Noir I recorded in my tasting book was in 1985. It was—to reprise the theme of things that no longer exist—from the old Louis K. Mihaly winery in Napa Valley, the 1982 Private Reserve (a meaningless designation, then as now, as no law governs the use of those words). I came across it at the old Les Amis du Vin winetasting group in San Francisco and liked it so much that I promptly drove up and bought a half-case. I can’t remember what I paid—five dollars a bottle?

What was that Mihaly Pinot like? “Fruity-cherry smell,” I wrote. “Flavors of cherries and tar. Round, mellow, mouth-filling and deep. Terrific stuffing and complexity. Silky smooth. Long, rich aftertaste.”

Silky . . . cherries . . . mellow. In other words, a wine we would recognize

today as Pinot Noir. I recall a certain leathery smell (perhaps what I meant by “tar”) that could have been caused by *brettanomyces*, a yeast that in small amounts can add complexity to a wine’s aroma, but which in larger quantities can make the wine smell like a perspiring horse. (To this day, the subject of how much, if any, “brett” a wine can or should have launches critics into angels-dancing-on-pinhead debates.) It was the sort of Pinot Noir once planted in considerable quantity on the floor of the Napa Valley but hardly to be found there anymore, the victim of critical disdain and a conviction, now hardened into the detritus of conventional wisdom, that Pinot Noir does not deserve a place in Napa Valley, outside of the Carneros, which really oughtn’t to be a formal part of Napa Valley anyway.

I liked that Mihaly, although in retrospect I can see that it lacked the delicacy and breed (such a nice word for wine) you want in a Pinot Noir. It might well have faded out of my mind forever in the endless Niagara of wines I have drunk, with more or less pleasure, since. But like a first date on which something significant happens, it turned out to be unforgettable. That wine proved to me that California Pinot Noir could be as distinctive as Cabernet Sauvignon.

After that, my Pinot encounters were scattershot. A 1982 Adelsheim from the Willamette Valley in Oregon intrigued me, and so did an early Saintsbury Garnet from Carneros, although you could not have asked for two more different wines—the former dark and earthy, the latter as lightly fruity as a fresh, carbonic young Beaujolais. I liked a 1985 Charles Krug for its soft suppleness. A 1986 Pedroncelli from Dry Creek Valley was heavy and tannic. I tasted through a range of the then-new 1985s from the *Domaine de la Romanée-Conti* and was a little ashamed at not being impressed. In the main, Pinot remained an afterthought. For every one I stumbled across, there were a hundred Cabernet Sauvignons, Zinfandels, Chardonnays, and—a passion at the time—German Rieslings. With Pinot Noir,

the truth, now clear to me, is that you either love it or are indifferent. I was indifferent.

The first Russian River Valley Pinot Noir I find in my notes was a 1985 Lot #2 from Dehlinger. (Years later, I asked Tom Dehlinger what the name meant, and he replied, grinning, “A failed experiment in marketing!”) It was a wine that intrigued yet puzzled me, and, judging from my brief and ambiguous written remarks, I wasn’t sure what to make of it. It seemed to change before my very eyes (or nose), now beef-bouillony and vegetal and, yes, “stewed,” in the sense of bringing to mind a gurgling pot of chunky tomato sauce. But then it seemed to inhale and breathe out from the glass a great waft of blackberries, blueberries, and cherries, as if some fruity essence had awakened deep within its slumbering soul, stimulated by a tickle of air. It straddled the line between ripeness and its opposite with the nimble-footedness of a high-wire acrobat performing without a net.

That was a wine to taste twice, or three times, or four, to pause between sips and mull over. It was not great, but it was, well, *interesting*. There was something elusive about it, like a flitting shadow or a butterfly’s flight. For the first time, I understood why people used the word “tease” to describe Pinot’s appeal. Tom Dehlinger has talked about Pinot Noir’s “intellectual challenge,” whereas Bob Cabral, at Williams Selyem, describes it as “a bully one minute and a passive baby the next.” Both winemakers are referring, I think, to Pinot Noir’s schizoid, changeling character.

LIKE FRANCE, A PINOT NOIR, A BURGUNDY

Rochioli’s property is part of a chain of Middle Reach vineyards that runs for seven or so miles along Westside Road, from just outside Healdsburg down to the Wohler Bridge, where the landscape, as we saw on our row-

boat ride, changes dramatically. (There is no precise definition of Middle Reach boundaries, since the region isn't a legal appellation—yet.)

The vineyards are on both sides of the river, but, to my mind, the best—certainly, the best-known—are to its northwest, on either side of Westside Road. They run from the river's edge onto the flatlands and benches and then, crossing Westside, extend a few hundred feet onto the flanks of the hills. Above that, the terrain, dominated by 1,652-foot Mount Jackson, becomes too rugged and remote to plant to any great extent. The temperature is hotter, too, as you move into Dry Creek Valley, which is patently too warm for Pinot Noir.

These Middle Reach vineyards and wineries, stretching from Philip Staley (who does not make a Pinot Noir) through Belvedere, Bacigalupi, and Hop Kiln, and then to Williams Selyem, Davis Bynum, and finally Porter Creek (all of whom do), are famous. None, however, is as historically connected to Pinot Noir as Rochioli.

Westside Road is a sleepy little country lane, rolling and curvy and picturesque as it wends its way past vineyards, farmhouses, and little wineries. To my esthetic sensibility, it is one of the most scenic wine routes in California. For more than a century, the Westside area, like all of Spanish-Mexican California, consisted of large ranchos, many of them thousands or even tens of thousands of acres. The regional Spanish-Mexican *commandantes* had issued these land grants within their jurisdictions to encourage agriculture and industry, reward soldiers, or provide for propertyless friends or relatives. Sonoma alone included scores of ranchos; Fitch's Sotoyomi Rancho, at 48,836 acres, was the second largest. Built on old Pomo trails, Westside Road was one of the lanes that connected the ranchos and the subsequent population centers. It gave people from Healdsburg and points north and east access to the river hamlets of Rio Nido and Guerne-

ville and the far coast (and vice versa), allowing them to avoid the more circuitous southern routes along Eastside and River roads.

As chapter 6 described, the area was not heavily settled until the 1880s and 1890s, when Italian immigrants began arriving in large numbers. They came to seek their fortunes; word of mouth and letters back home spread enticing tales of a gentle river valley whose genial climate and hills were said to resemble Italy's own pastoral countryside. One of these families was a clan that originally came from the small village of Fornovolasco, outside Lucca. Their name was Rocchioli; they later dropped the second "c." Their story could stand for that of hundreds of others, except for the way it has ended.

Michele Rocchioli and his wife, Menichina, and their two children, Angela and Giuseppe, sailed past the Statue of Liberty to land in New York City on August 1, 1911, when Giuseppe, later to be known as Joe (and, still later, Joe Sr.), was eight years old. Over the next few years, Michele made his way across the country, working at odd jobs much as the young Cyrus Alexander had done. In 1914, he arrived in the Russian River Valley, where he found a position on the old Wohler Ranch.

At a mere 1,310 acres, the Wohler place hardly qualified as a rancho. It was a combination hopyard and vineyard, bordering the Russian River, that belonged to a landowner named Raford Peterson. ("Raford PETERSON was here Wednesday," the *Sonoma Democrat*, published out of Santa Rosa, proclaimed in an 1895 society brief, suggesting not only Peterson's importance but also the newsworthiness of the ten-mile trip between the Wohler Ranch and Santa Rosa in those pre-automobile days.)

As soon as Joe was old enough, he also started working on the ranch, and he did well. "He was one of the smarter ones and rose to the top," Joe Rochioli Jr. says of his father. By the late 1920s, Joe Sr. had become

the ranch foreman, with a reputation for driving his field hands hard, although no harder than he drove himself.

In 1930, he married Neoma Baldi, the daughter of friends who also were from the Fornovolasco area. Joe Jr. was born in 1934. A few years later, the ambitious Joe Sr., longing to be his own boss, leased a 125-acre property near the Wohler Ranch, called Fenton Acres after the name of its owner. Joe spent the next thirty years there, raising his family and saving his pennies before eventually buying the property in 1957. The Fenton Acres site is where the Rochioli vineyards and winery are now located. Joe Sr. died in 1966.

Before he died, Joe Sr. put in his first vines, albeit reluctantly. Like many others throughout Sonoma County who planted grapes in those days, he did so on the advice of the University of California's local farm advisor. Joe Sr. considered himself a farmer of crops, especially hops, and apparently did not have any particular seriousness about grape growing, much less winemaking, beyond having another product to sell in a market that was reportedly expanding. He planted French Colombard, Gamay Beaujolais, and Valdeguie, the high-yielding varieties then in demand for the jug wines preferred by consumers. He sold them to the likes of giant wineries such as Gallo and Martini & Prati, where the grapes disappeared into blending vats of "Chianti," "Burgundy," "Rhine," and all the other purloined names.

Joe Jr. then entered the picture. He is a craggy man, earthy and voluble, with a penchant for salty tales and a good belly laugh. We sat one day on the veranda outside the winery tasting room, in our shirtsleeves although it was midwinter. The fragrant little pinkish-purple flowers on the plum trees had blossomed, and there were already bursts of wildflowers along Westside Road. We were in the January-February heat wave and mini-drought of the 2003 vintage, and, although the weather was shortly to turn

wintry again, on this day a soft southerly breeze shot the temperature to well over 70 degrees. In Guerneville, people were sitting in the cafés or sunning themselves by the old bridge; but Joe Jr. worried that the heat would wake up the vines too soon. If that happened, the rains and frosts that were bound to come could kill the tender shoots or start the grapes on the process of uneven ripening as a result of the physiological problem of grape shatter (loss of berries).

I asked Joe Jr. how he came to plant Pinot Noir. He settled back in his chair and spun the tale.

“We were gettin’ the same prices [for grapes] as Lodi, Sacramento, and the [Central] Valley, and we just couldn’t compete with ’em,” he said. Prices for cheap inland grapes had sunk to extremely low levels by the 1960s. Along the coast, where the cost of production and the cost of living in general were higher, such prices were, in the long run, unsustainable. Beyond that, the local hops industry was in the throes of its final collapse. Joe Jr. understood that the farm’s prospects were not good. “So I started thinkin’, in order to survive, we’re gonna have to do something special. And the future was varietal wines. I had read a little about France, and over there, they had all these varietals, and they kept the production [yield] down.”

Joe Jr. got it into his head to plant some of those low-production French grapes. But Joe Sr. wouldn’t hear of it. Like the other old-time growers, he was interested in quantity, not quality. But Joe Jr. was seeing something his father didn’t.

Nor were the experts at the University of California particularly helpful. When Joe Jr. sought their advice, “They said, ‘Jesus Christ, put in more Gamay Beaujolais! That’s what you wanna put in!’” he recalled. “But I says, ‘No! That’s not what I wanna put in! That’s ten tons to the acre. I want something shy-bearing! I want something quality!’”

“Something quality,” in that unknown new world of varietal wine,



Joe Jr. and Tom Rochioli, père et fils, the heart and soul of the Middle Reach.

turned out to be Sauvignon Blanc. Joe Jr. planted some in 1960, using budwood he got from U.C. Davis's vineyard. He had walked through a dozen rows of grape-laden vines, each assigned with a different clonal number, tasted from each, and finally chose the grape "that really tasted different." But at that nascent time in the American wine industry, nobody wanted this strange new white grape for itself. Joe Jr. was forced to sell it, along with his French Colombard, as "mixed whites" to the usual suspects—Gallo and Martini & Prati. As he recalled this, Joe Jr. practically winced. He shook his head with sadness as he said, "The most beautiful grapes you ever saw. . . ." It wasn't until 1969 that a premium winery, Rod Strong's old Windsor brand, bought those Sauvignon Blanc grapes for themselves. (The story has a happy ending. Rochioli's old-vine Sauvignon Blanc is among the best of that varietal produced in California, year in and year out.)

Next, he tried planting Cabernet Sauvignon, but the grapes didn't seem to ripen properly in the cool climate. Then the idea of Pinot Noir popped up. It's hard to say just why. Joe Jr. hadn't exactly been a Burgundy buff; he barely knew what Pinot Noir was. "At home, we drank pretty much Zinfandel, the homemade stuff," he says, like most of the Italian Americans. But he now arrived at an firm conclusion: "We had to do it like France, a Pinot Noir, a Burgundy."

In 1968, he put in his first Pinot Noir vines, just a few hundred feet from where Rand, Rick, and I had climbed up, in a patch of the vineyard now known as East Block.

"Everyone thought I was crazy!" Joe Jr. laughed.

I asked him where he had gotten his Pinot Noir cuttings. In 1968, very little Pinot Noir was available in California, and the options for anyone seeking it were severely limited.

"I heard from friends that this old grower in Napa Valley had some,"

he recalled. I pressed him, wondering whether it could have been Louis K. Mihaly. Joe Jr. put his hand to his forehead and thought.

“To tell you the truth,” he eventually replied, “I don’t remember his name or even where he was, except that it was south of St. Helena.” As Mihaly’s place had been. Joe Jr. drove over the hill, struck a deal with that now-forgotten grower, and in went East Block.

Then I asked Joe Jr. what he had planned to do with his fancy new Pinot Noir. Wasn’t it likely to have simply ended up in the “mixed red and black” blending vats at Martini & Prati and Gallo?

“To tell you the truth, I didn’t really know,” he said. “It was a matter of pride. I just thought something had to happen here, or there wouldn’t be any grapes.” Nor did it ever enter his head to make his own wine. “I was poor, very poor. I didn’t have the money to buy equipment or anything.”

Despite having no plans for his Pinot Noir, only a year after planting East Block, he planted West Block right next to it. This time, however, the source of the cuttings was well known. Joe Jr. recalled that he had been hauling some French Colombard down to Wente Brothers Winery in the Livermore Valley. The grapes from that rather bland varietal might have filled out one of the many white wines the Wentes were producing at the time. Joe Jr. had heard that his good friend Carl Wente had brought in some French clones of Pinot Noir, and Joe asked him for some budwood.

But Carl Wente said no. “‘Joe,’ he says, ‘I paid a lot of money for these.’ So I says to him, ‘Carl, come on, now.’” (It’s fun to imagine these two shrewd, veteran grape men, one a flinty-eyed Italian American, the other a wizened German American, in the vineyard, kicking the dirt, feeling each other out, bargaining.) “‘Well,’ Carl says, ‘I guess I can let you have some.’” Joe Jr. laughed a deep, happy laugh. “He charged me five cents a bud. I bought five thousand buds. That was a lot of money!”

When our conversation ended, I shook hands with Joe Jr. and told him

he must be very proud of how well things had worked out. After all, Rochioli's Pinot Noirs are among the rarest, most coveted, and most expensive in California—or in the New World, for that matter. He pointed with his chin to the winery building, with its fancy, stone-finished, wood-paneled tasting room, and said, "Oh, yeah. It's a gold mine." He did not miss the hard times during the Depression, when the family had been so broke they never left the Wohler Ranch and ate only what they could grow.

"But it's killin' me," Joe Jr. said. "I bought all this land for little or nothin', two thousand dollars an acre. Now it's valued so high, my estate's blown clear out of sight. They're sayin' my kids will have to come up with seven million dollars in inheritance tax!"

I guessed success was a double-edged sword, but I did not think that Joe Jr. was complaining.



Technically speaking, Joe Jr.'s Pinot Noir was not the first to be planted in the Russian River Valley, or even along Westside Road. In the 1930s, the old Fountaingrove Winery, north of Santa Rosa, grew some, or is said to have grown something called Pinot Noir. Mary Frost Mabon, in *ABC of America's Wines*, thought so highly of it that she called it "one of the top wines of California"—and, moreover, noted that Fountaingrove's '35 vintage was actually labeled Sonoma Pinot Noir. Where exactly the grapes were grown I do not know, but, in 1948, the American writer Julian Street said that Fountaingrove's Pinot Noir and its Cabernet Sauvignon were "identical in color, bouquet, and flavor," which is exactly the problem when Pinot Noir is cultivated in a too-hot climate—it becomes too full bodied.

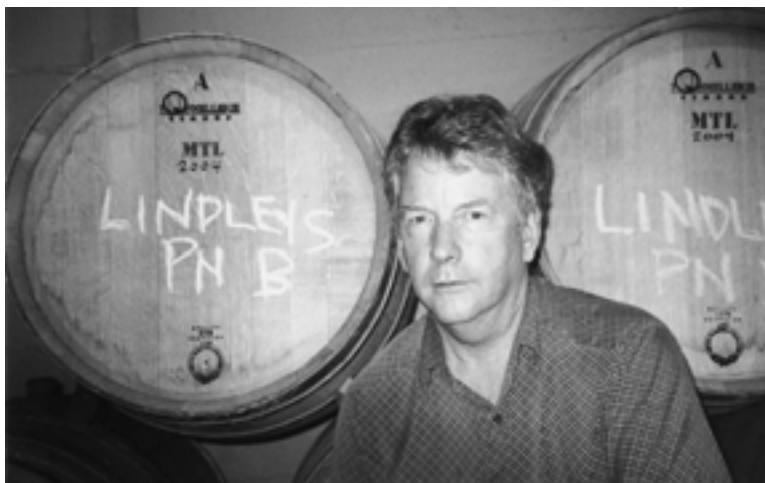
The Bacigalupi family, just up Westside Road from Rochioli's place toward Healdsburg, definitely planted some Pinot Noir in 1964, also get-

ting their budwood from Wente Brothers and also following the advice of the peripatetic farm advisor. A few miles farther west, after Westside merges with River Road just before Guerneville, Korbel had tinkered on and off with Pinot Noir and actually vinified a varietally labeled one in the 1950s. Paperwork in Korbel's archives dating back to 1955 records something called Sonoma Pinot Noir, Santa Nella Vineyard, the old name for the vineyard just across River Road from the sprawling Korbel campus. (There's still a little inn nearby, the Santa Nella House, built in the 1870s by a physician friend of the original Korbel brothers.) But Korbel's focus was on sparkling wine, and the winery missed out on the chance to become known as a Pinot Noir pioneer. Not that it has hurt them. Korbel has become one of the most successful sparkling wine producers in the world, and the profits from his bubblyies have enabled owner Gary Heck to buy other wineries in Sonoma County—Kenwood, Valley of the Moon, and Lake Sonoma. And, in fact, Korbel's Pinot Noir program, now resuscitated, produces very good wine.

Once the Rochioli's started growing Pinot Noir, they needed to find a winery to make it into wine. They didn't have to look very far. Just a few miles down Westside Road was another adventurous family whose claim to fame in this little tale is that they were the first to make a wine from Rochioli's Pinot Noir grapes—and in so doing made history.

That family was headed by Davis Bynum. Davis, who had been the garden editor at the *San Francisco Chronicle* and a home winemaker, was hooked up with the old Berkeley food-and-wine crowd that included Alice Waters, of Chez Panisse restaurant fame. He began making and selling wine in 1965, using purchased grapes, in a storefront on San Pablo Avenue in Albany, just north of Berkeley, a traffic-choked street of auto repair shops and Chinese restaurants. Davis's ambition was to own his own winery, and he eventually purchased the old Whitehall Lane vineyard, on Highway 29 in Napa

~PINOT NOIR COMES TO WESTSIDE ROAD~



Hampton Bynum with two barrels of organically grown Pinot Noir.

Valley. “We wanted to build a winery,” his son, Hampton, recalled, “but the Napa Planning Commission wouldn’t let us. So we thought, ‘This is a joke. Let’s find someplace else.’”

“Someplace else” turned out to be a run-down hop mill on Westside Road. The hops industry had been huge in the Russian River Valley; the annual hops harvest employed more pickers than any other crop in the county, and the beer factories of Santa Rosa were the biggest employers around. But even by the early 1950s, the hops industry was going downhill—one reason why Joe Sr. was looking around for a new crop to plant—and by the early 1960s, it had completely collapsed. In 1962, the little hop mill on Westside Road shut down.

Davis bought it on the cheap, although it required a huge amount of work to convert the dilapidated old stone building into a winery. (In the small world of Russian River Valley wine, one of the young men Davis hired

to work on the project was the Pinot Noir winemaker Gary Farrell, then a student at Santa Rosa Junior College, who later had his own eponymously named winery on Westside Road. Farrell had started a construction company to put himself through school. Later, he made wine for the Rochiolis. In the spring of 2004, Farrell sold his winery to the spirits giant Allied Domecq, although the deal called for him to remain as winemaker.)

“Joe was selling his Pinot Noir to Martini & Prati and Gallo for practically nothing,” Hampton Bynum recalled. “Those grapes were going into Hearty Burgundy. So we went to see him, and we said, ‘Joe, you’re getting a hundred fifty dollars a ton for your Pinot Noir. We’ll give you four hundred fifty a ton for it.’” It was an offer Joe Jr. couldn’t refuse.

Once they got the grapes, the Bynums needed a full-time winemaker; Davis was still living in the Bay Area, visiting the winery only a few days a week. That turned out to be Hampton. Young, bearded, and handsome, with long blond hair, Hampton knew next to nothing about making wine. But Davis appointed him to the job anyway. “When Dad informed me that I was now the winemaker,” Hampton says, grinning with irony, “I just said, ‘Well, Dad, that’s great!’ But he was nice enough to hire Bob Stemmler to hold my hand.” Stemmler was an experienced winemaker who had worked at Charles Krug and Inglenook and who went on to establish his own winery in Dry Creek Valley.

As things turned out, the day they crushed their first grapes, the Bynums’ permit to operate a winery arrived in the mail. Also on that day, Farrell and his construction crew finished putting a new roof on the winery building. Hampton (whom Farrell calls “a very good instinctual winemaker”) made the wine. That 1973 Davis Bynum Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir was the first vineyard-designated wine ever made in the Russian River Valley. Despite its historical significance, one critic, writing of it in 1976, said that it “deserved no standing ovations.” On the other hand, Joe Jr.

claims that the best Pinot Noir he ever had was a 1978 Davis Bynum, also made with Rochioli grapes.

I asked Hampton why Davis decided to put Rochioli Vineyard on the label; the *hommage* of vineyard designation was almost unheard of in California at the time. “Because my father was raised in the European tradition,” Hampton replied, “and he fancied that, perhaps, this might be the New World Burgundy.” The label also listed the Russian River, not the Russian River Valley.

Step by step, Russian River Valley Pinot Noir was happening. Serious growers were growing it, serious reviewers were paying attention to it (if not always favorably), and serious wine lovers were drinking it. Davis Bynum served his Pinot Noir to his Berkeley friends, who in turn told *their* well-connected friends about it. Word was spreading.

From these chance occurrences, a Burgundian-centered vision began manifesting itself along Westside Road. The pieces and players were now in place for the revolution that was erupting in the Russian River Valley.



It is a testimony to how slowly things actually developed, however, that even by the early 1980s, Rochioli Pinot Noir grapes remained very cheap. When Gary Farrell released his first commercial wine, a 1982 blend of Rochioli West Block and Three Corner, it could fetch a price of only eighty dollars a case. “At that time, no one knew who Rochioli was,” he says. The same wine today, if that blend were made (it isn’t), would cost eighty dollars a bottle.

But the critics—insiders like Joel Butler, who were always on the lookout for something new and compelling—eventually discovered wines made from Rochioli’s grapes. By the late 1980s, demand for these grapes had be-

come so intense that Joe Jr.'s son, Tom, became convinced that the family had to build their own winery and make their own wine. "Everybody else was using our name and making great wine," he recalls. "Davis Bynum was doing well with it, Williams Selyem was getting some, Rod Strong was doing good things with the Sauvignon Blanc, and several others. So I told Dad, 'Let's try to do it on our own! Rochioli is who we are, and that's what the label's gonna say!'"

Joe Jr. was reluctant to take such a giant step. "He kind of hemmed and hawed," Tom recalls. Joe Jr. had been a pioneer, but not a reckless one; the financial investment of starting a winery carried an extraordinary risk. But around this time, he delivered some grapes to a certain winery and discovered the entire crush crew stoned out of their minds on pot. When he returned the next morning, the crew was still high—and the grapes were still sitting there in their bins, untended and oxidizing, crawling with fruit flies. That place "made an awful wine that year," Joe Jr. says. That episode helped to convince him that Tom was right: they had to do it on their own. They got Gary Farrell to help them design the new winery and select the equipment. He also made the first few wines, but Tom quickly took over the job as winemaker.

They were now producing a Rochioli Pinot Noir. The next step came in 1990, when Tom visited Burgundy for the first time and the scales fell from his eyes. The father had been determined to grow Pinot "like France, a Burgundy." Now the son decided to do it like the quintessential Burgundy vineyard, the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti.

The Domaine, of course, is famous for being divided into seven mini-vineyards, or *climats*, six of them devoted to Pinot Noir and one to Chardonnay. The various vineyards are separated by little more than donkey paths, but for centuries they have been the subject of fascinated speculation. Why are the wines made from each vineyard so different? And why, for that mat-

ter, are the various *climats* not blended together to make a single wine, as is the custom in Bordeaux? The six Pinot Noir vineyards at Romanée-Conti (Romanée-Conti, La Tâche, Romanée St. Vivant, Richebourg, Grands Echezeaux, Echezeaux), added together, total just 175 acres, about half the size of, say, Lafite. But it would be absurd to suggest carving Lafite up into separate bottlings. Why do they do it at Romanée-Conti? And why is Pinot Noir never blended with other varietals, as are the wines of Bordeaux?

The answer has partly to do with Burgundian inheritance laws and local tradition, but it also involves the nature of Pinot Noir. Something about this wine is, to use a word commonly associated with it, transparent. That is, it is an almost perfect mirror of the conditions in which the grapes are grown; it seems to reflect even the tiniest subtleties of weather and soil, in a way that a fuller-bodied red wine such as Syrah, Merlot, or Cabernet Sauvignon does not. (Riesling and Sangiovese are the only other major varietals that are similarly transparent, and they, too, are delicately structured wines.) A chemist might point out that Pinot Noir grapes contain as little as one-tenth the quantity of anthocyanins—pigments that add body and strength to a red wine—in Cabernet, and thus that subtler influences from elements other than the grape will have a greater impact on the resulting wine. But Beaujolais also is low in anthocyanins, and it is never referred to in the same hushed tones as Pinot Noir, which is why, in 1395, the Duke of Burgundy ordered all “wicked and disloyal” Gamay Beaujolais vines uprooted from his vineyards and replaced with Pinot Noir.

I have asked many Pinot Noir winemakers about this transparency, and while all agree that Pinot Noir is the most site-sensitive of varietals, no one is quite able to say why. “For some reason, it’s just a more translucent filter of what’s coming up through the plant from the ground,” says Ehren Jordan, who makes Pinot Noir at his Failla winery on the Sonoma coast. Dan Goldfield, at Dutton-Goldfield, expresses a similar thought. “That’s

the difference between Pinot and Cab. What makes Pinot so unique is there's no grape that expresses a singular piece of land more straightforwardly." Then he adds, "Because with Pinot Noir, there's no such thing as the best quality. It's all about personality."

It is an astounding thing to say that "there's no such thing as the best quality" when it comes to Pinot Noir. Would anyone ever say that about Cabernet or Chardonnay or almost any other varietal? But that is the essence and the charm of Pinot Noir: minute differences between the wines fascinate us. To a Burgundian, the wine is an expression not of its variety but its origin; that is why the Pinot Noir always must remain unblended, as a highly pedigreed show dog must breed only with its own kind. Romanée-Conti's co-director, Aubert de Villaine, has said that a Pinot Noir wine is "like somebody's personality or face." Each wine, that is, a window into an authentic and independent soul, each different in its own way, and each revealing a different facet of—well, of whatever its essence is. Richard Olney, who wrote about the Domaine in his little 1991 book *Romanée-Conti*, said that, after every bit of science has been applied to understanding Pinot Noir, its "chthonic mystery . . . remains intact." (And it took a trip to the dictionary to find the meaning of "chthonic": "dark, primitive, and mysterious," from a Greek word designating the underworld of the dead.)

I don't mean to suggest that there is universal agreement on the issue of whether the best Pinot Noirs must be single-vineyard specimens. "Who's to say," muses Farrell, "that a combination of, say, Rochioli West Block and Three Corner wouldn't create a more complex wine?" For that matter, who's to say that a blend of Russian River Valley and, say, Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir could not make a great wine? But no one is likely to create such a composite (except, just possibly, Jess Jackson), which would be entitled only to a California appellation.

Farrell hits one nail squarely on the head with his suggestion that the single-vineyard Pinot Noir trend “is more market-driven than winemaker-driven,” and this statement is certainly not undermined by the fact that he makes quite a number of single-vineyard wines himself. Collectors who are willing to shell out fifty or sixty dollars and more for a bottle of Pinot Noir want to see a vineyard name on the label, and that is what vintners happily give them. I used to joke (and it’s truer than ever) that every extra word a vintner can squeeze onto the front label is worth an additional five dollars. Apply this formula to a hypothetical wine—Jones Winery 1999 Brown Vineyard South Block Bobby’s Corner Lily’s Row Clone 9 Old Vine Grandad’s Special Estate-Grown Pinot Noir—and be prepared for sticker shock.

At any rate, and in so many ways, the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti estate reminded Tom Rochioli of his own piece of land. His first Pinot Noirs had been blends assembled from various parts of the estate. Now he arrived at a momentous decision: to create separate bottlings of Pinot Noir, each based on a block designation, or a vineyard-within-a-vineyard—a *climat*—the way they did it at Romanée-Conti. Whereas Joe Jr. had honored the Rochioli Vineyard en masse, Tom would award each subsection its own *hommage*, if he believed it deserved it. Chutzpah? Shrewd marketing? A true *idée fixe*? Probably, in Tom’s case, a combination of all three.



The teardrop-shaped Rochioli vineyard consists of 128 planted acres. The section closest to the Russian River, where we climbed up the crumbly bank, is called Riverblock. It was planted to Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in 1989.

Riverblock seems to have been the Rochiolis’ response to increasing consumer demand for their grapes and wines. The soil is not ideal for Pinot

Noir, and nothing might ever have been planted there had the market not tightened and economics not dictated. Tom himself calls Riverblock “a mess” and admits, “I don’t think it’s the best of my group.”

In fact, lots of people with land immediately adjacent to the Russian River planted grapes there only in the late 1980s and 1990s. “Prior to 1996, you couldn’t even sell Pinot Noir from down there,” says Simi’s vineyard manager, Jerry Chong, referring to riverbank Pinot Noir. “You were lucky to get six hundred dollars a ton. But the explosion of the Pinot market has allowed these people to sell Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. I’ll tell you, in the long run, that’s not where the best ones are going to grow.”

But such remarks do not take into account the obsessively perfectionist viticulture that a fanatical grower like Joe Rochioli Jr. practices in his vineyards. The soil in Riverblock is very rich old riverbottom. It consists of deposits of fine-grained sand and silt left behind by the river’s endless flooding and receding (hence the name riverwash) and is relatively high in nutrients and organic material left over from decaying leaves, fish poop, microorganisms, and the like. (Below that, as we have seen, is that 60-foot-deep well of gravel.) Left to themselves, grapevines would grow too vigorously, which is why Joe Jr. and his crew have to fuss endlessly to reduce yields. “If you miss,” Tom says, “you get that tomato, veggie quality”—Broadbent’s “stewed” character.

(But I want to say here that Joe Jr. does such a good job at viticulture that the winemakers who vinify Riverblock’s grapes—such as Cabral at Williams Selyem and Tom Rochioli himself—consistently produce some of the great Pinot Noirs of California. In the summer of 2004, at another of our big blind tastings, my *Wine Enthusiast* colleagues and I went through more than three hundred California Pinot Noirs from the 2002 vintage, and Williams Selyem’s Rochioli Vineyard River Block, as they spell it, was the second highest-scoring wine.)

Next up from Riverblock is the section Tom calls Mid 40. It is a true bench, separated from Riverblock by a step in the earth, about a foot high and stretching across the entire vineyard. In a homely phrase, Tom calls this step “the Hump.” Mid 40 contains East Block, West Block, and Three Corner, the third-oldest Pinot Noir vineyard on the estate, planted in 1974. These *climats* are the crown jewels of the Rochioli estate and are priced accordingly.

The soil changes abruptly at the Hump. It is less rich in nutrients, a well-drained sandy loam common throughout Sonoma County’s valley-floor agricultural lands, ideal for grapes and almost any other crop. In the Côte de Nuits, for a thousand years, the best grapes have grown on a slice of hillside, midway up the slope. Go a little higher or lower, and the quality is not so good. One is tempted to think of Mid 40 as such a tenderloin strip. The vines there grow well but not too vigorously and do not require as much fussing as those down in Riverblock. They ripen “almost automatically,” Tom says.

Another reason why Mid 40 is different from Riverblock is the fog. Coming in from the south, southeast, and southwest during the late afternoon or early evening, it crosses over Riverblock first and reaches Mid 40 a little later. By mid-morning the next day, the pattern reverses, making Mid 40 warmer and sunnier than Riverblock—not by much, but on such thin margins is Pinot Noir’s personality built. This delicate balance of sun and fog seems to impart to the grapes the beautiful acid-tannin-fruit complex they possess. Vine age no doubt also has something to do with it.

As you leave Mid 40 and approach Westside Road, you notice how red the soil becomes. There is nothing like it farther down toward the river. This is not rivery silt and sand anymore, although streaks of it are folded in. Rather, it is iron-rich stuff, formed inside volcanoes, eroded and rusted,

and washed down from the mountains. And beneath it is that bottomless pit of gravel. This soil is very dry and not particularly rich, and consequently growers find even lower vine vigor.

These roadside vineyards represent an ambiguity. Tom Rochioli himself seems unsure about which varieties do best there. “There are so many inconsistencies, it’s hard to nail,” he says, when I ask him about it. The Rochiolis have hedged their bets in these vineyards, planting not only Pinot Noir and Chardonnay but also Syrah, Gamay Beaujolais, Sauvignon Blanc, Zinfandel, and the Cabernet Sauvignon grapes Oded Shakked buys for Longboard.

In fact, Westside Road marks an important transitional zone at Rochioli. “It’s on the edge of the hundred-year flood plain,” says Cabral, whose winery is across the street, just down Westside Road. “On the river side, you see all this alluvial plain of silt and sand that sits on top of gravel that goes down to kingdom come. As you cross the road, you get into more clays and metamorphosed sandstone and rocks that were held under intense pressure and heat for a long time, that cooked the soil down below it.”

In Rochioli’s case, this Westside Road transitional zone marks the boundary between the sandy soils of Riverblock and Mid 40, on the one hand, and the true hillside vineyard Tom calls Sweetwater, on the other.

Hampton Bynum had told me, “Tom’s favorite, of all the plantings, is Sweetwater,” and I certainly got the feeling that it was his pride and joy. Planted only in 1999 and 2000, it is his youngest vineyard, his little baby. As the last vineyard he may ever get to install, it occupies a special place in his heart.

We four-wheeled up there one afternoon, and Tom beamed like a proud papa. “Now *this*,” he said, as we bumped along up a steep incline, “is really new.” Sweetwater looks different from the flatland vineyards, not only because of its rugged slopes but because the vines are bunched much more

closely together, in so-called European tight spacing. This accomplishes several tasks. In such nutrient-poor dirt, the vines' foliage of leaves would otherwise be very thin, allowing the grapes to get sunburned. Clustering the plants together creates a communal canopy that helps shelter them. It also forces the plants to compete for whatever water and nutrients are available, further stressing them. Then, too, tight spacing represents an economic decision that maximizes the land's value, an important factor because developing a new vineyard can cost tens of thousands of dollars an acre.

The Sweetwater soils are the most complex on the estate, of a type found in Sonoma only on mountainous uplands in the northern half of the county. The land here has been folded, faulted, uplifted, shuffled, and reshuffled endlessly over the eons, the soils constantly metamorphosed, broken down, recycled, and eroded. There is practically no consistency at all from one spot to another, except that, in general, the dirt is meager. Runoff is very high, bringing with it the danger of erosion and landslide. Vigor is the lowest on the estate, and the berries on the vines predictably are very compact, far smaller than at Riverblock, and with thicker skins.

I tasted Rochioli's 2000 West Block, 2000 Riverblock, and two 2002 Sweetwater Pinot Noirs on a Bulwer-Lyttonian dark and stormy night at the Farmhouse Inn, a country inn and little restaurant run by an old Sonoma Italian American family, the Bartolomeis, in Forestville. The inn is on River Road right where Wohler Road meets it at Mark West Creek, an intersection that dependably floods during big storms. While the wind howled outside and the creek rose ominously, I lit a cozy fire and popped the corks.

The 2000 vintage wines were in bottle and had already been commercially released, but the two Sweetwaters were barrel samples. Tom initially had been reluctant to let me try them, because a barrel sample is only an embryo of a wine, and it can be too easy to come to premature conclusions regarding such an undeveloped infant. But he eventually relented and gave

them to me in 375-milliliter bottles, half the size of a regular bottle. They were made from the Dijon clones 777 and 115 and were the first Sweetwater Pinot Noirs ever vinified, which lent them a certain historical interest.

The Riverblock and West Block wines, I wrote that night, “share the same characteristics,” which were a ripe full-bodiedness and power, combined with delicacy. Both were delicious from the get-go, but there was no getting around the fact that Riverblock was a shadow of its neighbor. But what a shadow!

The smell of West Block reminded me of a “meat-centered entree.” Certain California Pinot Noirs can be overly fruity; they are delicious but have a Lifesaver candy one-dimensionality. Not so the West Block, which contained scents of veal and tobacco, mushrooms and bacon, herbs and anise, as though a Mediterranean stew were bubbling happily on the stove. “Then dark fruits and berries emerge,” perfuming the air: cherries, blackberries, the deepest, ripest, smokiest blueberries. Dark chocolate and roasted coffee bean, too.

Riverblock, by contrast, was “undeniably thinned down.” Tom himself earlier had used the word “floral” to describe Riverblock, and “floral” in a Pinot Noir is not particularly a compliment the way it is in, say, an aromatic Riesling or Gewurztraminer, or even a violetty Merlot.

Both Sweetwaters were dense, dark, and tannic, the result of the grapes’ thick, mountain-grown skins. Clone 777 was all fresh, young, jammy fruit: raspberry tart, red cherry pie (including the baked, buttery crust), a sprinkle of white chocolate powder and cinnamon, a drizzle of sweet vanilla. Clone 115 by contrast had sharper acids and was earthier and more herbal.

It seemed only natural to make a blend of the two Sweetwaters, something I assumed Tom Rochioli might do, in one ratio or another. Mine was fifty-fifty and produced a fabulously wholesome, complete Pinot Noir. It was different from West Block, livelier and fruitier, without as much

depth, silkier, and perhaps less serious, but precocious and sensual, with a good grip of tannins on the finish. It was a Lolita of a Pinot Noir, a warm, sexy nymph. You couldn't have asked for anything more seductive, and I marveled that it would only get better—not simply this vintage when additional months in oak conferred upon it a smoky sweetness, but in the future, as the vines aged.

Every winemaker talks up his or her latest project. In this case, it was obvious that Tom Rochioli's happiness about his sweet new baby was entirely justified.

PINOT NOIR'S RIVER ROAD ROUTE

While the Rochioli's and the Bynums were busy on Westside Road, a nearly simultaneous development took place on the opposite side of the river, to the south. In the rolling hills below River Road, a retired airline pilot named Joe Swan, who had flown for the old Western Airlines, bought some vineyard land for his retirement and decided to make wine.

River Road is the valley's main crossing, the nearest thing to a highway it's likely to get. The road used to be a backwater, but with so many young workers settling around Forestville and Sebastopol these days, it can get trafficky during rush hour, with commuters driving to and from the industrial parks and office complexes paralleling Highway 101. Near River Road's eastern end, in Santa Rosa (across Highway 101, it becomes scenic Mark West Road, which climbs across the Mayacamas into Napa Valley), is the Egg Basket general store, which marks the unofficial boundary between city and wine country.

As the crow flies, River Road is only a few miles from Westside Road, but in some respects it might as well be in another county. Particularly in

the old days, valley folk tended to stay on their own side of the river. With only a few bridges, and those just as likely to be flooded out during a big storm, travel wasn't so easy; besides, there was a certain provincial "my neighborhood is better than yours" attitude.

As a result, and even though they were thinking and working along similar lines, Joe Swan and Joe Rochioli Jr. were barely aware of each other's existence. "Swan was doing his own thing a couple of hills over," Tom Rochioli said, motioning his arm in River Road's general direction as though he were gesturing toward Japan. As for Joe Jr., he just says, "Well, I knew Swan was plantin' some vineyards over there, but we didn't really communicate."

Swan, who died in 1991, was a fanatical Burgundy lover. According to his son-in-law, Rod Berglund, who makes the wines at Joseph Swan Vineyards, Swan always intended to grow Pinot Noir, even before André Tchelistcheff recommended that he plant it because the weather along River Road was so cold.

Swan's land is in the southeast part of the appellation, actually not too far from Two Acres, in a part traditionally known as Vine Hill. Berglund calls it Laguna Ridges, a take on the old Laguna de Santa Rosa name from Spanish rancho days. (He also expresses hope that Laguna Ridges will someday be an AVA.) Because it is farther south, and more open to the broad floodplain running down through the Petaluma Gap to San Pablo Bay, Laguna Ridges is chillier, foggier, windier, and rainier than the Middle Reach. Joe Rochioli Jr. used to deride it as "swampland" more suitable for Gravenstein apples than the fine French varietal grapes he was interested in. The bottomlands, especially right along the Russian River, are not really so good for grapes, although lots of them grow there. The best vineyards are located south of River Road, and especially on the well-drained slopes of



Rod Berglund holding the reins at Joseph Swan.

low hillocks in a compact area that some, including Merry Edwards, call the Golden Triangle. Merry, a vivacious and energetic woman with a keen sense of humor, describes this as her “nickname” for the land bounded by Vinehill Road, Laguna Road, and Guerneville Road. It’s not really shaped like a triangle, more like a bowling pin. But a glance at a map shows that it occupies the geographic heart of the Russian River Valley AVA.

When Swan bought his property, it contained the usual field blend, dating from the 1880s, but he ripped out the old vines in 1968. (In retrospect, it’s a shame he didn’t keep a few rows.) In 1969, he planted Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, exactly one year after the Rochioli. But the first commercial release of a Swan Pinot Noir was in 1973, the same year Davis Bynum put out his Rochioli Pinot Noir. Talk about synchronicity!

Two things make the Laguna Ridges area distinct. One is the climate; the other is Goldridge soil. The climate is coolish, although some areas in the Russian River Valley, especially the Green Valley, are even chillier. As for the soil, “Goldridge” is as serious a buzzword as you’ll find in California wine country. Burgundians may boast of their vaunted Kimmeridgian limestone, Germans of their slate, the Chateauneuvians of their rounded stones; Sonomans slap the Goldridge trump card down and reach for the chips. Of course, every wine region, of necessity, finds something to brag about. If grapes grew in Manhattan, people would praise asphalt.

Tom Dehlinger says that, of his sixteen acres of Pinot Noir, “maybe four acres are absolutely stunning, year after year, our top spots. And they tend to be Goldridge and a variant of Goldridge, Altamont.” Davis Bynum agrees: “Grapes love it. It’s mostly sand and doesn’t have a lot of nutrients.”

In a 1972 study of Sonoma’s soils, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the University of California described Goldridge as “fine sandy loams” with “a sandy clay loam subsoil . . . underlain by . . . sandstone.”

“It’s almost like talc, it’s so light,” marvels Rod Berglund. That sandy structure ensures excellent drainage, which is what vintners like about it.

“I can tell you what makes Goldridge so easy for farming,” says Ehren Jordan, at Failla. “There aren’t a lot of rocks, [and] it drains incredibly well. You can get twelve inches of rain in one day and then drive a truck out into the vineyard the next day. That’s why I call it the rain forest desert.” Yet this same quality “makes Goldridge highly erodable,” Forrest Tancer adds, warning that “you have to be really careful it doesn’t all wash away after a rainstorm.”

You can’t pin the excellence of the Laguna Ridges area for Pinot Noir merely on Goldridge soil, however; as Dan Roberts, Dr. Dirt, points out, “You could have Goldridge in Fresno, but you couldn’t grow Pinot Noir there!” It seems to be the combination of climate *and* soil—terroir—that does the trick.



Joe Swan’s Pinots were big, tough wines. Tancer used to go over to taste with him, and he recalls them as being “masculine. You’d almost want to question if it really *was* Pinot Noir. It had that very herbal, spicy, tannic quality. I didn’t find them particularly charming.”

But they aged well. A year or two after Joe Swan died, Alice Waters asked Rod Berglund to host a tasting of Swan Pinot Noirs at Chez Panisse, starting with the 1973 vintage and going up to the 1989. For the occasion, she prepared a Mediterranean lamb dish; recalling it now makes my mouth water. Although I no longer have my tasting notes, I remember the wines as being delicate and fine. Some were richer than others, with that taffeta mouthfeel and mocha-raspberry liqueurish sweetness you sometimes get in a mature California red of almost any varietal—Pinot Noir, Petite Sirah,

Zinfandel—whose tannins have fallen out. They were light but very pretty, although I wasn't entirely sure they made the case for twenty years of cellaring. But they did show that the best California red wines can age.

I met up with Rod Berglund again in January of 2003. It was the day of the annual Winter Wineland event, designed by the Russian River Valley Winegrowers Association to lure tourists during a season when they normally don't come. Swan's tiny parking lot was packed, and the rustic little tasting room was jammed with a swirl-and-sniff crowd that, fortunately, was buying. Rod, a tall man with a shaggy mane of reddish hair, a lopsided grin, and an easy, languorous personality, was busy chatting up visitors, while the cash register ka-chinged. Later, Rod joked that he once had been able to take January off and go someplace warm after the harvest, but no more. What with the increased marketing and public relations duties a winemaker is expected to shoulder in these competitive times, even dull old January has become just another work month.

Sadly, many of the details of Joe Swan's viticultural history died with him. He was not, it turns out, a garrulous man. "If you asked him a question," Rod recalls, "he didn't pontificate. He'd give you a simple 'yes' or 'no.'" Tancer referred to this same reticence when he described Joe Swan as "mysterious."

As a result, there are different versions of where Swan obtained his Pinot Noir budwood. "According to one," Rod relates, "André Tchelistcheff gave him the cuttings from Beaulieu's original vines, in Rutherford." Joel Butler, who now works for Diageo, the company that owns Beaulieu, says that those vines had been planted in the early 1900s by Georges de Latour "from cuttings he imported from France," although no one seems to know from precisely where. "But," Joel adds, "there's also speculation that M. de Latour might have gotten plant material from his next-door neighbor, Gustave Niebaum, at Inglenook."

(Our friend Mary Frost Mabon, in *ABC of America's Wines*, tells of her visit to Inglenook in the summer of 1941, when she tasted wines with its then-owner, John Daniel, Niebaum's grand-nephew. Among them were two Red Pinots [*sic*] from 1936 and 1937, both with a Napa Valley appellation. Here is her description: "Both . . . have a good deal of body, although they are by no means coarse. The '37 is softer and quite velvety; the '36 will remind French winedrinkers of an Hermitage, and like that wine should age well and so be laid down in their cellars." That '37 rather sounds like the Mihaly I once liked.)

Rod Berglund continues the narrative: "Later, when Beaulieu's vines were ripped out and André wanted to replant Pinot Noir in Carneros, he had to come back to Joe for the cuttings." Butler adds, "André began to pull out the Rutherford Pinot blocks starting in about 1952 or so. Combination of vines dying off . . . and also André just didn't think the character and quality of these Pinots were as good as what could be produced in a cooler area. And there was pressure to plant more Cabernet in Rutherford anyway."

But that's only one version. "Others," Rod tells me, "say Joe got his cuttings from Mount Eden Vineyards, in the Santa Cruz Mountains," which Martin Ray had established in 1942. (Ray had worked at Paul Masson and made a '36 Pinot Noir there. The American writer Julian Street, in 1948, called it "the first American red wine I ever drank with entire pleasure.")

Merry Edwards, who crafts a range of single-vineyard Pinot Noirs from the Russian River Valley at her Meredith Estate, happened to be working at the Martin Ray winery when Joe Swan was alive. At dinner one night in her Forestville home—a brilliant meal of five courses, each composed of wild mushrooms, and each accompanied by a different Pinot Noir of hers—she said, "I can tell you where Joe got his first Pinot cuttings; from Mount Eden. Joe used to come down and visit me all the time. The reason Rod doesn't know is that he came into the picture a lot later than I did.



Merry Edwards, a true pioneer of Russian River Valley Pinot Noir.

“After that,” she continued, “Joe would go to France every year and always bring [budwood] from Burgundy in his pocket.” Bringing in such uncertified “suitcase clones” (sometimes called “Samsonite clones”) has long been illegal—the last thing the U.S. Department of Agriculture wants is for some contagious plant disease to be smuggled into the country and start an epidemic—but that has never stopped covetous vintners from doing it, to this day.

Joe Swan’s enthusiasm for Pinot Noir spread to his neighbors in the Golden Triangle. Two years later, Elmo Martini planted some at Martini & Prati, a remarkable turn-around for a winery that for nearly a century had produced jug Chiantis and faux-Burgundies. “Dad thought it was going to be the next big thing,” his son, Tom, recalls. (By coincidence, as I write this, the Martin Ray Winery has just announced that it is buying Martini & Prati.) Martini & Prati never made a name for their own Pinot Noir wine, though, because they preferred to sell their grapes to others.

In 1975, Tom Dehlinger came along, obtaining his cuttings from Joe Swan’s vines and making his first Pinot Noir wine, the 1977, in Swan’s winery. Also around that time, Forrest Tancer really got rolling with Iron Horse, and Marimar Torres arrived in the Green Valley. Among others who pioneered the southern part of the valley were Steve Kistler, Merry Edwards, Lynmar, and Paul Hobbs. Today, the south Russian River Valley makes Pinot Noirs that differ from those of the warmer Middle Reach, wines that perhaps trade ripe and fruity voluptuousness and warming alcohol for a crisper elegance and, possibly, greater ageability. Just as in Burgundy (although in a different way), the north-versus-south dichotomy of the Russian River Valley offers alternatives for Pinotphiles as well as a lifetime of happy arguing concerning preference.