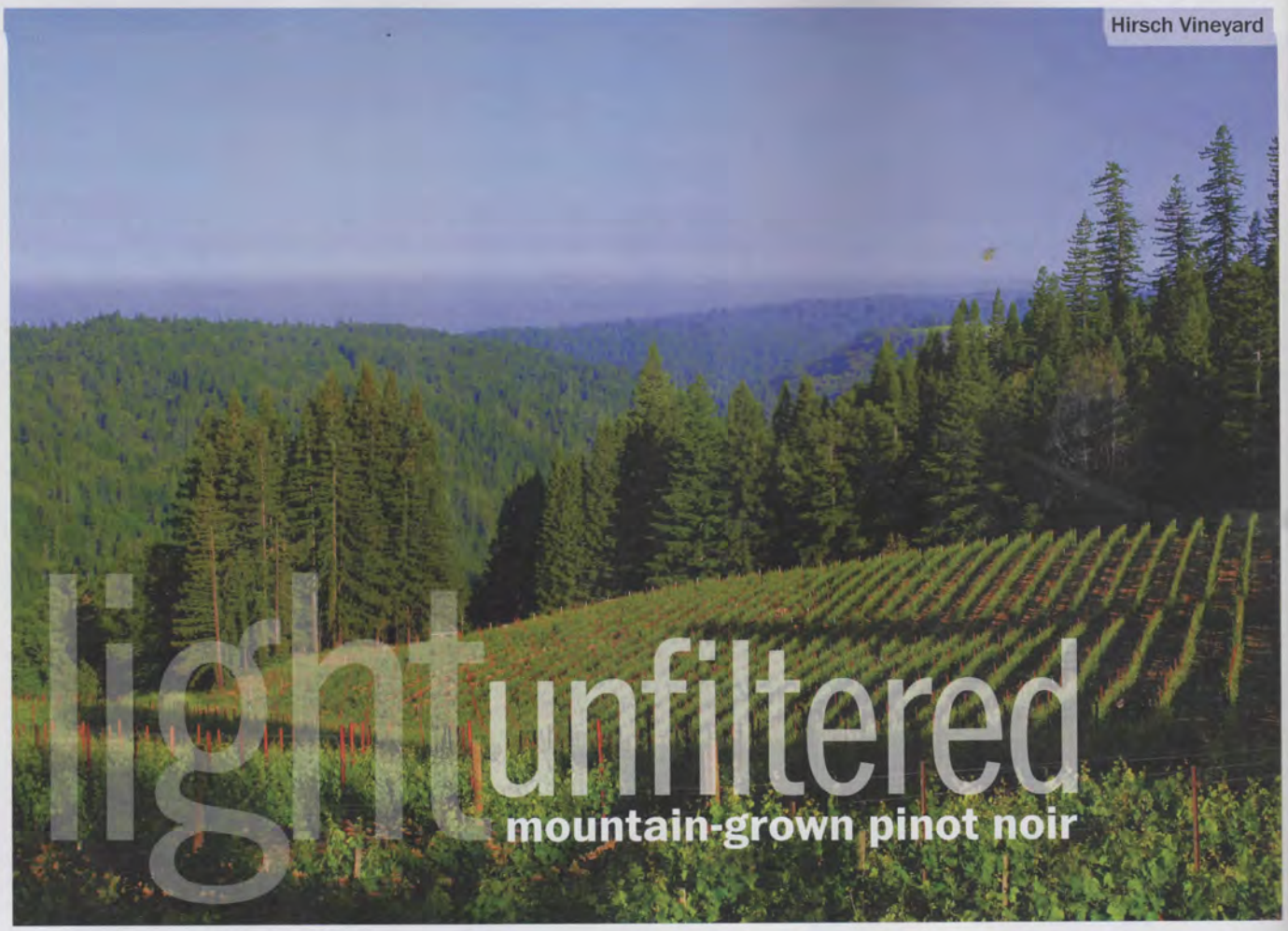

light unfiltered

mountain-grown pinot noir

by Patrick J. Comiskey

Much is made of mountain cabernet sauvignon in California, powerfully built wines grown on the slopes and spines of the Vaca and Mayacamas ranges. Zinfandel, too, garners special notice and praise when grown at elevation. But pinot noir at similarly lofty settings gets little attention—even though more acreage than ever is grown above the fog line, upwards of half a mile above sea level. Recently, I tasted and talked with sommeliers and winemakers about the character of mountain-grown pinot.

To gain an appreciation of coastal mountain vineyards, it's best to wake up early in Los Gatos, Philo or Jenner by the Sea—at or near sea level, in other words. Get in the car, get in a low gear and climb. In the summer months (June and July especially) from Mendocino to Santa Cruz, you will begin that journey in fog, so thick in places you may not be able to see much beyond the hood of your car. The road is slick and the earth damp; dew collects on the conifers and occasionally lands on your windshield with a sudden slap. As you wind your way upward, the gloom you've been nosing through starts to grow brighter, yellowing slightly to the color of egg cream, the light growing ever more ethereal until you emerge from the last stubborn wisps of cloud into brilliant morning sun, about a thousand feet higher than when you started.

By the time you reach for your sunglasses, it should be obvious that vineyards above the fog line experience very different morning hours from their counterparts' in the valleys. More light, for starters. "In the summer months," says Jeffrey Patterson of Mount Eden Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains, "we're getting maybe fourteen hours of sun. A valley vineyard might see ten." Even at the inland Chalone appellation, where Michael Michaud planted vineyards at 1,600 feet, this is true. "We're getting sun from virtually six a.m. to six at night," he says. "In the Santa Lucia Highlands, across the Salinas Valley from us, they're getting cut off at three p.m."

More than quantity, however, there's a quality of light that's inescapable: "I keep coming back to the word 'pure,'" says Jason Drew of Drew Vineyards, who draws from high-elevation sites in Mendocino. "There's really not a lot of haze up here, less traffic, less pollution—that's an empirical fact.

"We have the longest days in relation to the season's coolest temperatures."
—David Hirsch, Hirsch Vineyards

We're out of the fog and the smog zone." The same is true at Flowers Winery on Sonoma's outer coast, where Darrin Low makes the wines. "It's pretty much unfiltered here in the mornings," says Low. "There's nothing the light has to go through." And though the fog doesn't push much beyond 900 feet, the ridgetops are still ventilated by this continuous airflow, keeping the air clean and limpid—a fog pattern without the fog.

Among other things, says Michaud, this translates to an intensity of sunlight that lower elevations can't match: "It strips paint," says Michaud, who recently showed me the photograph of an old truck on his property that he'd hoped to fix up and race at Laguna Seca. "The thing looks like it's been sandblasted."

And while it can certainly get warm on a mountaintop, that intensity doesn't necessarily translate to heat. "I think much of our ripening comes from solar radiation rather than heat," says Thomas Fogarty winemaker Nathan Kandler, whose highest elevation pinot vineyard—Windy Ridge in the Santa Cruz Mountains—stands at 2,000 feet. "If it's cool and the sun is bright the plant is still photosynthesizing. You get excellent flavor development in bright light, more so than in heat."

Growers at elevation enjoy long hours of unmitigated sunshine late in the season, when tannins are evolving. "We have the longest days in relation to the season's coolest temperatures," says David Hirsch, whose vineyard is situated at 1,400 feet on the outer Sonoma Coast. Ross Cobb, who makes wine for Hirsch and for his family's outer-coast label, Cobb Wines, agrees. "By mid-September there's not as much heat pulling air into the valleys," explains Cobb. "The fog stays offshore, and you get this beautiful, clear, dry air. Not only do you avoid botrytis, but it's great for flavor development."

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Across the board, growers at higher elevations report generally cooler seasons than those at lower elevations.

The fog pattern without fog naturally leads to some diurnal variation, but as you might expect at higher elevations, the temperatures are more uniform than in places that have to endure the fog's daily ebb and flow. "Our climate's more compressed than a marine climate's," says Rhys's Kevin Harvey, speaking of his higher-elevation vineyards, Skyline (2,300 feet) and Alpine (1,500 feet). "It's not as warm in summer and not as cold in winter; it's a flatter curve."

"Lower highs and higher lows," is how Jason Drew puts it. Most mountain sites are spared the fury of spring winds, which results in more uniform flowering and better fruit set. A good set results in more even ripening—or rather, less uneven ripening, the kind that can lead to a jangly tannic profile. "What I have observed is that the tannins are actually softer, more fine grained," explains Drew, "because ripening is so much more even."

Mountain pinot vineyards reflect the tumult of California's geology at its most naked and chaotic. Many are situated on or

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near fault lines, and their soils can vary markedly from the North American to the Pacific plate. What's consistent is their weathering.

"After thousands of years of rain and runoff, ridgetops are typically pretty thin," says Drew of his Mendocino sites. "They're like the opposite of alluvial soils. But there are fissures and fractures, allowing the roots to penetrate very deep."

"Our soil's best attribute is drainage," says Jeffrey Patterson at Mount Eden. "It's very friable, which means the root zone is vast; roots can go down quite a ways and not be impeded by clay pan, like you find in Carneros." In impoverished soils, the vines are naturally low in vigor, with smaller berries and thicker skins—owing, at least in part, to the poor water-holding capacity of these nonalluvial soils.

Finally, many of these vineyards carry organic matter made up of millions of years of coastal forest decomposition. "For us [on the outer Sonoma Coast]," says Cobb, "that means white pepper, some jalapeño and fir; I can't tell you how much these wines smell like the nearby bay laurel trees sometimes."

The Mt. Harlan appellation boasts some of the highest-elevation pinot vineyards in the state, topping out at 2,500 feet. Calera's monopole is so remote that it takes Josh Jensen and his crew nearly an hour to drive to the vineyard gate from his winery, 1,000 feet below. Jensen settled upon Mt. Harlan with the aid of US Geological Survey maps and reports. He wasn't looking for a mountain setting when he purchased the property, and there was certainly no advantage to being out of the way (except that the parcel was relatively cheap). His sole purpose was to find a healthy percentage of limestone in the soil, and the deposit on Mt. Harlan is among the purest in California. "I concluded that if I wanted limestone, I'd have to be up in the air," he says.

To a great extent, being up in the air means being out of the way, which may amount to the ultimate terroir-defining element for mountain pinot. Community is a rare commodity in a mountain setting: It was probably no accident that the state's first iconic pinot producer, Martin Ray, chose to plant in the Santa Cruz Mountains. A duly-inspired David Bruce followed, and then, eventually, Mount Eden Vineyards. Ray was a famously irascible figure, cultivating, in the words of historian Charles Sullivan, "a highly unflattering personal image in the wine industry, an image in which he took great pride." Indeed, a mountain aerie, far from human contact, may have been the only reasonable place for such a man—and may have also contributed to his irascibility. Mountain winemakers seem more prone to idiosyncratic styles given the location of their vineyards and the isolation they afford—places where styles can evolve unim-

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—Nathan Kandler, Thomas Fogarty

pinot at elevation

a *Wine & Spirits* Tasting, January 26, 2011, *Providence*

Drew 2007 Yorkville Highlands Weir Vineyard Pinot Noir
Mendocino County, 800 feet

Drew 2009 Mendocino Ridge Valenti Vineyard Pinot Noir
Mendocino County, 1,300 feet

Patz & Hall 2007 Alder Springs Vineyard Pinot Noir
Mendocino County, up to 2,700 feet

Flowers 2007 Frances Thompson Vineyard Pinot Noir
Sonoma Coast, 1,400 feet

Hirsch 2007 San Andreas Pinot Noir
Sonoma Coast, 1,600 feet

Cobb 2008 Family Coastlands Vineyard Pinot Noir
Sonoma Coast, 1,100 feet

Thomas Fogarty 2008 Windy Hill Vineyard Pinot Noir
Santa Cruz Mountains, 2,300 feet

Rhys 2008 Skyline Vineyard Pinot Noir
Santa Cruz Mountains, 2,300 feet

Rhys 2008 Alpine Vineyard Pinot Noir
Santa Cruz Mountains, 1,200 to 1,500 feet

Calera 2008 DeVilliers Vineyard Pinot Noir
Mt. Harlan, approx. 2,100 feet

Calera 2008 Ryan Vineyard Pinot Noir
Mt. Harlan, 2,500 feet

Michaud 2006 Estate Pinot Noir
Chalone, 1,600 feet

On a late January morning I gathered six sommeliers to taste a dozen bottles of mountain pinot noir at *Providence* restaurant in Los Angeles. Drew Langley and Josh Dryer hosted the tasting, which included Matthew Kaner *(Bar Covell),* Eduardo Porto Carreiro *(Lukshon),* Taylor Parsons *(Spago)* and Chris Lavin *(*Michael Mina's *XIV).*

As with most things pinot, mountain-grown character was subtler than it is in other varieties. "If someone hands me a glass of mountain cabernet from Napa," said Eduardo Porto Carreiro, "I'm much more likely to say it's mountain fruit because it's right there—it's a stalwart red wine with hillside florals and structurally more of a backbone; whereas with the pinots, we're really dealing with minutiae."

We found regional typicity in the Santa Cruz Mountain wines—a persistent savory conifer note—and in the wines from Sonoma Coast, where, according to Chris Lavin, the pinots had "an acid structure that was consistent through the flight."

If there was a through-line for the entire set, it was textural. "I can see why Josh Jensen used the word 'chiseled,'" Lavin said. "You can see the bones in these wines, their transparency is more apparent." Most often that presented itself with a marked minerality—salinity in the coastal wines, a grippy intensity in the inner coastal wines. Of the inner coastal wines from Michaud and Calera, Taylor Parsons said, "I think the precision of the minerality is most evident here. "They're less about fruit and wood, and much more about earth and minerality, less about flavors than they are about textures."

Drew Langley commented that the Santa Cruz Mountain wines met his expectations of high-altitude pinot noir. But the inner coastal wines caught his attention. "The Calera and Michaud wines were the ones I admired the most. They're the ones I want to drink."

peded, outside other spheres of influence.

This combination of factors—long hours of limpid sunlight; a cool, somewhat mitigated climate; particularly meager soils and an indefinable human factor—link both coastal and inner-coastal high-elevation pinot sites. Even though the terroirs of these places differ dramatically from one another, the winemakers working at these heights tend to describe their fruit in remarkably similar ways.

"The fruit here is more detailed," says Kandler in the Santa Cruz Mountains. "There's less of that big California berry fruit; here you get more savory beetroot, cranberry, very focused flavors."

Jensen at Mt. Harlan says, "There's something about that atmosphere, combined with lower yields. You get wines that are naturally leaner—hardly ever round or fat. They're more chiseled."

And from Mendocino Drew reports, "The wines aren't big and showy. They start out like a tight blossom and do an unfolding act."

Structural intensity is built into mountain-grown pinot. James Hall, who makes wines from many north coast sites, saves his gentlest handling for pinot from the 2,500-foot Alder Springs. It's his coolest fermentation and shortest cold soak. "It would be so easy to smoke the tires and end up with a big, brooding hulk, but that's not exactly what I'm looking for. It's the opposite problem I have with other sites, where I'm looking to build that intensity."

That structural intensity, what some call minerality, contributes to the longevity of pinot grown at altitude. "At twenty years old they're not just drinkable," says Jensen, "they're very exciting."

"Minerality lifts fruit," explains Kevin Harvey of Rhys Vineyards. "It can provide relief from fruit, a weightlessness. Without it the fruit would seem syrupy and heavy."

"Pinot noir exhibits such great transmission of the character at these sites," says Harvey. "The wines from mountain sites are so overt in their expression, such an extroverted expression of terroir. They may not be the most complete wines—there are wines that are more spherical, that show more of everything. But I do feel that these are some of the most interesting and unique pinots in the New World." ■