



## Sonoma Coast 2025 Tasting Report: Lighter Touch for an Epic Lineup

Friday, Apr 11, 2025

The wine regions in California that produce elegant, pure-tasting, acid-driven pinot noirs and chardonnays are few and far between. The Santa Rita Hills in Santa Barbara, the Carneros district straddling Napa and Sonoma counties and Anderson Valley in Mendocino County are among them.

But the Sonoma Coast American Viticultural Area, and more specifically the extreme western section of the AVA that actually touches the Pacific Ocean – called West Sonoma Coast – may be the best place for sleek but concentrated Burgundian style wines.

Our team tasted 370-plus chardonnays, pinot noirs and other varieties from the Sonoma Coast over the past year, many of them in the past two months, and this report covers what we found, mostly from the 2022 and 2023 vintages. To give an idea of how epic this lineup is, we gave two wines perfect scores while 13 received 99-point ratings and dozens of others were in the 95-point-plus range.

Six other pinots rated nearly as well, including the [Aubert Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast UV-SL 2022](#), which James described as very aromatic, with notes of lavender, rosemary and dark cherries, and a palate that shows creamy, ultra-fine tannins that spread across the tongue, forming a superb texture that goes on for minutes.

Superlatives were easy to come by when tasting both the 2022 and 2023 vintages. Pinots from 2022 generally showed more muscle and depth of fruit, while the small number of 2023 reds released so far show that year's elegance, balance and brilliant acidity.

As for chardonnay, we can't think of a time when we were more enthusiastic about a California vintage than when tasting the 2023 Sonoma Coast whites from Raen, Littorai, Aubert, Ferren, Paul Hobbs and numerous others.



I gave a perfect score to the Raen Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Fort Ross-Seaview Charles Ranch 2023. It's almost unbelievably light, elegant and well balanced yet with persistent, refined flavors and a lingering, crisp yet creamy finish. It is layered in lemon pith, creme brulee, cheese rind, crisp pears, golden apples, minerals and kiwis on the palate.

Among James' top scorers is the Aubert Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Park Avenue Estate 2022. "It is deep and thoughtful, with such intellectual and visceral pleasure," he said of it. "Wow. Montrachet clone. Drink this whenever you can. But it will age for decades."

Almost all of the top-scoring wines in this report exemplify a trend in style that James and our team truly appreciate and are happy to praise. In pinot noir and chardonnay alike, the full-bodied 15 percent alcohol heavyweights of 10 years ago now seem outdated. They taste overly rich and heavy to us and a good part of the global community of fine wine drinkers.

Some of the evolution in style comes from winemaker choices, like harvesting at lower ripeness levels to retain acidity, using a lower percentage of new oak barrels in fermentation/aging to minimize oak spice flavors, and extending the new wines' contact with lees for more freshness and minerality.

Some winemakers here, like Ted Lemon, the founder and winemaker at Littorai Wines, have always favored a lighter touch. "We've been doing it for 30 years. We say that if you like this less rich style, come to us," he said.

The Sonoma Coast location is the paramount factor, however. The climate and geography lend themselves to more elegant-style wines. In northern California, the 50-degree Fahrenheit (10 degrees Celsius) waters of the Pacific and prevailing westerly winds cool the immediate coastal climate significantly.

On a summer day, the high temperature difference between coastal regions and interior regions of Sonoma County can vary by 30 degrees Fahrenheit. The mostly mountainous, hilly or sloping coastal terrain is composed of more rocky, sandy, less-fertile soil than the flatter inland valleys, including much of the well-known Russian River Valley AVA.



To be clear, the AVA boundary lines for Sonoma Coast, West Sonoma Coast, Petaluma Gap and Russian River Valley are difficult to understand, overlapping in many places. Some parts labeled as “coast” are a full hour’s drive away from the crashing surf.

For example, a winemaker can take grapes from one vineyard near the town of Sebastopol, make the wine, bottle it, and then label one half as Sonoma Coast and the other half as Russian River Valley.

An effort to avoid some of this confusion is what prompted many growers and winemakers to petition the federal government for the West Sonoma Coast AVA. They had been calling themselves the “true” Sonoma Coast or the “extreme” Sonoma Coast but eventually jelled around “west” as the most accurate and sensible adjective.

Approval came only in May 2022, so in many cases the term is only now being used on labels for consumers to see. Some wineries, such as Littorai, have decided not to adopt the term, at least for now. Lemon says the consumers and the wine trade have a hard enough time picturing where Sonoma County is, let alone the intricate intra-county AVA distinctions.

Back to the vintage discussion. Based on our tastings so far, the 2023 vintage for Sonoma chardonnay and pinot noir is more exceptional than 2022. We think 2023 will rate high on the scale of recent vintages, as good as the terrific, super concentrated and structured 2021 harvest. That year produced stunning wines like the 100-point Hirsch Vineyards Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Raschen Ridge 2021.

2023 has a quite different character than ’21 but shows equally high quality. It’s all about elegance and vibrancy.

First, let’s go into the 2022 vintage conditions, before returning to 2023. A record-breaking heat event in September disrupted the 2022 harvest for many parts of Northern California, especially those growing late-ripening varieties like cabernet sauvignon. Some grapes shriveled into raisins on the vines.



But this “heat dome” did not play much of a role for Sonoma Coast pinot noir and chardonnay. Both varieties ripen rather early and many coastal vineyards had already been harvested when it hit, winemakers told us. Plus the heat’s effects were moderated largely, if not totally, by the cool ocean breezes.

Some coastal vineyards did suffer from stormy spring weather, however, which caused the newly emerged grape clusters to shatter and reduce eventual yields dramatically.

Marine Layer winery founder Baron Ziegler and winemaker Rob Fischer said that all their chardonnay sources were picked before the heat dome and after a good amount of sufficiently warm temperatures for ripening the wines to potential alcohol of about 13 percent while retaining good acidity.

Their Marine Layer Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Dutton Jentoff Vineyard 2022 is a bold, concentrated and pure wine from an extreme coastal site that seems to pack in more fruit, more violets, more cinnamon and cloves than is possible.

It’s not a coincidence that the winery name comes from a meteorological term for the bank of low clouds or fog that usually lurks just off the Sonoma coast and comes ashore most nights in the summer.

The 2023 growing season, in contrast, progressed slowly, with no extreme heat events, resulting in the latest harvest that many Sonoma winemakers can remember. Ted Lemon’s team began harvest in the third week of September and finished on Nov. 1. It was the latest finishing date in his 30-plus year career.

Winemaker Melanie McIntyre of Raen said 2023 allowed lots of time for ripening while still retaining great, balancing acidity. “It was the best year overall since we started in 2013,” she said. “Cool but not as cool as 2018. We harvested a month later than usual. We finished on Oct. 5 and we never pick in October.”

Both 2022 and 2023 produced an abundance of remarkable Sonoma Coast wines that are well worth the effort to find and purchase. Please review the tasting notes and scores below to help you make buying decisions.

*– Jim Gordon, Executive Editor*



#### MERRYVALE CHARDONNAY SONOMA COAST 2023



**Score** 94

Bright and fresh aromas of lemon zest, grapefruit pith, flint and honeysuckle. The medium-bodied palate has high-tension acidity, showing green melons, yellow apples and kaffir limes. A new style of chardonnay with some residual malic acid. Delicious. Drink or hold.

**Color** White  
**Country** United States  
**Region** California  
**Vintage** 2023

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#### MERRYVALE CHARDONNAY SONOMA COAST PETALUMA GAP SUNCHASE 2023



**Score** 94

Flashy aromas of lemon peel, flint, yellow apples and spices. The palate is textural with a medium-bodied mouthfeel, showing grapefruit, kiwis, honeysuckle and wet river stones. Wonderfully balanced and fresh with an underlying tension. Drink or hold.

**Color** White  
**Country** United States  
**Region** California  
**Vintage** 2023

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#### MERRYVALE PINOT NOIR SONOMA COAST DURELL VINEYARD 2023



**Score** 94

A meaty, almost chewy, well-concentrated wine with excellent structure and intricate flavors. Nice, firm tannins wrap up sour-cherry, raspberry, mushroom and star-anise flavors on a base of vibrant acidity. It's good and lean, built for longer aging for those who are patient. Drink now or hold.

**Color** Red  
**Country** United States  
**Region** California  
**Vintage** 2023

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#### MERRYVALE CHARDONNAY SONOMA COAST PETALUMA GAP SUNCHASE 2022



**Score** 93

Aromas of honeysuckle, brioche, preserved lemons, mandarin pith and baking spices. The palate is textural with a balanced acidity, showing peaches, lanolin, yellow apples and orange blossoms. A lovely balance between power and freshness. Drink or hold.

**Color** White  
**Country** United States  
**Region** California  
**Vintage** 2022

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#### MERRYVALE PINOT NOIR PETALUMA GAP SUNCHASE 2023



**Score** 93

A distinct and detailed, medium-bodied wine with good complexity and intriguing savory flavors that keep your interest. Moderate tannins, ample oak accents, plenty of red and black tea, black cherries and redcurrants. Hints of bay leaf, forest floor and star anise accent the fruit flavors. Drink now or hold.

**Color** Red  
**Country** United States  
**Region** California  
**Vintage** 2023

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#### MERRYVALE PINOT NOIR SONOMA COAST 2023



**Score** 93

A spicy, elegant and firmly structured wine that shows the great balance of the 2023 vintage, along with abundant leafy, smoky and cedary aromas and tasty red cherries and sour cherries in the flavors. Full-bodied, moderately tannic and nicely complex. Drink now.

**Color** Red  
**Country** United States  
**Region** California  
**Vintage** 2023

**Avg. Price** \$ 45

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#### MERRYVALE CHARDONNAY SONOMA COAST 2022



**Score** 92

Golden-yellow in appearance. Bold aromas of lemon confit, baking spices, sourdough bread and lanolin. The palate is full-bodied with a generous mouthfeel and balanced acidity, showing poached pears, yellow-apple tart and brioche. Generous and giving. Drink now.

**Color** White  
**Country** United States  
**Region** California  
**Vintage** 2022

**Avg. Price** \$ 45

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#### MERRYVALE PINOT NOIR PETALUMA GAP SUNCHASE 2022



**Score** 92

A pretty firm, structured and oak-spice dominant wine that's full-bodied and almost sweet in flavor. Grown at 1000-1200 feet elevation on the side of Sonoma Mountain using clones 828 and 777 of pinot noir. Moderate tannins and good acidity give a good, light grip. Drink now or hold.

**Color** Red  
**Country** United States  
**Region** California  
**Vintage** 2022

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#### MERRYVALE PINOT NOIR SONOMA COAST 2022



**Score** 91

A well-balanced, fresh-tasting wine that's full-bodied and easy to sip. Red and black cherries, strawberries, hints of blackcurrants and bay leaf in the flavors. Moderate tannins add just a bit of nice grip to the texture. Drink now.

**Color** Red  
**Country** United States  
**Region** California  
**Vintage** 2022

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