

## The fog chasers

### The wines of Sonoma County's Green Valley AVA receive a cold, clammy embrace

- Stephen Yafa, Special to The Chronicle  
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If you plan to hunt fog for a living, you'd better be nimble, especially if the fog dances down coastal ridges and darts through rows of grape clusters in that pocket of Russian River Valley paradise known as Green Valley.

A few grape varieties, including Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, love fog. Syrah needs a little more convincing, yet all three develop slowly and often majestically in the cool nights, temperate days and maritime mists that funnel into Green Valley through the windy Petaluma Gap to blanket this prehistoric Sonoma County lakebed about 15 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean.

Five million years of geological evolution have transformed the region into a ridge-protected, moisture-collecting trough, or geosyncline. During summer and fall, fog arrives after 4 p.m., spends the night and dissipates by late morning, blanketing the vineyards on the floor of Green Valley before fanning north in a lighter cover over the rest of the Russian River Valley.

Thanks to that fog, as well as the prevalence of a desirable type of soil, tiny Green Valley has changed in the last 15 years from an apple-producing region to one of California's best sources of wine grapes.

Green Valley is an official American Viticultural Area on the southern end of the Russian River Valley, which overlaps it. It includes 10 wineries and 1,200 acres of vineyards owned by 25 growers, according to Jaimie M. Douglas, executive director of the Sonoma County Wineries Association.

About 12 miles long and 4 miles wide, the compact valley -- not to be confused with the other wine-growing Green Valley in Solano County -- nestles between Sebastopol to the south, Forestville to the north, Highway 116 to the east and Occidental to the west. That's its geography, but the soul of Green Valley lives within the slightly saline, moist air currents that waft in and out to coddle the tender skin of Pinot Noir fruit, blow wet kisses at Chardonnay, then disappear into the morning sun.

Easy to overlook on any map, Green Valley is all but impossible to forget once acquaintances have been made -- whether in a Pinot Noir from Marimar Estate, Hartford Family Winery or Tandem Winery; a bracing bubbly from Iron Horse, or a Chardonnay from Dutton-Goldfield's Rued Vineyard. Flavors and aromas of green apple and lemon custard sing harmonies in the white wines; sarsaparilla, blueberry and Bing cherry lend their melodic voices to the reds.

While wine grapes have been grown in Green Valley since 1830, until recently the area was most famous horticulturally for Luther Burbank's experimental farm, Gold Ridge. But fog alone hasn't transformed Green Valley into one of the favored regions among buffs of Burgundian-style wines in Northern California. Vine roots also take fondly to the drainage and benefits provided by its sandy, mineral Goldridge loam.

What arrives in the glass, when at the top of its form, is an enticing paradox of brightness yet depth, spiciness yet silkiness that derives from the area's singular soil and climate conditions.

"Add vigor and stir." That's soil analyst Paul Anamosa describing the Goldridge loam. Lacking in potassium and other key nutrients, Green Valley's dirt allows viticulturists to "manage the deficiencies" -- to add and subtract their own minerals at their own levels.

"It's like a parent-teacher conference when you go in for a soils analysis," says Joy Sterling, director of marketing for Iron Horse. "If Paul tells you you've got Goldridge, you go 'Yes!' and let out a big sigh of relief. "

Enter the fog chaser

Mike Bobbitt may not know dirt or mouthfeel, but he knows fog. Bobbitt is what Sterling calls a fog chaser, hired by Green Valley producers like Sterling and her husband, Forrest Tancer, at Iron Horse, as well as by Steve and Joe Dutton of the area's pioneer farming family, to track where that fog comes from, where it travels, how much of it accumulates by volume and how long it lingers.

Bobbitt sees himself as more of a grape geek in direct contact with the cosmos, downloading and decoding satellite images that come to him via a Geographic Information System and Global Positioning System.

In the fog's wake, vibrancy triumphs over opulence. Not that you taste the fog in every sip of a Green Valley wine, but you do taste its magical handiwork.

Marimar Torres, of the prestigious Spanish wine family, fell madly in love with Green Valley upon first sight, planted acres of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in the rolling hills west of Graton and opened Marimar Estate in 1992.

"I think we definitely have the best combination of California terroir and bright fruit with European heritage and finesse," she says.

"I call it crystalline," Iron Horse's Sterling says. "Shiny, precise. Crisp, fabulously lively flavors."

To Steve and Joe, the Dutton brothers, "It shows up in the purity of the fruit." The Duttons not only finish each other's sentences, they often speak simultaneously with the same cadence, in stereo. It can be unnerving.

"That tangy green apple you get in our Chardonnays," they say in unison, "that's from long cool days."

Merry Edwards, The Chronicle's 2004 Winemaker of the Year, also knows Green Valley intimately. Some of her most prized Pinot Noir grapes, bottled under her eponymous label, come from vineyards smack dab in the middle of the valley.

"These wines get soft but never blowsy," she says. "The more tannin in Pinot the better. You can't get too much, because you need to hold on to the phenolics, which create body and depth. They get leached out at every stage. In such a finicky, difficult grape as Pinot, with really low tannins and phenolics to begin with, Green Valley's long cool days and cooler foggy nights, along with sandy Goldridge loam for drainage, deliver a darker fruit profile with cola, black cherry and earthiness that's quite delicious and quite unique. "

While Cabernet Sauvignon and other Bordeaux varieties need more sustained warmth, shrouding fog prolongs the growing season in thin-skinned Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. That enables the tannins to slowly resolve with enough daytime heat to fully ripen. Their firm grip, as a result, neatly balances their sinuous appeal.

As any honest winemaker will tell you, at least 90 percent of the difference between good and great in any wine is in the vineyard. That's not just in the quality of the fruit; it's also in the savvy that goes into knowing precisely when to pick it. In Green Valley, sugar levels -- or Brix -- mean little, since so many additional factors determine ripeness and readiness. That's where intuitive experience matters, a mastery of relevant science aligned with a talented, sophisticated palate.

They co-exist comfortably enough in Greg La Follette, co-owner of Tandem Winery near Forestville, and newly appointed winemaker at the resuscitated DeLoach Vineyards in Santa Rosa.

A molecular chemist by training, La Follette is Green Valley's go-to tech guy. As he drives past Christmas tree farms, vineyards, fruit orchards and horse pastures on the back roads of Green Valley in his 20-year-old Volvo station wagon, he musters such genuine passion for non-acylated anthocyanins - - colors and pigments -- that his hands jump off the steering wheel to sketch their behavior in a hypothetical grape.

Fog-blessed aromas

But La Follette can be equally swept away by the cranberry and blueberry fruit aromatics in Green Valley Pinot Noir, its violet scent, East Asian spice, forest-floor herbals and sensuous silkiness.

"Technically, La Follette's the most savvy guy I've ever met," says Greg Walter, who writes and publishes the Pinot Report newsletter from the city of Sonoma. "On the other side, he's a hedonistic evangelist. He could bring a church to tears about Pinot."

It's that curious combination of unpretentious expertise, enthusiasm, funkiness and dedication in La Follette that also holds true for the culture of Green Valley and its inhabitants. But the casual rural feeling of the place can deceive, too. Up until the early 1990s, Green Valley had many more Gravenstein apples than grapes. Some of Sonoma County's most sophisticated restaurants, like the Farmhouse Inn in Forestville, are wedged between horse stables and listing, weather-beaten barns. And some of the North Coast's most sophisticated winemakers have taken up residence as well.

La Follette uncorks a vertical sampling of vintages from grapes grown at nearby Keefer Ranch from 1999 to 2003, and lets the unfinned and unfiltered wine he creates with Greg Bjornstad, formerly the viticulturist at Joseph Phelps Vineyards, speak for itself.

Swirling and sipping, you soon encounter those tantalizing contradictions that make some wines far more intriguing than others. All the technical chatter about small berries, loose clusters, wild yeast fermentation, punch-down methods and such fades into white noise as you feel the satin texture sliding in one direction, the soft tannins tugging in another, and taste contrasting flavors in flux -- a constantly changing experience on the palate, almost kaleidoscopic.

"Pinot," La Follette says, "can love your tongue like no other."

To achieve greatness, he adds, you can't practice safe winemaking.

La Follette came to the right place for Pinot Noir worship. Much of the credit for that belongs to the late Warren Dutton and his wife, Gail, the parents of Joe and Steve. For decades the Dutton clan had farmed prunes, hops and apples in the area. In 1964 they purchased 35 acres of Gravenstein apple trees interspersed with a few French Colombard grapevines. That inspired Warren to follow a wild hunch. Three years later he began planting Chardonnay, despite the prevailing wisdom that no premium wine grapes would ripen in such a fog-drenched climate.

"The neighbors thought my folks were crazy," Joe recalls, now standing in an open area at Dutton Ranch, just past the town of Graton, where the exteriors of rustic wood buildings are decorated with antiquated hand saws, scythes, pitchforks and similar relics. A sign on the front door of the first building in the compound reads: "Complaint Department -- >300 miles."

Desirable delicacy

By 1970, established wineries, including Kistler Vineyards and Sebastiani Vineyards & Winery, were bidding on Dutton's Chardonnay grapes. Mineral components helped balance the potential flabbiness of the high-heat Chardonnays from vineyards in Alexander Valley to the east, and from most other inland North Coast areas as well. Established wineries responded to the delicacy of the Dutton grapes' light honeyed lime and earthy components -- more Burgundian in style than they could obtain elsewhere. And against all odds, just as Warren promised, the grapes came in fully ripe.

Way back in the 1970s, when everybody was sure California could never produce a decent Pinot Noir, Warren began planting that variety as well.

Dutton died young, at 57, in 2001. Today, his family's farm holdings have grown to more than 775 acres within Green Valley -- 65 percent of the AVA's total vineyard acreage -- with another 525 elsewhere.

Out came Gravensteins, tree by tree, and in went trellised vines. Some apples remain in Green Valley, but Gravensteins fetch about \$160 a ton; Pinot Noir grapes can sell for more than \$3,000 a ton.

Today Joe Dutton co-manages the vineyards at Dutton Ranch and, with his wife, Tracy, owns and operates Sebastopol Vineyards Dutton Estate Winery; his brother, Steve, also manages the family's vineyards and, with Dan Goldfield, founded Dutton-Goldfield Winery in 1998. Both wineries produce estate-grown wines.

Patz & Hall, Kistler, Keegan Cellars, Capiaux Cellars and more than a dozen wineries outside the area buy from the Duttons' vineyards and designate "Dutton Ranch" as the fruit source on their labels. The Duttons' dominance in the region amounts to a bucolic fiefdom.

At about the same time that Warren Dutton was transforming orchards into vineyards, Barry and Audrey Sterling (no relation to Napa Valley's Sterling Vineyards) purchased Iron Horse, a remote ranch at the bumpy end of Ross Station Road in the far west corner of Green Valley. Beginning in 1976, they transformed this expanse of rolling hills into one of the nation's finest producers of sparkling wines, made with new plantings of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Peacemaking bubbly

When President Ronald Reagan served Iron Horse sparkling wine to Mikail Gorbachev in 1985 at the historic summit meetings that helped end the Cold War, the winery made headlines around the world.

The Sterling family, which includes Joy, her husband Tancer and her brother, Laurence, share a domestic unity that goes to the core of Green Valley's character -- more homespun "All in the Family" than glittery "Falcon Crest." At least for the moment.

Joy Sterling has been using her marketing skills, dervish energy and powerful connections to raise the public's awareness of Green Valley as a distinct area with a personality all its own. Last year she helped organize the region's first symposium to publicize the region, which is still so little-known nationally that some producers use Russian River Valley, rather than Green Valley, on their labels.

Last month, she led an effort to allow producers to use both. Eight wineries filed a petition with the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau to change the AVA's official name from "Sonoma County-Green Valley" to "Green Valley-Russian River."

"Green Valley is the most consistent viticulture appellation in Northern California," says Daniel Roberts, a viticultural consultant. "There's less diurnal variance, or difference between day and nighttime temperatures, and less difference between one vineyard location and another. It's truly unique."

Roberts knows thermometers, but he also knows what he likes in his Pinot Noir. "Dark fruit, dark cherry, not overly strawberry. That's Green Valley."

Or some might say, "It's the fog, stupid."

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A taste of Green Valley wines

These 11 recommended Green Valley wines, selected from 75 that were tasted, can be enjoyed now, but many -- whites and reds -- would benefit from more bottle aging.

## Sparkling wine

1997 Iron Horse Green Valley Blanc de Blancs (\$48) -- Made from 100 percent Chardonnay, this vintage, with seven years on the yeast, combines a mellow toasty scent with tantalizing hints of kiwi and citrus on the palate. Smooth, sensuous, and as seductive as sin itself.

## Pinor Noir

2003 Capiaux Widdoes Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$36) -- Winemaker /owner Sean Capiaux exhibits his trademark finesse in merging deep fig flavors, sweet cherry, and hints of mint and clove in a bright offering that delivers layers of depth and a long, sustained finish. Drink now, but also stash a few bottles.

2003 Dutton Estate Jewell Block Dutton Ranch Green Valley Pinot Noir (\$50) -- The clear winner in our tastings. Bright, vibrant dark cherry and raspberry aromas and flavors with nutmeg, licorice and earthy undertones. Lush and deeply layered, with a long, rounded finish. Well-structured, should gain complexity with age without losing fruit freshness.

2002 Hartford Court Arrendell Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$65) -- Herbal and floral aromas with hints of violet, toasted oak, and dark berries. Still young and frisky, needs to mature to justify its lofty price. Concentrated fruit and firm tannins hold promise of lush complexity to come, as well as a longer finish.

2002 Iron Horse Estate Bottled Green Valley Pinot Noir (\$30) -- Light, silky texture. Subtle cinnamon mingles with bright cherry flavors. Crisp acidity, a hallmark of Green Valley, gives it vibrancy rather than layered depth.

2002 Marimar Torres Estate Cristina Selection Don Miguel Vineyard Green Valley Pinot Noir (\$47) -- No one works harder to achieve a classic Burgundian style that Marimar Torres. The Cristina Block delivers tannic grip balanced by velvety smoothness but needs more bottle age to integrate floral and sassafras components.

2003 Orogeny Green Valley Pinot Noir (\$30) -- Aptly named for the geological process that gives birth to mountains, because the wine delivers towering peaks of dark fruit in combination with Burgundian barnyard earthiness. Tannins need time to resolve. Lay down and reward yourself handsomely in three-plus years.

2002 Scherrer Winery Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$35) -- No fining or filtration. Dark black cherry laced with orange zest. Think of something to celebrate in 2007.

## Chardonnay

2002 Dutton Goldfield Rued Vineyard Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$40) -- Tropical fruits predominate, but with just enough acid to overcome a potential for cloying sweetness. Will please fans of pineapple-oak Chardonnay style.

2002 Iron Horse Estate Bottled Green Valley Chardonnay (\$26) -- Intriguing aromas of white chocolate, apple and new grass. On the palate, tangelo -- bright and clean. Refreshing and balanced.

Syrah

2002 Sebastopol Vineyards Russian River Valley Syrah (\$24) -- Satiny smooth with cinnamon and espresso flavors.

-- Stephen Yafa

*Stephen Yafa is a freelance writer in Mill Valley. E-mail him at [wine@sfchronicle.com](mailto:wine@sfchronicle.com).*

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