



GRAPES READY TO MAKE MOUNT TAMALPAIS MERLOT

North by Northwest

MARIN COUNTY IS CULTIVATING FAR MORE THAN SOCCER MOMS. BY JORDAN MACKAY

With Sonoma County to the north, Napa Valley to the west and the Santa Cruz Mountains to the south, Marin County is surrounded by regions famous for producing some of America's best juice. Yet when was the last time you got a taste of Marin's *terroir*? Considering there are only a handful of wines made in this region, probably never.

Not that wine grapes haven't been grown in Marin in the past. In fact, it's generally accepted that the first



THE PEYS IN WEST MARIN

vineyards in Marin were planted in the San Rafael area in 1817, a good 20 years before wine growing ever reached Napa. At the turn of the century, though, the combination of phylloxera—a devastating plague that destroyed almost all vines here and in Europe—and the 1906 earthquake virtually ended the existence of Marin's wine industry. People settled the area, replacing crops with houses.

But is there anything about Marin today that causes it to be physically unsuited to producing wine? Not at all. In fact, what's different about the region might allow it to make some of the state's best. Case in point? The wines bottled by Jonathan and Susan Pey.

The Peys have two labels, Pey-Marin and Mount Tamalpais. All the wines are sourced from vineyards located on the cold, windswept hills between highways 101 and 1, not far from the southern end of Tomales Bay. Pey-Marin

focuses on varieties that come from the north of France (Pinot Noir and Riesling), while Mount Tamalpais focuses on styles from the south of France (Merlot and a dry rosé). Both labels represent impeccable wines with a structure rarely seen in California, lacking the typical overindulgences in bulk, sweetness and alcoholic heat. They are as close to classical as anything we've got.

Keen and earnest, Jonathan Pey spent 20 years working for immense international wine companies, such as Seagrams and Kobrand. But Pey-Marin, which had its first harvest in 1999, is the exact opposite kind of venture. It's a hands-on boutique operation in which Pey is actually making the wine, though he's had no formal training.

"I spent 20 years working with wines that taste like their process and not where they're from," he says. No longer. But the landscape deserves some credit for the results too. Located between the nippy Pacific and fog-bound San Pablo Bay, the western Marin vineyards stay cooler than most of the state's major wine-growing regions, yet the nearby bodies of water also keep things warmer in the winter, making for a long, balanced growing season. The result is amazing potential for high-quality wines.

But besides some new developments by the McEvoy family and the Chalone wine group, you're not likely to find many new vineyards in the county. For one thing, the county's set a 60-acre minimum on buying land in western Marin, which excludes all but the biggest players. But as small-time winemakers like Jonathan Pey gain experience, the few excellent wines that already come from Marin will only get better. x

TASTING NOTES

2005 Pey-Marin Riesling

Wonderfully bright and crisp and very dry, with a hint of minerality and flavors of sharp citrus. \$20

2005 Mount Tamalpais Vin Gris

A luscious, drink-now rosé, redolent of strawberry and pomegranate, with a clean, brisk finish. \$16

2004 Pey-Marin Pinot Noir "Trois Filles"

A blend of a few Pinot vineyards, this has classical, Burgundian proportions and an earthy nose of black

cherry. It could become even more interesting over several years. \$36



2004 Mount Tamalpais Merlot

A Merlot unlike any in California, it eschews richness for sharpness and clarity. Etched notes of violets and plums; clean flavors and sweet tannins. \$29