

Coming in from the cold

Once thought too chilly for most wine grapes, Marin County is emerging as a region with great potential.

By Patrick Comiskey, Special to The Times

February 14, 2007

Nicasio — UNLESS you've been living under an air-conditioned rock for the last couple of decades, you may have noticed signs that the world seems to be getting warmer. It's been widely reported that the trend is likely to wreak some interesting havoc upon California's wine regions in the not-too-distant future, leaving Napa and parts of Sonoma with conditions that resemble the Central Valley. And wine-growing regions once thought to be extreme, like Marin County, the sprawling coastal county north of San Francisco whose cliffs form the northern edge of the Golden Gate, are finding their way to the center.

Marin has long been considered too cool, too foggy and too marginal for anything but sparkling wine grapes. But all that's changing. In the last decade, a small but ardent group of viticulturalists has been farming vineyards there and attracting winemaking talent.

Whether or not global warming is a factor, the county's reputation for grapes has gone from marginal to viable in a very short period of time.

Of course, Marin County is more famous for its counterculture than its viticulture, but wine grapes have been here for nearly two centuries, beginning with plantings by Spanish settlers at Mission San Rafael in 1817. As the century progressed, immigrants planted so many vines that a souvenir booklet from 1893 boasts "every dweller from Fairfax to Sausalito has his little vineyard." Earthquakes, Prohibition and phylloxera brought an end to this cottage industry, but interest was rekindled in the early 1980s as Napa and Sonoma became wine tourism destinations.



2004 Pey-Marin
Pinot Noir

Marin vineyards tend to be set fairly close to the Pacific, and they're subject to dramatic daily fluctuations of temperature, along with moisture and fog.

Jonathan and Susan Pey are perhaps the most articulate proponents of Marin's viticultural potential. They founded two Marin-based winery brands, Mt. Tamalpais in 1999 and Pey-Marin in 2001, and bring many years of experience to their efforts. Jonathan served as the general manager for several large wineries, including Robert Mondavi, Rosemount and Penfolds N.A. Susan, meanwhile, directs the wine program for the Il Fornaio restaurant chain.

2004 Pey-Marin Pinot Noir. An earthy and slightly thick wine — but those earthy flavors are toothsome. It's chewy without being rich, with a nice foresty scent and green flavors. Pillow of black cherry fruit and redwood, barky finish. At marinwines.com, \$36.



Jonathan and Susan Pey

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