

# Exploring Wine with Tim Fish

## Arguing Pinot Noir on the Road to Anderson Valley

The wines from this remote California region are as distinctive as the place itself

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Quarreling over Pinot Noir styles is a favorite pastime for wine lovers who have more spare time than I do. It's basically an Old World versus New World argument, the classically graceful reds of Burgundy against the boldly flavored Pinots of California. For those of us who manage to love both, the whole thing seems like nonsense.

That may be why I like the Pinot Noirs (and most of the other wines) of Anderson Valley in Northern California's Mendocino County. At their best, the wines balance elegance and a sense of place with rich and complex fruit, a satisfying reconciliation of the Old and New Worlds.

Anderson Valley is the sort of place you might imagine wine comes from, relatively untouched and untamed. Good wine seldom comes from drab places, and this region's Pinot Noir, Gewürztraminer and sparkling wine are as distinctive as the place itself.

Anderson Valley is a two-and-a-half-hour drive north from San Francisco, and the last 20 miles are an amusement park ride through tall redwoods and hills. Long, narrow and sparsely populated, this valley is not the sort of place you happen upon by coincidence. The designated American Viticultural Area (AVA) is about 16 miles long and five miles across, with thickly wooded mountains close on either side.

The valley is named for Walter Anderson, who stumbled upon it while leading a hunting expedition in 1851. Modern winegrowing was introduced there in the mid-1960s. Soon after, the valley became a haven for flower children fleeing San Francisco, and their distinctive mark remains there today, a sort of hip, rural eccentricity.

The climate is cool compared to Napa and Sonoma, with fog in the morning and breezes in the afternoon coming from the nearby Pacific Ocean, but in the summer, temperatures can spike in the afternoon and reach 100° F. Vineyards are planted mostly in the benchlands and hills, and the soils are an eclectic mix of clay, loam and gravel.

Established wineries such as Handley, Husch and Navarro have been producing good Pinot Noir in Anderson Valley for years, and a new generation of wineries such as Londer, Black Kite, Goldeneye and **Breggo** are upping the ante on quality. An excellent example is Londer Pinot Noir Anderson Valley 2009 (90 points, \$35).

The valley's white wines can be as compelling as the Pinots, particularly crisp and aromatic wines like Pinot Gris and Riesling. Navarro in particular has a knack for those wines, but newcomers like Foursight Wines have become players; its Gewürztraminer Anderson Valley 2009 (89, \$20) is intense yet graceful, offering the sort of tart, spicy nuttiness that makes good Gewürz so intriguing. I rated it 90 points, non-blind.

For many American consumers, sparkling wine is their first introduction to Anderson Valley. Roederer Estate, owned by Champagne house Louis Roederer, produces some of California's best and most-consistent bubbly. Its non-vintage Brut Anderson Valley is widely available around the country and sells for a bit more than \$20.

While the Roederer is easily found on the shelves, most Anderson Valley wines are produced in modest quantities of 500 to 1,000 cases, so you'll seldom find them at the big discounters. If you're lucky enough to have a good wine shop in your town, that's the first place to look. But try not to get into an argument over Pinot Noir while you're there. You could be stuck there all day.