

Forbes

Will America's Pot Capital Choose Wine Over Weed?

By Katie Kelly Bell

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Mendocino's historic and richly deserved reputation as America's pot capitol is finally giving way to a new reputation as producer of world class wines. Medals are being awarded and critics are oohing and ahing over the likes of delicious pinot noirs from Drew Wines and intriguing chardonnays from Parducci Cellars. Bigger winery names such as Cakebread and Duckhorn are adding vineyards, opening wineries, and celebrating the prestige of Mendocino terroir. Indeed, not long ago fruit was quietly shipped out of the county to make wines elsewhere. And yet, despite all of the long-deserved recognition, the locals greet these changes with reluctant enthusiasm and a whiff of skepticism.

Deborah Cahn, a self-described "aging hippie" and owner of Navarro Vineyards, moved with her husband to Mendocino's Anderson Valley in the 1970's to grow Alsatian varietals. In fact, she and her husband originally supplied Roederer Estate with grapes while the sparkling producer was getting up and running. Cahn is one who is careful not to jump for joy at all the newfound attention, stating, "I want moderate success but I don't want to be Napa."

Today Cahn confesses "shock" at seeing 30 wineries in her once remote and quiet valley. Of course, it's still quiet and remote—but the young energy is promising. Notes Jim Roberts, proprietor of Anderson Valley's boutique inn, The Madrones. "There is a whole new group of young people here who are really into food and wine. It's a gift to have that new energy in Mendocino."

Mendocino is one of the most refreshing and authentic wine regions I've visited in ages. Flaunting individuality is encouraged and conformity is about as popular as a bad case of the flu. Freedom of expression is what the hippie, back-to-the-landers originally came for in the 1960's and 1970's. Cahn is proud of the region's reputation for "tolerance for personal liberty." She notes, "The hippie-redneck coalition might have opposing views politically but they all agree they don't want the government in their lives."

Odds are that Anderson Valley and Mendocino will never become what Napa is today, largely because of geography. It takes commitment to get into the region. The large, expansive four-lane highway that zips through Sonoma quickly narrows into a tight two-lane curvy road once you reach the northern county line. It's also worth noting that up here you are more likely to spot a deer than a five star hotel and spa.

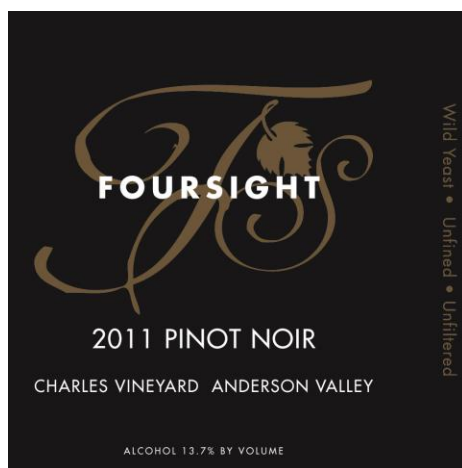
The land is dense with farming families that go back two or three generations. Most have been practicing biodynamic and sustainable farming for decades, long before it was even a consideration for the rest of the world. All of these aspects tend to make Mendocino a most compelling place to drink wine because, quite honestly, you never know what you're gonna get.

While Anderson Valley is growing famous for its elegant pinot noirs and Alsatian varietals, the rest of the county is developing other varietal excellence. Neighboring appellations are growing zinfandel, merlot, syrah, and chardonnay, among others. Consider Coro Mendocino—a group of Mendocino winemakers who formed a winemaking consortium to cultivate red wine blends within a specific set of standards (much like those of Chianti or Chateaufeuf du Pape). The participating wineries produce a red blend within the protocols (including a minimum of 40% zinfandel but no more than 70%, and at least one year in barrel) and submit the blend for blind tasting/evaluation and acceptance by a tasting panel. This self-imposed process is all part of an effort by Mendocino winemakers to show consumers some of the best the region has to offer.

Back in the 1950's the Charles family, who own Foursight Winery, was a big part of the lumber industry in the Anderson Valley; at the time it was a boomtown. The region even had its own local dialect, called Boontling, largely to make outsiders feel even more like outsiders. Boontling was so valued that the vocabulary and nursery rhymes were taught in the local schools as part of the curriculum. However, in 1969, new regulations and other changes precipitated the demise of the lumber industry. Charles is nostalgic for the old days, worrying that the local history will be lost over time. But, she points out that "You have to adapt with each generation. We adapted by making wine." She's quick to add that before the wine business people made a living cobbling three different jobs together. Now, the wineries are employing people full time—giving a new sense of job security.

As a native of Mendocino, third-generation winemaker Jake Fetzer has seen his share of change, yet he acknowledges that pot still holds significant sway. "I know two guys who scrapped all of their wine training and schooling (and good jobs in the wine business) to grow pot. It's easy money, but it's not creative." Clearly marijuana farming will always appeal to the profiteers. For the rest of Mendo wine is an alluring alternative. **Even Charles concedes a bit to the positive changes, but adds, "I just want the people here to hold on to our heritage in this place." Moving forward while looking back, surely there's a Boontling word for that.**

Ten Of Mendocino's Best Wines



2011 Foursight Charles Vineyard Pinot Noir. This Charles family flagship wine shows balance and finesse with notes of cherry and raspberry. Some earth and forest in the background add to the wine's overall structure and appeal. **Also look for their 2012 semillon—a nice alternative white with great complexity.**