

MARIN COUNTY



Photos by Erik Castro / Special to The Chronicle

WINE

Vintners revive dormant tradition

New crop of artisans producing quality Pinot, Cabs and mead in the land of cheese and milk

By Stacy Briscoe

Marin’s reputation as dairy country is unshakable, but the county also is a unique wine region. Spanish missionaries planted Marin County’s first grapes as early as 1817. By the Gold Rush era, German and Italian immigrants settled into the North Bay scene, and grape-growing as well as winemaking became commonplace. But the phylloxera virus, 1906 earthquake and Prohibition dealt a blow to the industry. Vineyards were torn out; farming practices turned to livestock. Winemaking had a modest comeback here in the 1970s. Today there are about 200 acres of vineyards in pockets throughout the county. The cool, coastal climate allows grapes to mature slowly without increasing overall sugar levels, resulting in wines that are lighter in body and lower in alcohol, and maintain a higher level of natural acidity than those in some areas farther inland. Pinot Noir is the predominant grape, but Marin County also produces Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. Veer off the cheese trail to meet a few vintners keeping this region’s winemaking tradition alive.

Sean Thackrey

A shack overlooking the Bolinas Lagoon houses the tasting room of Sean Thackrey, whose unusual winemaking methods over the past few decades have made him one of Northern California’s most iconoclastic winemakers. Thackrey never “studied” wine in the traditional sense: He doesn’t hold a degree in enology nor any other agricultural science. Science, he says, asks questions unrelated to what he’s interested in: making wine. “There is no degree in winemaking.” He cites his former career as a fine artist as the perfect preparation for life as a winemaker. “It made me extremely comfortable about making large decisions quickly based on instinct. Winemaking is an improvisation every year, not a fixed process.” He believes it’s the winemaker’s decisions, from harvest through bottling, that ultimately determine the final expression of a wine. Thackrey’s expression comes from the techniques he’s learned from his vast collection of ancient texts on winemaking. The most notable of these ancient methods is borrowed from the Greek poet Hesiod’s “Works and Days,” a kind of farmer’s almanac for the ancient Greeks. According to the poet, one must align a vineyard’s harvest based on the constellations of the stars and “expose them to the sun for 10 days and nights.” Thackrey may not leave the grapes out that long, but he does let them settle in the bed of his truck for at least 24 hours. “I let them sit for up to 72 hours if I can,” Thackrey says. “Things ripen differently off the vine than they do on the vine.” Letting the grapes rest “under the stars” has proven time-consuming, risky and well worth it. As Thackrey notes, “It’s not making things easier, as with much of modern winemaking, but it does make for more unique wine.”

Wine to try: Andromeda 2013 Pinot Noir Devil’s Gulch Ranch Marin County (\$60)
660 Horseshoe Hill Road, Bolinas; (415) 302-8121. Tasting room open by appointment only. www.wine-maker.net



Sean Thackrey, above, has learned many techniques from his vast collection of ancient texts on winemaking, top. Among the fruits of his labor is a 2015 Andromeda Devil’s Gulch Ranch Pinot Noir.