

Jeff Pisoni, winemaker, Fort Ross Vineyard & Winery, Sonoma, CA



“I always read *Wine Business Monthly* and see it as an amazing resource for the wine industry. It is the go-to reference when one is looking for a new piece of equipment, packaging or other technical matters. There is always a comprehensive article on whatever topic I search for, written in such a practical way for winemakers to make the best decision. We bought a new destemmer in 2018. When I started my research, the first place I looked was *Wine Business Monthly*.”

WINERY NAME AND LOCATION: Fort Ross Vineyard & Winery was founded by Linda and Lester Schwartz in 1994. The vineyard covers 33 different blocks and elevation ranges from 1,400 to 1,700 feet in the coastal mountains of the Fort Ross–Seaview AVA.

ANNUAL CASE PRODUCTION: 5,000

PLANTED ACRES: 50

CAREER BACKGROUND: I’ve made wine all my life. My family background is farming, and my father, Gary Pisoni, started growing grapes when I was three years old—which is when my brother and I started helping stomp grapes. At the time, he was also making wine at home and introducing me to winemaking. I loved everything about it then and still do today: the aromas and flavors, the science, the geology, the art, the history, the mystery. I went on to study at CSU Fresno and earn my enology degree. It’s been a focused approach to winemaking all along. Now I make wine for both operations—my family business in Santa Lucia Highlands and Fort Ross Vineyard & Winery on the Sonoma Coast, in the Fort Ross–Seaview AVA, where I’ve been the winemaker since 2009. I think a lot of winemakers enjoy exploring, and I do, too. I love the fruit and these vineyard sites that I get to work with.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR BIGGEST PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGE? I took over as head winemaker for my family’s wine brand (Pisoni Estate) when I was 22 years old. I was a bit nervous, to say the least! I had just finished school at Fresno State, carried out some wonderful internships, and was headed back to the family business to start working. While my family had farmed for generations and my father had made many vintages of wine, this was our first commercial wine label, so I felt even more pressure. One of my internships was at Peter Michael Winery, where we made our first couple vintages. I took copious notes during my internships and fortunately had relationships with some great winemakers that we had been selling grapes to. This all helped build a network of people to explore ideas with.

Given my age, I was probably less aware of the pressure in that role. I remember being particularly paranoid about stuck fermentations. I would watch those tanks close—Brix and microscope checks twice daily!

VARIETIES THAT YOUR WINERY IS KNOWN FOR: Fort Ross is known for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. This is 95 percent of our production and a natural fit given the climate. The only other variety is a small slice of Pinotage. The owners are from South Africa and brought the proprietary clones overseas when they first planted the vineyard. It’s a fun grape to work with and tells a special part of their journey in making wine here in Fort Ross–Seaview.