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California Pinot Noir Cools Off in 2011

A chilly summer and rainy harvest slow the momentum of recent vintages **BY JAMES LAUBE**

THE 2011 VINTAGE FOR CALIFORNIA PINOT NOIR IS A TALE OF two harvests. A series of October storms drenched the North Coast and split winegrowers into two camps—those who picked prior to the deluge and those who waited, hoping the skies would clear. Wines made from grapes picked before the storms stand above the rest, although not unequivocally. Anticipating the downpours,

some vintners harvested marginally ripe grapes; after the rains, vintners salvaged what they could, with mixed results.

The chilly storms hit Sonoma County the hardest. Areas farther inland and to the south were less affected. But the combination of rain and cold weather was the closing curtain to a growing season whose crop had already been reduced by a damaging spring frost.



James Hall, co-founder and winemaker at Patz & Hall, battled spring frosts, a cool summer and October rains in 2011, which saw yields of Pinot Noir drastically reduced across the state.

Six to Watch

AIKEN

Joel Aiken, former winemaker at Napa's Beaulieu Vineyard, created his label with a focus on small-production wines from tiny parcels. One such site is the 12-acre Silver Pines Vineyard. On the western edge of the Sonoma Mountain, at an elevation of nearly 1,000 feet, Silver Pines features low-yielding Pinot Noir vines planted on thin soils.

Though Aiken, 55, made his reputation with Napa Cabernet at BV, Silver Pines has given him a chance to develop his interest in Pinot. "I love the idea of blending different clones," Aiken says.

Aiken's debut Pinot, the 2009, is a combination of three clones, but the 2010 splits its composition between a Pommard clone and a UCD 23 clone. "Both really add something different," explains Aiken. The Pommard gives dense fruit and berry aromas, while the UCD 23 delivers big berries, black fruit flavors, tannins and spice. The wines are picked and fermented separately, then blended just prior to bottling.

Aiken also acts as winemaker at Chase Cellars, Rarecat Wines and Amici Cellars. He and his wife, Amy, the winemaker for Meander Cellars, are also partners in Palisades Wine Co. in Calistoga, where they make their wines.

—MaryAnn Worobiec

92 AIKEN Pinot Noir Sonoma Mountain 2010 **\$55** 149 cases

BOHÈME

Kurt Beitler has wine in his blood. A grandson of Caymus Vineyards founder Charlie Wagner, Beitler, 36, moved from Oregon to California in the 1990s to study mechanical engineering, but he never lost sight of his heritage. After Beitler finished college, uncle Chuck Wagner encouraged him to get into wine. In 2000, Beitler joined the family business, managing Belle Glos' Pinot-producing Taylor Lane Vineyard in Sonoma. There, Beitler found a passion for growing grapes, calling it, "a test of the body and the mind." The following year he tried his hand at vinifying Cabernet Sauvignon, but ultimately decided to double down on Pinot Noir and Syrah when he branched out with his own label, Bohème.

Beitler grows all of his grapes in three vineyards he leases near Taylor Lane, in the foggy Sonoma Coast AVA. The cool weather makes it difficult to ripen grapes, but Beitler, who moved to the town of Occidental to be close to his vineyards, likes how elegant the wines can be. "I've always tended to take chances and run close to the margin—behavior that's both opened doors and wrought destruction," he says. He no longer makes Syrah, focusing solely on Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

—Augustus Weed

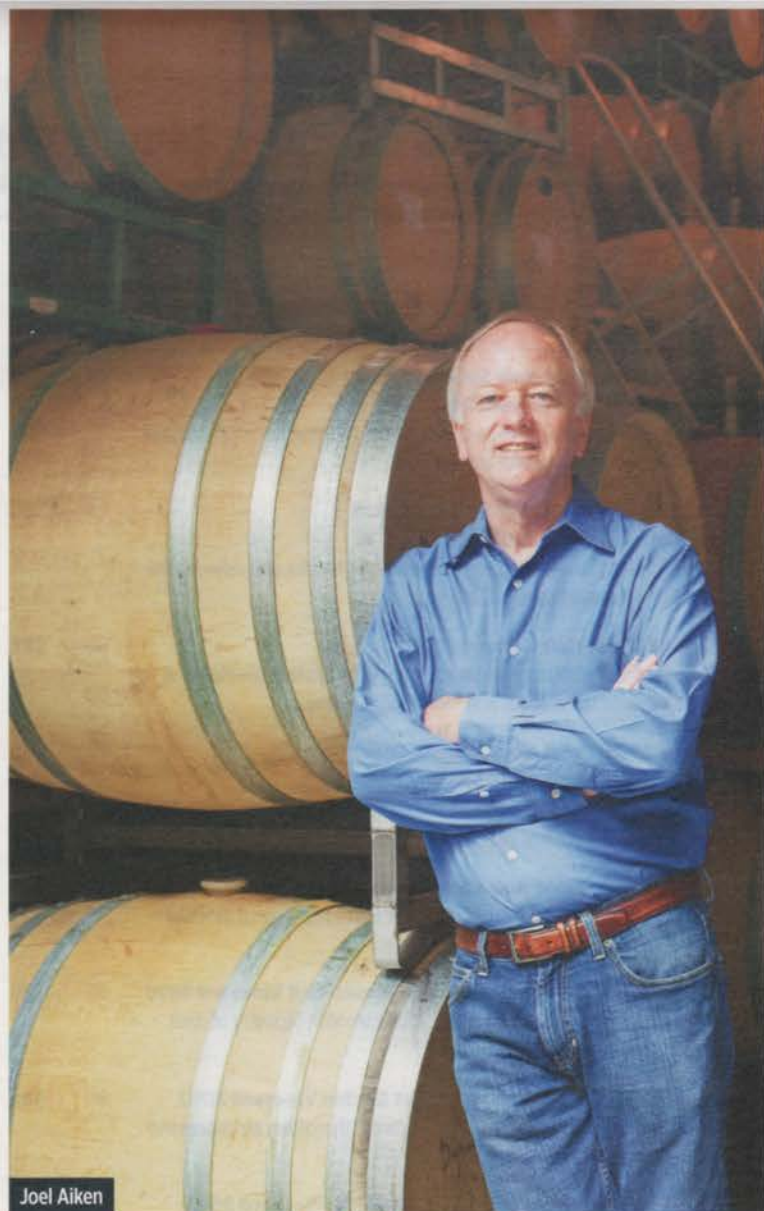
92 BOHÈME Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Taylor Ridge Vineyard 2009 **\$50** 191 cases

89 BOHÈME Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Stuller Vineyard 2009 **\$45** 204 cases

ENROUTE

The Nickel family quietly produced Pinot Noir for years under both its Napa-based Nickel & Nickel and Far Niente labels before establishing the EnRoute brand in 2007. After purchasing and replanting a 20-acre apple orchard near Graton in Sonoma County, the family set its sights on acquiring the Amber Ridge vineyard, a source of impressive Pinot Noir bottlings from Kosta Browne and Siduri.

Located in the warm northern reaches of Russian River Valley, Amber Ridge is at the core of EnRoute's only Pinot Noir, Les Pommiers. The



Joel Aiken

wine, its name a nod to the history of apple growing in the area, is a blend of the family's two vineyards, with additional grapes from Dut-ton's Manzana Vineyard. Winemaker Andrew Delos, 37, blends the three sources in order to express the unique qualities of each vineyard in the final product. "There are so many different Russian River styles," says Delos. "Green Valley for its forest floor qualities, Graton for its minerality. Amber Ridge gives us that big, ripe cherry and pomegranate backbone, and they all come together to create the hallmark Russian River Pinot that we love."

—Aaron Romano

89 ENROUTE Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Les Pommiers 2011 **\$65** 5,500 cases

RAM'S GATE

Ram's Gate's new winery, at the southernmost end of Carneros, is the first one you pass when driving into Sonoma Valley. Designed by architect Howard Backen, the facility is striking, offering stunning views of the property. The wines are made under the direction of Jeff Gaffner, 53, whose other credits include Saxon Brown and Black Kite.

Ram's Gate tapped its own recently replanted vineyard as well as Sonoma Coast's Sangiacomo and Bush-Crispo vineyards in Russian River Valley for its 2010s. Plans are to add more vineyards to the lineup, including Silver Eagle in Sonoma Coast, Diablo in Russian River and Glass House in the Petaluma Gap.

Gaffner wants the wines to express the individuality of the vineyards. Recently, he's grown interested in the role wind plays in moderating the temperature at various growing sites. "I'm fascinated by wind signature,"



Ram's Gate

he says. "The vines shut down [as the afternoon breezes kick in] and you get this wonderful hang time."

With plantings of Chardonnay, Syrah and smaller lots of Cabernet and Zinfandel all part of the mix, Ram's Gate aims to grow its case production from the current 4,000 to 10,000.

—J.L.

90 RAM'S GATE Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Bush-Crispo Vineyards 2010 **\$70** 174 cases

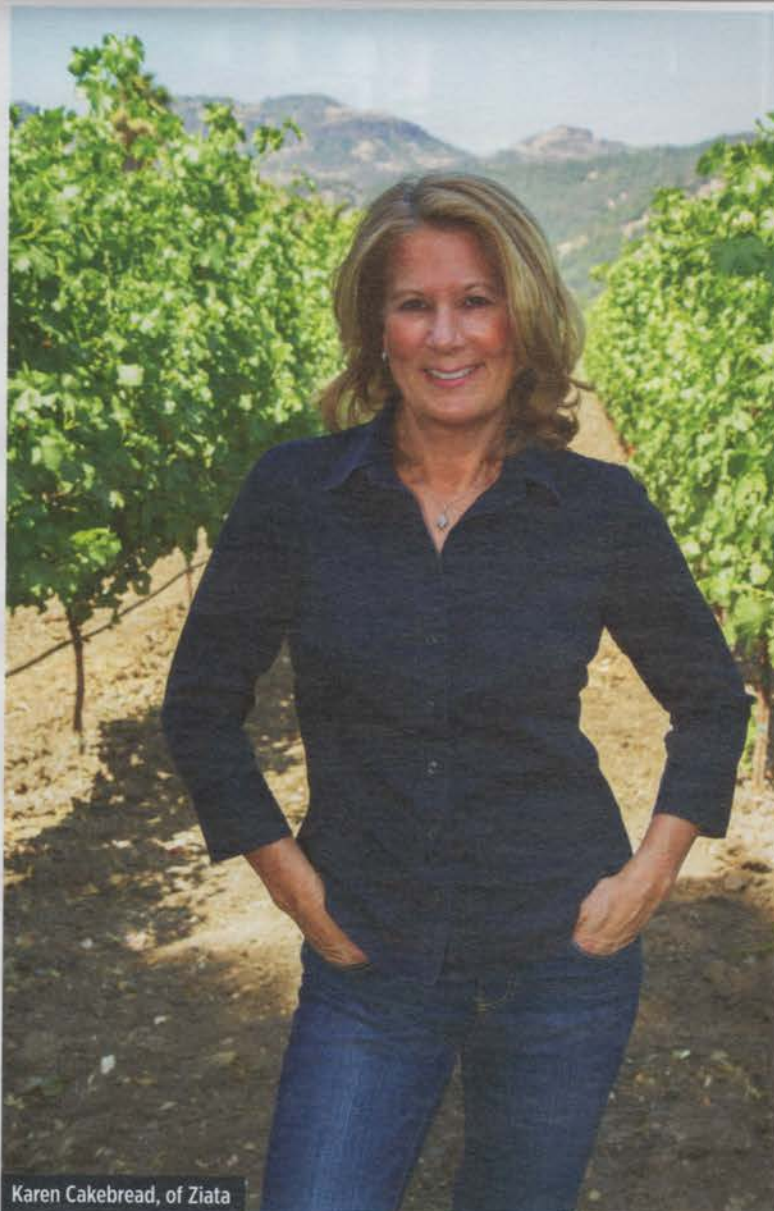
90 RAM'S GATE Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Sangiacomo Vineyards Roberts Road 2010 **\$68** 292 cases

VALDEZ FAMILY

Born in a small village in Michoacán, Mexico, Ulises Valdez crossed the border into San Diego, Calif., in 1985, when he was 16. Now a U.S. citizen, he has built one of Sonoma's most successful vineyard management companies, farming more than 1,000 acres. Inspired to start his own label by Mark Aubert, Valdez, 44, came to appreciate the quality of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grown in Western Sonoma's cooler climates.

In 2001, Valdez established his first Pinot vineyard, replanting a 30-acre apple grove along Laguna Road in the Russian River Valley. A year later, he planted another Russian River vineyard, Lancel Creek. Both vineyards were bottled separately in 2010, but beginning with the 2011 vintage, Valdez will produce a single Pinot Noir under the Valdez Vineyards label using grapes from all of his vineyards. Valdez recognizes how difficult the variety can be to grow, but for him that's part of its appeal. "I like to be challenged all of the time," he says. Winemaker Mauricio Soto, 30, aims for supple textures and pure fruit flavors in the bottlings, with Aubert assisting with the final blends.

—A.W.



Karen Cakebread, of Ziata

90 VALDEZ FAMILY Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Lancel Creek Vineyard 2010 **\$50** 190 cases

90 VALDEZ FAMILY Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Ulises Valdez Vineyard 2010 **\$50** 225 cases

ZIATA

Karen Cakebread is slowly adding to her small lineup of Ziata wines. A Sauvignon Blanc in 2008 was followed by a Cabernet Franc, a Pinot Noir and now a (soon-to-be-released) Bordeaux blend, all sourced from Napa Valley. She vinifies the Ziata bottlings at Napa Wine Co., in Oakville.

"Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot are the wines I tend to turn to the most," says Cakebread, 59, who started her own label after more than 20 years working with her family at Cakebread Cellars. "Pinot is a very sensual wine," she says. "I love its fruitiness and earthiness." It is also the most demanding of wines, she adds. "Working with it the first year, you don't know if you get it right. I love to watch how it changes over time. It drove [me and winemaker Anne Vawter] crazy because it kept on changing." Cakebread calls the 2009, sourced from the small, rocky Paladini Vineyard in Carneros, "a bold wine," and expects it to age well for a decade.

The name Ziata is a tribute to Cakebread's mother and grandmother—two inspirational figures in her life—whose surname was Annunziata. Vawter, 34, "brings an intuitive approach to winemaking," Cakebread says. "She's got all the technical education, yet there's a calmness [to her] winemaking." Vawter also makes wine under her own Red Mare label. Cakebread's next project is a Cabernet-based red wine from the 2012 vintage.

—J.L.

90 ZIATA Pinot Noir Carneros 2009 **\$45** 325 cases