



BROADBENT

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## The Washington Post

FOOD

# Sonoma Coast vs. Russian River Valley refinement



By BY DAVE MCINTYRE  
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I don't like chomping on a toothpick or eating buttered popcorn with dried mangoes sprinkled on it," **KATHLEEN INMAN** said.

We were discussing chardonnay, of course.

**INMAN**'s own wine was nothing like the caricature of California chardonnay she had just described. Lemony and creamy, with flavors of apricots and pears, it glided across my palate with grace and ease, lingering like a lover's memory. I need to drink more chardonnay, I thought — at least more like this, if I can find ones like this.

Inman is co-owner and winemaker at **INMAN FAMILY WINES**, in the Russian River Valley area of Sonoma County. The valley is famous for its chardonnay and pinot noir; it's a "cold-climate" region, where ocean air streams through and cools nighttime temperatures, helping the grapes preserve acidity. Inman calls her winemaking "natural," as in, "no additions, no subtractions." That means she does not use commercial yeasts to ferment the wines or enzymes to boost color. Nor does she "correct" a wine's acidity or sugar level in the winery.

The flavor notes of her chardonnay — especially the citrus — are typical of the area.

"The balancing acidity is the hallmark here and is maintained even for people trying to make chardonnay in a riper style," says Rod Berglund, owner and winemaker at Joseph Swan Vineyards. "We tend to have a lush mouth feel, and I think that's from the long hang time we have here," he adds, referring to the longer growing season that allows vintners to harvest later.

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Some wineries have tried to persuade the federal government to expand the boundaries of the Russian River Valley American Viticultural Area, a reflection of the region's success and the price premium conferred by its name on a label. With success comes maturity, and some winemakers I spoke with said they are in search of greater elegance.

"A lot of us are heading toward a lighter, more food-friendly style," says Mick Schroeter, head winemaker at Sonoma-Cutrer winery.

That change holds for pinot noir as well as chardonnay. Russian River has darker-side-of-pinot tendencies: deep color and black-fruit flavors rather than the more herbal characteristics the wine achieves in other parts of Sonoma County.

As **INMAN** and I savored the **INMAN FAMILY 2009 THORN RIDGE RANCH PINOT NOIR** during her recent visit to Washington, I asked her to explain the difference between the wines of the Russian River area and those of the "extreme" Sonoma Coast, where pinot noir and chardonnay grow at higher altitudes and much closer to the ocean. She started with a technical answer about herbal flavors and tannic structure, then focused on the wines' texture, a rather subjective aspect that can befuddle the literal-minded. (It helps to have a glass or two.)



Kathleen Inman, Owner and Winemaker, Inman Family Wines

"Sonoma Coast is more silk, while Russian River is velvet," she said.

The aesthetic and even the cultural ramifications of her analogy are de-

batable; ultimately, it comes down to a stylistic preference. Sipping the Thorn Ridge Ranch pinot, I was quite happy with velvet.

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