

The Monopole Comes to California

When Ambassador James D. Zellerbach envisioned planting Pinot Noir and Chardonnay outside of the town of Sonoma in 1953, he was inspired by what he had seen and tasted in Burgundy, and that included the concept of a monopole.

Thus, Hanzell Vineyards was born.

Today, its 46 acres of vines are certified organic and aim to be 100% self-sustained through regenerative agricultural practices, a substantial commitment that requires total oversight and control.

Laurel Glen on Sonoma Mountain is another example of a successful monopole, first planted in 1968. Its 14 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon are also farmed organically; Phil Coturri has been looking after them since 2011.

These are two of the most prized and respected properties in Sonoma County, both monopoles.

Today, there are a handful of Sonoma wineries built around this model that make impressive wines year to year, proving the benefits that can be had from the level of detail that is possible within a monopole mindset.

Some of the newer ones include Steve Kistler's Occidental Vineyards on a Sonoma Coast ridge above Freestone-Occidental, where the highest levels of farming Pinot Noir are happening. The 85 acres of Pinot Noir grapes go into several exquisite estate bottlings.

A Sense of Control

One of Sonoma's most exciting new monopoles is Cornell Vineyards.

"There's an intimacy with the grapes when you farm them yourself," says Elizabeth Tangney, Cornell's winemaker and vineyard manager. "The understanding I gain from watching the season, budbreak to harvest, is invaluable and increases my understanding of how to make the wine."

A vineyard of 20 planted acres in the Fountaingrove District appellation, on the



Kathryn Sloan,
Small Vines



Paul Sloan,
Small Vines

“With a monopole, you have complete control and the ability to make wines that express a sense of place most of all. We... focus on the place where the grapes are grown and how the vineyard was planted.”

Sonoma side of Spring Mountain, Cornell is surrounded by another 200-plus acres of wild land. Devoted to producing small amounts of high-quality Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, it requires fierce devotion to stay on top of everything that happens at this site every year.

“The only downside to a monopole is there’s no off-season,” Tangney adds. “I watch closely areas of variability, berry size, color accumulation. These details allow me to make better picking decisions and better winemaking decisions.”

The same is true for John Hamel, winemaker for Hamel Family Wines in

Sonoma. Hamel has developed and acquired four vineyards throughout Sonoma Valley and the Moon Mountain District that have evolved into four individual monopoles, the most important of which is Nuns Canyon Vineyard.

“In a certain sense it is more difficult to be a young winery focusing on a specific vineyard site and its expression than relying on the cachet of a well-known vineyard that is farmed by a grower,” he says. “But we strongly believe that something is missed when the fruit is grown by one entity, and the wine is made by another.”

The monopole route can be riskier than

going for a fruit-purchase model with a famous or renowned vineyard. The stakes are higher, but ideally the rewards will be too.

“The most important decision a wine-maker makes is where to grow vines and the second most is how the vineyard is farmed,” says Hamel. “With those two facets as the most consequential, the opportunity to develop a monopole is the ideal.”

At Small Vines in the Russian River Valley, Paul and Kathryn Sloan farm several estate Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vineyards to make their own wines. Beginning in 1999, they planted European-style, high-density vineyards with the intent of