

Sunset

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EXCLUSIVE
BOOK EXCERPT

LESS WATER, BETTER WINE?



A growing number of West Coast vintners are trying dry-farming—and discovering it's no compromise.

By Sara Schneider

"FEW CALIFORNIA WINES have any terroir," declares Brice Jones, proprietor of Emeritus Vineyards in Sonoma's Russian River Valley and founder of Sonoma Cutrer. If you're

come from the skins, the result is more intense and complex flavors, deeper color, and richer textures in the mouth. Plus, says Jones's vineyard manager, Kirk Lokka, "A with the season." winemakers use the "meaning that compounds are resulting in a fine.

"Jones started dry farming his vineyards long before the drought... Given the prospects, dry-farming seems eerily relevant. And in a happy coincidence, dry-farmed wines might just be better wines."

ers just the amount needed onto the soil. But when you drip small amounts of water at the surface, explains Jones, the vine forms a shallow, onion-shaped rootball—and no roots dive deep through the layers of earth looking for moisture. And thus no roots absorb what those earthy layers could bring to the wine. As Jones puts it: "You're practically farming hydroponically!"

Jones and a growing number of other dry-farming advocates around the state are convinced that under most circumstances, established vines don't need any water beyond what nature gives them—in fact, they produce better wine when they aren't

Besides delivering a sense of rooted vines also produce smaller grapes with a greater skin-to-juice ratio, which means more of a wine's flavors, texture

Dry-farming advocates believe vines don't need any water beyond what nature provides.

his vineyards the urging of his each winemaker horrified at the thought of irrigation: "You will change the signature of the wine!" (In most of France, it's illegal to irrigate vineyards; but then, most of France gets more rain than California.) Villaine presided over the most legendary region of all—Burgundy's Domaine de la Romanée-Conti—so Jones was convinced to give dry-farming a shot. Now he reports that many of his neighbors are watching his results closely. In this fourth year of drought, the water available for vineyards varies widely from region to region. Some growers are severely limited; others have decent supplies—but no one knows for how long.

the prospects, dry-farming seems relevant. And in a happy coincidence, dry-farmed wines might just be better wines. This isn't about oak butteriness, but rather fresh fruit. ☺



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Best bottles

In our tastings, these wines from dry-farmed vineyards showed an underlying minerality that added interest to more expected flavors.



Bucklin 2012 Old Hill Ranch Ancient Field Blend (Sonoma Valley; \$34). Notes of black fruit and damp loam are balanced with florals and spice, followed by mixed fruit—strawberry, cherry—with an anise accent on a long finish.



Emeritus 2012 Hallberg Ranch Pinot Noir (Russian River Valley; \$42). Forest-floor aromas mix with hints of vanilla and green tea on the nose; generous but not overly ripe wild berries are layered with gentle spices.



Frog's Leap 2012 Estate Grown Cabernet Sauvignon (Rutherford, Napa Valley; \$52). A lovely balance of exuberant fruit (cassis and mixed berries) with a savory herbal side, earth and florals, and tobacco and spice.



Smith-Madrone 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon (Spring Mountain District, Napa Valley; \$48). A swirl of tobacco, mocha, and vanilla leads to dark plum and briary berries, with solid and elegant structure.



Stony Hill 2012 Chardonnay (Napa Valley; \$45). After earthy fall apples and juicy melon on the nose, a gamut of bright citrus flavors joins minerality through a long finish. This isn't about oak butteriness, but rather fresh fruit. ☺

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