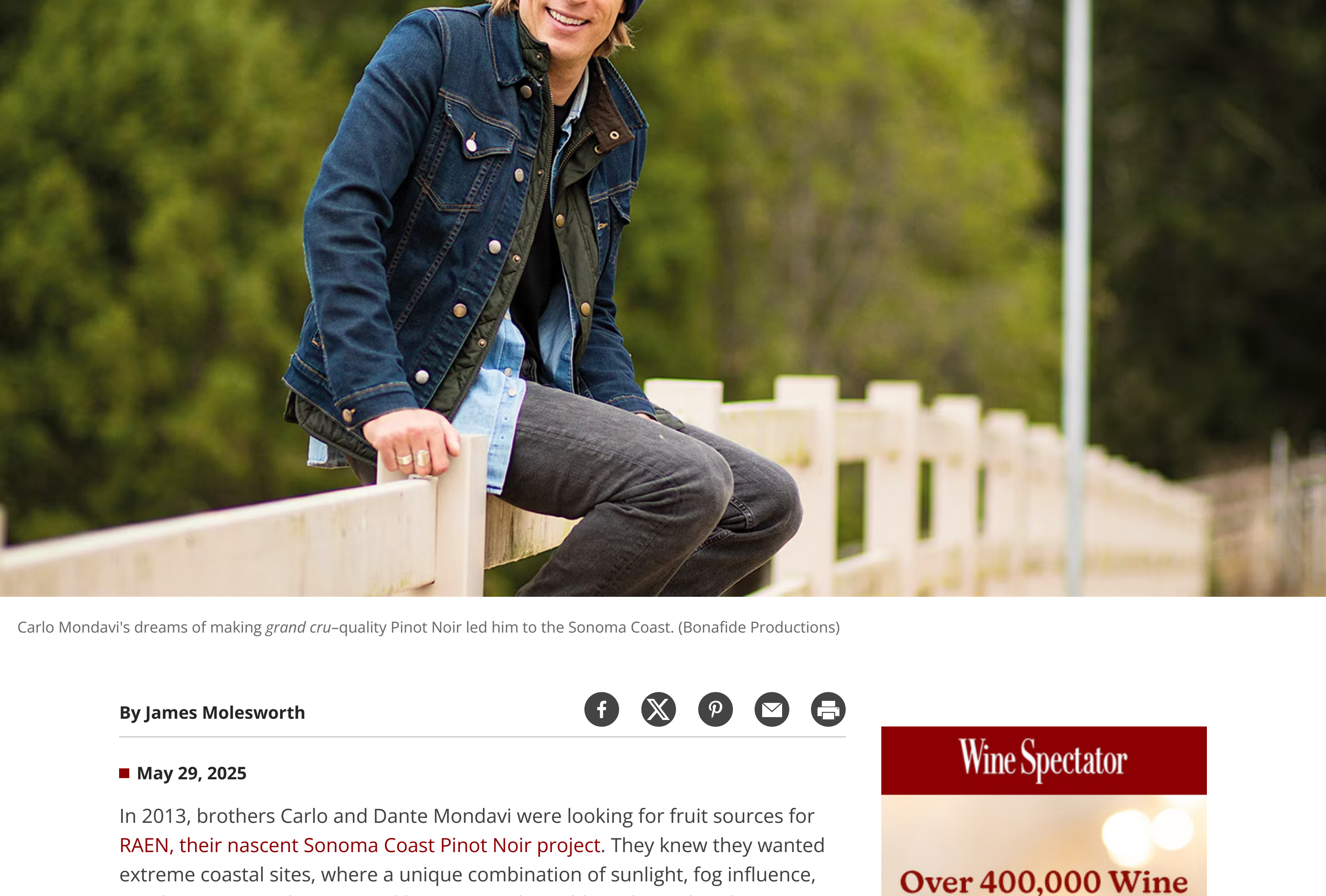


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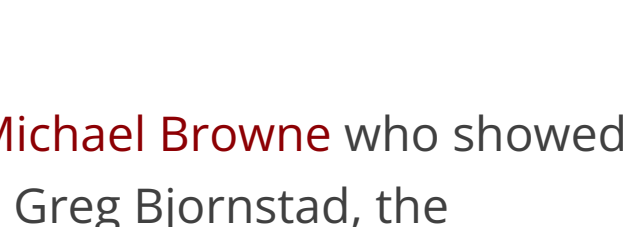
RAEN's Pinot Noir Rise Continues on the Sonoma Coast

Brothers Carlo and Dante Mondavi—with the help of an all-star cast of Sonoma Coast pioneers—are expanding their stellar wine lineup



Carlo Mondavi's dreams of making *grand cru*-quality Pinot Noir led him to the Sonoma Coast. (Bonafide Productions)

By James Molesworth



■ May 29, 2025

In 2013, brothers Carlo and Dante Mondavi were looking for fruit sources for **RAEN**, their **nascent Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir project**. They knew they needed extreme coastal sites, where a unique combination of sunlight, fog influence, nearly continuous breezes and low-vigor soils could produce what they considered *grand cru*-quality grapes. The search wasn't easy. There wasn't an abundance of Pinot Noir vineyards that fit the profile, while those that did were already spoken for.

"When Dante and I started, it was **Bob Cabral** and **Michael Browne** who showed us the coast," says Carlo. "And through that we met Greg Bjornstad, the viticulturist for **Flowers** at the time. He showed us Charles Ranch, but it was a Chardonnay vineyard."

Charles Ranch sits on one of those extreme coastal sites. The Mondavi brothers were smart enough to engage with the **Martinelli family** who farmed the site, and today their Charles Ranch Chardonnay is among California's elite bottlings. But it was Pinot Noir they were mainly after, and Carlo isn't one to give up on a dream.

"We kept begging Greg for Pinot," says Carlo. "Then one day he called and said something might be available. Even better, he said it was right next to Charles Ranch. I drove up the next day to see it."

Bjornstad had been sourcing grapes from the Hellenthal vineyard next door to the Martinellis' Charles Ranch for his **own eponymous label** at the time.

"But I think Greg wanted to focus on farming and not sales, and so he was pulling back on his own production. When I got up there, he introduced me to Gard Hellenthal."

Hellenthal Vineyard's History and Evolution

In 1978, Gard and Lori Hellenthal decided to take the Elliot family, their friends, up on an offer to be caretakers for a piece of land. That land, on a ridge line just a few miles inland from the coast, and more than an hour's drive along a winding dirt road north of Jenner, caught Hellenthal's eye right away. A logger from the Santa Cruz area, Hellenthal accepted the initial offer for a six-month stay, and then wound up buying the 140-acre property later that same year. Wine was not the plan ...

"Bohan was the only vineyard in the area at the time," says Hellenthal, 72, who had always enjoyed wine as a consumer. "**David Hirsch** was next door, and he started planting vines in 1980. We got to be friends, and so I figured I'd plant some too."

Gard's first planting, 2 acres of own-rooted vines, was the start of the Hellenthal vineyard. "Theoretically, Calera," says Hellenthal with a hearty laugh, referring to the Pinot Noir clone he planted, which at the time was often just being handed around for propagation by the area's few Pinot Noir pioneers. Hellenthal went on to plant three more blocks, in 1992, '95 and 2000, respectively, growing the vineyard to 17 total acres. Nothing has been ripped out or replanted along the way.

The Hellenthal name first appeared on Bill Smith's **W.H. Smith** label in the early 1990s. Bjornstad and others took turns along the way as well, helping to establish the Hellenthal name as a premium source for Pinot Noir. Today, John Raytek sources the fruit from the 1980 plantings for his **Ceritas** label while **MacRostie** and Hirsch take some grapes as well.

Mondavi was more than eager to use Hellenthal Pinot Noir for **RAEN**. But after the initial introduction from Bjornstad, it almost didn't work out. Hellenthal still farms somewhat conventionally, going against the grain of the more contemporary and holistic methods preferred by Mondavi.

Mondavi had asked Hellenthal to switch his approach, at least for the block he was sourcing from. On an early return trip after the initial agreement was made, Mondavi saw that the switch hadn't taken place.

"I nearly pulled out of the deal," says Carlo. "We had to have a serious conversation about it."

Hellenthal is an old-school grower, who farms to get grapes from A to B. From his perspective, what has always worked still works. There isn't enough time, nor enough labor or investment, to convert to the decidedly more hands-on, holistic and cost-intensive approach in the vineyard that Mondavi prefers. Hellenthal isn't interested in his own label either—he just farms.

"I just prefer to sell the fruit. I'm not looking to make my own wine," says Hellenthal. "Frankly, there's nothing nicer than just waving goodbye as the truck pulls away with the fruit."

Carlo—remember, he doesn't give up on a dream—didn't pull out. Instead, he agreed to pay a premium for the extra work, and the shift was finally under way.

Helping that shift along has been even more recent nudging from Hellenthal's daughter Elisa, 38, who returned to the family farm after working as a photographer in Seattle.

"The artsy thing didn't 100 percent pan out," she says. "I moved back to Sonoma at first, working in restaurants. While doing that, I was helping Dad a little bit here and there. The one day on the drive out here, I asked myself, 'Why not do this?'"

"Now, Dad and I can do tractor work. But pruning, harvest work, that's more than two people can handle. That's where we get some help from David [Hirsch]," says Elisa. Hirsch has a full-time onsite vineyard management team and has had a co-farming agreement with the Hellenthals on their adjoining parcels since they first starting planting vines in 1980.

RAEN's Sea Field Bottling

Since 2014, Mondavi has sourced from the block Hellenthal planted in 2000, named Home Block but labeled as Sea Field for the RAEN bottling. When asked if he sees any difference in the vineyard since adopting Mondavi's preferred approach, Gard shrugs it off.

"Nope," he says flatly, though he remains open to a new approach if there's enough hands on deck to get it done. In all cases, Elisa feels the block is a bit more consistent, vine to vine, as well as more resilient to extreme weather patterns. Mondavi echoes Elisa's sentiments, adding that he feels as if it's "night and day" from where the site was when he first started sourcing it.

Today, the Sea Field bottling is a bracing, brisk, textbook example of extreme Sonoma coastal Pinot Noir, rippling with tension as it displays bitter cherry and damson notes laced with rooibos tea. It also shares the ocean breeze-fed minerality that has become a signature of the growing number of extreme Sonoma Coast Pinot Noirs, including **Occidental**, **Rivers-Marie**, **Senses**, **Ferren**, **Bohème**, **Ceritas** and more.

"It's a constant conversation," says Mondavi of working with growers such as Hellenthal. "Not every approach works in every site. And it's important to work with growers in a collaboration, understanding their concerns and needs, whether it's labor, cost, etc. You can't just barge in and impose your way. This is a long game and we need to work hand in hand as we make these shifts, which obviously I think are very important."

Expanding to McDougall Ranch

The Mondavi brothers are continuing to grow the RAEN label, picking up new vineyard sources where and when they can. They hired winemaker Melanie McIntyre in 2017 to help put their vision into the bottle.

In 2024, they added the McDougall Ranch Vineyard, just a few miles from Hellenthal as the crow flies, but a bumpy, winding, up-and-down, 45-minute drive away.

Planted in 1997, the 7.78-acre site has been a source for bottlings from **Drew**, **Marnet**, **Kutch** and **Dutton-Goldfield**. Mondavi now has a long-term lease agreement on the property and will manage the farming directly. He's honoring the existing grape contracts while taking the remaining fruit for a new bottling that will debut in the 2024 vintage under the Pacific Rock name.

Though McDougall sits at about the same 1,000 feet of elevation as Hellenthal, there are differences in soil, exposure and clonal material, which will certainly play out in the wine. Another difference here is the McDougall Ranch Vineyard is warmer than Hellenthal. One similarity, though, is the farming.

Mondavi has started the conversion to organic viticulture here, starting with a cover crop that is already taking hold. Grasses standing calf-high run through the middle of the vineyard rows, though it's markedly thinner beneath the vines, an aftereffect of conventional farming, namely herbicide use.

"You can't just go in and sow cover crop everywhere right away," says Mondavi. "There's a half-life on the herbicides that has to dissipate first. If you seeded under the vines right away, those seeds wouldn't germinate. So we start between the rows and then eventually work it through to under the vines."

The process isn't without speedbumps either. A vineyard being converted to more holistic farming practices typically experiences a drop in yields and vigor right away, a function of the vines suddenly facing competition from the cover crop.

"But that eventually balances out and production should bounce back over time," notes Mondavi.

2024 RAEN Pinot Noir Pacific Rock Barrel Tasting

A barrel sample of the **2024 RAEN Pinot Noir Pacific Rock** bottling displays the difference between the sites, offering a punchier profile than the bracing Sea Field. The fruit profile is more pomegranate in tilt and decidedly juicier, with wet stone and rose hip notes giving it a touch more weight, though it maintains a lithe frame. Mondavi doesn't exactly have a poker face, breaking into a wide grin as he tastes the not-yet-bottled wine.

The success he's had in finding sources is also fueling his abundant energy. The long-term lease deal here gives RAEN another steady fruit source to work with for the coming generation.

"It's going to be so much fun to watch this site develop. We've got 28-year-old vines that are healthy and we now can carry them into 50, 60 years old. Old-vine Pinot Noir, from a *grand cru*-level site?" he says. "Yeah, you bet I'm absolutely excited."

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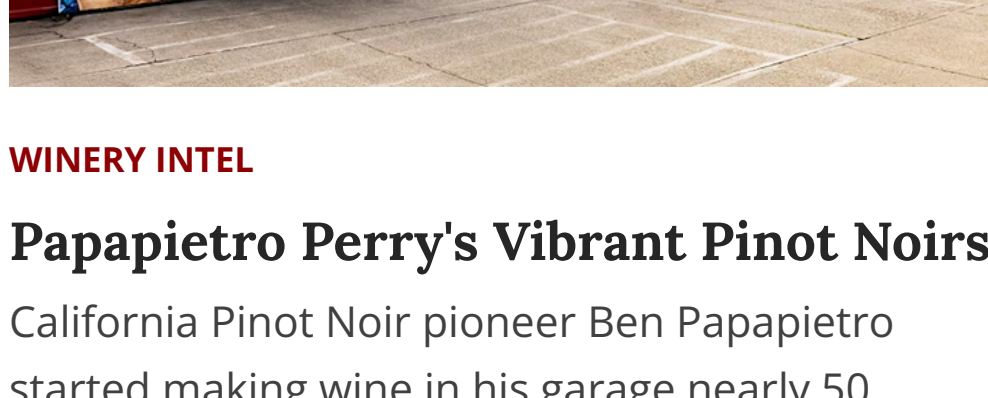


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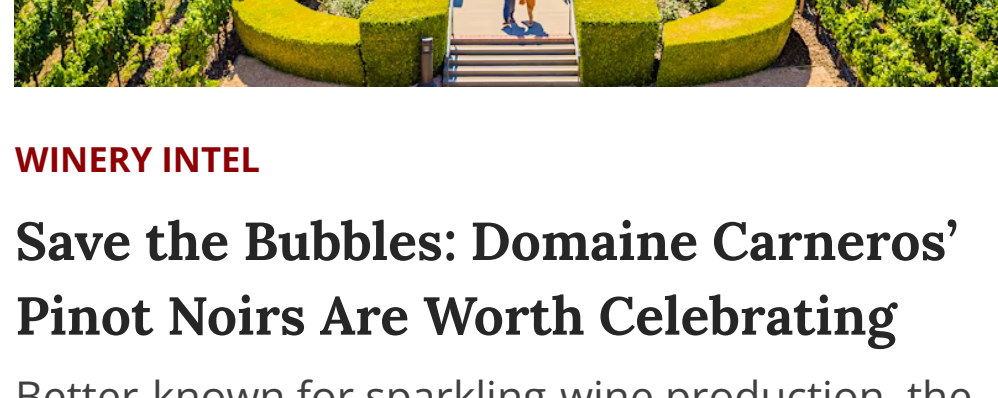


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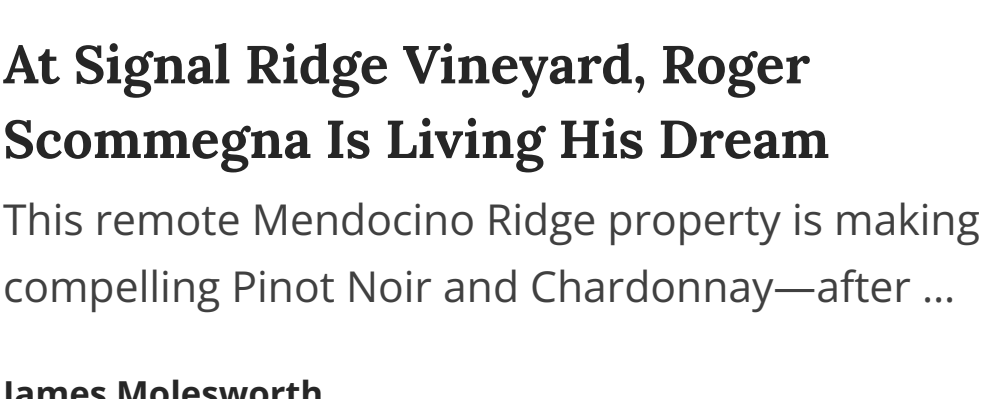


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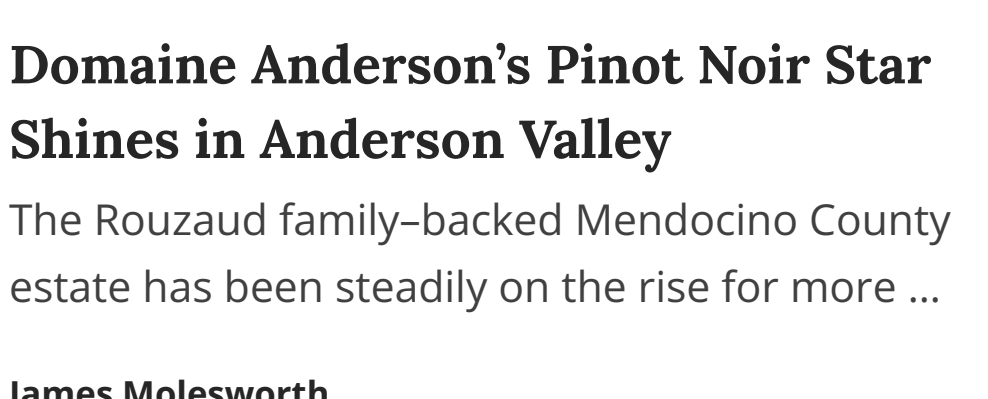


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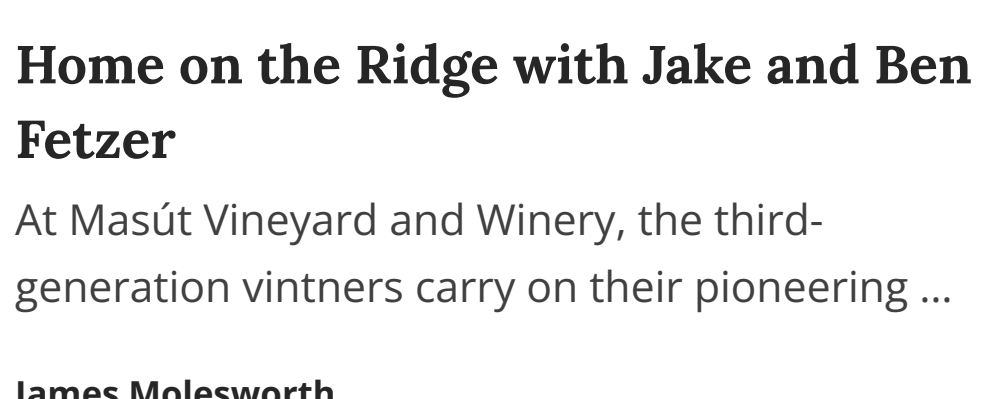


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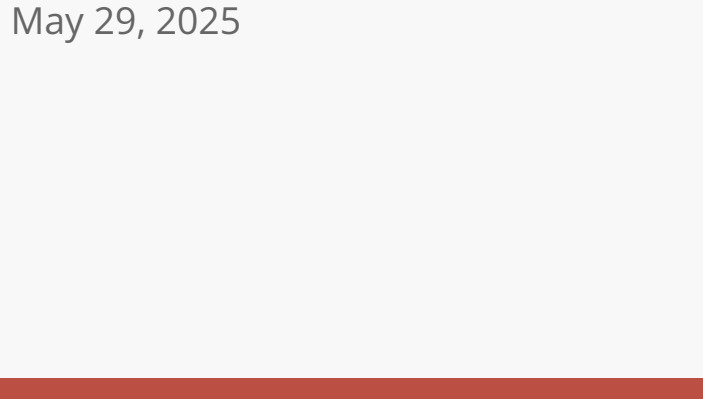
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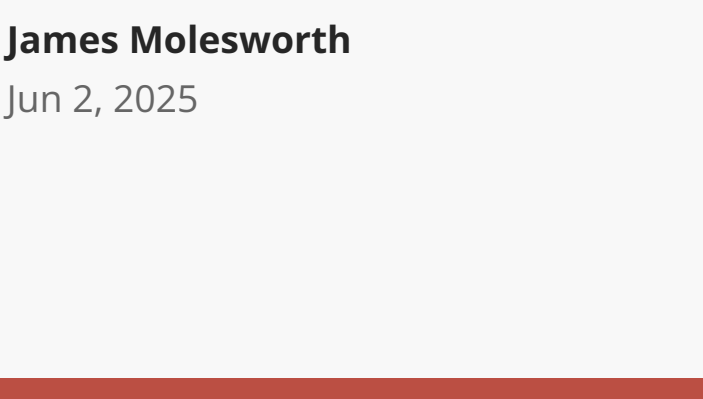
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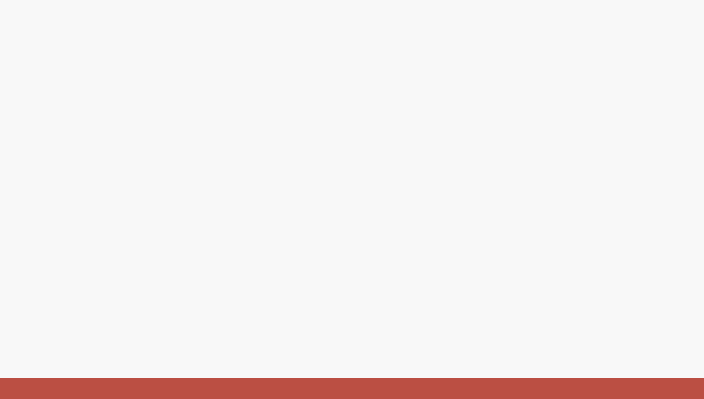
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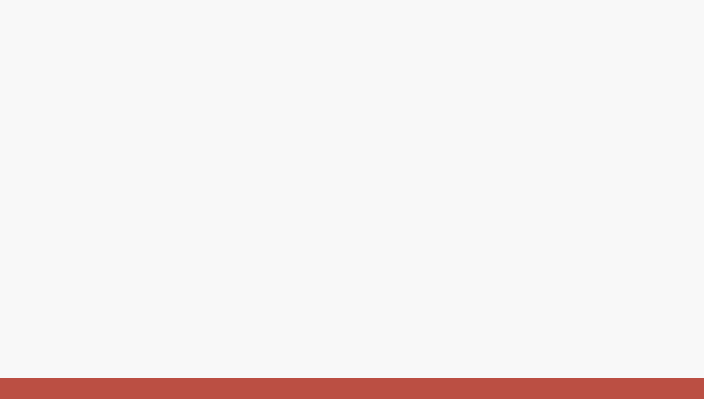
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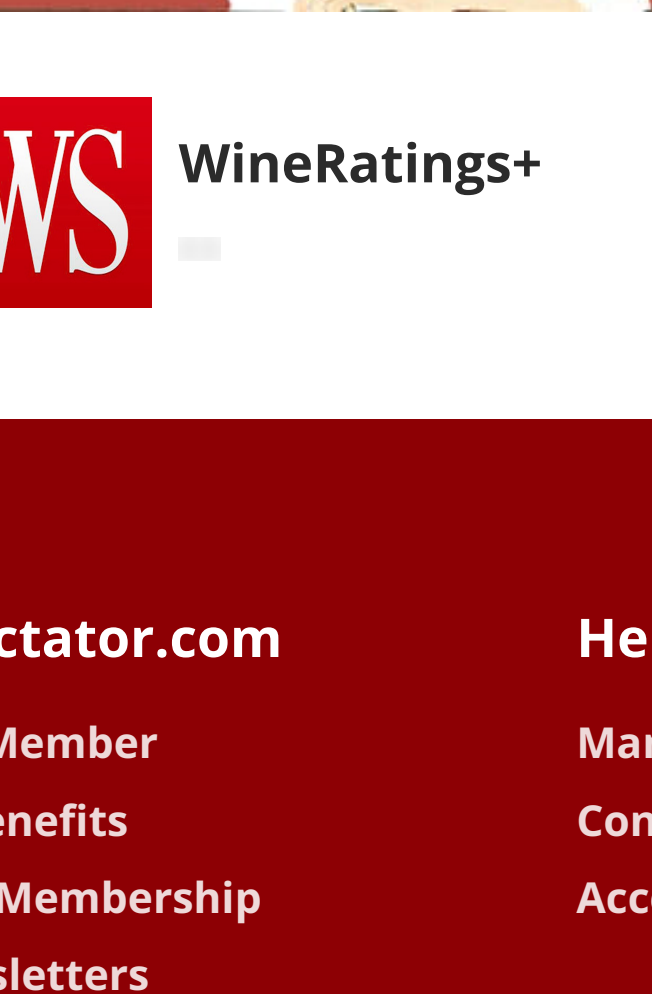
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