

# JEB DUNNUCK



## Sonoma: Another Brilliant Vintage in 2018

by JEB DUNNUCK

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This report focuses on the 2018s from Sonoma, yet also includes a handful of wines from Napa, Santa Lucia Highlands, the Central Coast, and Oregon. There is always some overlap in the coverage of California, but this is certainly a slightly more eclectic mix than usual. This is also a unique report in that due to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, all of the wines were shipped and tasted at my office in Colorado. While this is a terrific way to taste the wines, I certainly missed being able to visit and talk with the winemakers. Nevertheless, numerous Zoom meetings sufficed.

What is clear after spending weeks tasting through the 2018s is that this is a **sensational vintage** for Sonoma. This long, even growing season produced everything I look for in a great vintage: incredible top tier quality, a vast selection of absolutely beautiful wines at all price points, and wines that show their place of origin as well as singular characters. I have never tasted so many complex, elegant, yet also deep, textured, and layered Pinot Noirs from Sonoma as in 2018. I could say the same regarding Zinfandel. And while I think Chardonnay is slightly less successful, there are still massive numbers of beautiful wines in the vintage. Also, 2018 is a vintage where it's easy to taste the differences between the multitude of appellations. Sonoma Coast, Petaluma Gap, and Russian River Valley Pinot Noirs all show classic characters, and the regions as well as the style of the producers show beautifully in these wines.

It's essential to understand that while only a handful of estates were making world-class wines in the past, that's no longer the case today, with many new, exciting estates making incredible wines. While the benchmark estates certainly delivered the goods in 2018, readers should look at the wines from Aperture Cellars, Arista, Blue Farm, Boars' View, Capture, Cattleya, Chev, CIRQ, Croix, Devil Proof, Ferren, Jeff Cohn, Lasseter Family, Limerick Lane, Lynmar, Mauritson, Ram's Gate, Shared Notes, Sojourn Cellars, and Wayfarer, just to name a few of the exciting producers in this report.

Lastly, like everything else, the wine market is unquestionably in unknown territory these days. Consumers are still purchasing (some stores are reporting record sales), yet the demand for wines over \$100 has fallen off a cliff, and given the political uncertainties, tariffs, and unknowns regarding COVID-19, we are all in for a bumpy ride over the coming year or more. I expect small, high-quality importers, wineries, and retailers to take the brunt of the damage and expect consolidation (which has been ongoing now) and less competition. If you're able, now is a good time to support your favorite wine shop, importer, or winery.

## **The Reviews**

All these wines were tasted in Colorado in April and May of 2020. Due to travel restrictions, I had to rely on the estate's willingness to ship samples, and I'd like to give a heartfelt thanks to those who allowed me to taste their wines. It is a privilege to taste these wines, and I don't take this lightly. Where warranted, I also purchased wines at retail for this report.

## **Recent Vintages**

2019 – The 2019 vintage got off to a slow start and featured a long, even growing season. My tastings are limited to the whites and a handful of barrel samples, but this appears to be another promising vintage for Sonoma. I'll cover the 2019s in depth next year.

2018 – A classic, elegant vintage for the region, featuring a long, even growing season, no heat spikes, a huge crop, and perfect, cool weather through harvest. These are complex, nuanced, and layered wines, with the best having an incredible mix of richness and elegance. The massive yields affected Chardonnay more so than the Pinot Noirs, and the only downside to the vintage could be that they might not be the longest-lived. The vintage shares similarities with 2016, yet the wines are even more expressive and complex. Most are already drinking nicely, yet I remain convinced the top wines will have broad drink windows.

2017 – This was a brutal vintage for Sonoma featuring a massive heat spike (which overlapped the Zinfandel harvest) followed by devastating fires. Nevertheless, the quality is shockingly good, and the wines have concentrated, structured, and nicely focused profiles. The top wines will be long-lived.

2016 – This was a cooler, even growing season that saw an early bud break, a cool, wetter summer, and a lengthy, picture-perfect harvest that allowed growers and winemakers to harvest at their leisure. In general, these are medium-bodied, pretty, elegant wines that are drinking beautifully today yet, like the 2018s, will have broad drink windows.

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2018 [MacRostie Chardonnay Bacigalupi](#) 91

Last of the Chardonnay, the 2018 Chardonnay Bacigalupi comes from a site on the Russian River Valley and was raised in 22% new French oak. White currants, apple blossom, spice box, and honeyed toast characteristics give way to a soft, juicy, balanced beauty that has good acidity and a clean, elegant style ideal for drinking over the coming 4-5 years.

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2018 [MacRostie Chardonnay Kent Ritchie](#) 92

From a site in the Russian River and aged in 25% new French oak, the 2018 Chardonnay Kent Ritchie offers lots of toasty and spicy notes as well as orchard fruits, medium body, a pure, clean, soft style, good acidity, and a clean finish. It's another impeccably made Chardonnay that delivers the goods.

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2018 [MacRostie Chardonnay Russian River Valley](#) 90

The 2018 Chardonnay Russian River Valley is in the same ballpark, with beautiful purity of fruit (orchard fruits, white flowers), medium-bodied richness and depth, good acidity, and terrific overall balance. Both of these two appellation blends are terrific wines well worth seeking out.

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2018 [MacRostie Chardonnay Sonoma Coast](#) 89

Starting with the appellation 2018 Chardonnay Sonoma Coast, this light gold effort has a spicy, apple, and white flower-laced style to go with a clean, balanced, delicious style on the palate. It has plenty of classic Sonoma Coast character, terrific balance, and should keep for 3-4 years.

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2018 [MacRostie Chardonnay Wildcat Mountain](#) 92

Brought up in 24% new French oak, the 2018 Chardonnay Wildcat Mountain is another terrific effort. White flowers, toasted spice, peach, and honeysuckle notes all dominate the nose, and it's fresh and lively, yet also textured and lengthy on the palate.

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2018 [MacRostie Pinot Noir Russian River Valley](#) 89

Candied cherries, orange blossom, and exotic flowers as well as lots of spice emerge from the 2018 Pinot Noir Russian River Valley. It's a more concentrated, layered wine compared to the Sonoma Coast release. Drink bottles over the 4-6 years.

2018	<a href="#"><u>MacRostie Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast</u></a>	88
<p>Leading off the Pinot Noirs, the 2018 Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast was all destemmed and brought up mostly in neutral barrel (22% new). Lighter ruby-hued and translucent, it has a pretty, uncomplicated style that shows plenty of cherry and strawberry fruit, light spice and floral notes, medium body, and a juicy, delicious profile on the palate. Drink it over the coming 2-3 years.</p>		
2018	<a href="#"><u>MacRostie Pinot Noir Wildcat Mountain</u></a>	93
<p>More complex notes of mulberries, black raspberries, forest floor, bouquet garni, and spice emerge from the 2018 Pinot Noir Wildcat Mountain. Beautifully textured and medium-bodied, with a great mid-palate and silky tannins, it's unquestionably an outstanding effort and should easily drink well for 4-6 years or more.</p>		
2017	<a href="#"><u>MacRostie Pinot Noir Thale's Vineyard</u></a>	91
<p>The translucent ruby-hued 2017 Pinot Noir Thale's Vineyard was completely destemmed and spent 10 months in 40% new French oak. Coming from a site in the Russian River Valley, it's made in a more elegant style yet still brings the Russian River fruit profile with lots of cherry and mulled strawberry notes as well as medium body, a core of sweet fruit, and a great finish. It's another balanced, charming, incredibly delicious Pinot Noir from this estate. Drink it over the coming 3-5 years.</p>		
2017	<a href="#"><u>MacRostie Pinot Noir The Loch</u></a>	91
<p>The most expensive release in the lineup, the 2017 Pinot Noir The Loch comes from a site on the Sonoma Coast and was brought up in 40% new French oak, with the balance in once- and twice-used oak. It has a touch more oak yet packs plenty of light cherry and strawberry fruit, subtle spice, medium to full body, a great mid-palate, ripe tannins, and a good finish. I don't find it considerably better than the other releases here, but it's still a terrific wine.</p>		