

THE
tastingpanel
 MAGAZINE

MAY/JUNE 2019 • \$6.95

RISING
to the
OCCASION

Mezzacorona

INTRODUCES ITS NEW
 SPARKLING ROSÉ, AN ITALIAN
 GLACIAL BUBBLY DESTINED FOR
 YOUR NEXT CELEBRATION



The **Ransom** note
with David Ransom

The Ransom Note is a monthly column by Tasting Panel East Coast Editor David Ransom. Each month, David connects readers with some of the people, products, and events making news along the Eastern Seaboard.

From left to right, winemakers Phil Long, Darcie Kent, Karl Wente, Steven Kent Mirassou, and Rhonda Wood with Livermore Valley Wines' Chris Chandler at Manhatta in New York.



California Dreaming

EXPLORING WINES FROM THE SONOMA COAST AND LIVERMORE VALLEY

story and photos by David Ransom



Kenwood Winemaker Zeke Neeley with The Barn Pinot Noir.

I don't get to California wine country very often, so when I do, I'm like a giddy tourist on autopilot as I head toward Napa to check wineries off my personal bucket list. But after a couple of lunches I recently attended in New York, I'm rethinking my travel itinerary.

At Manhatta, Danny Meyer's new FiDi eatery 60 floors above Wall Street in downtown Manhattan, I joined a small gathering hosted by five wineries in Livermore Valley, which is located about an hour east of the San Francisco Bay. This region's role in California wine production dates back to the 1840s, when Robert Livermore planted the state's first commercial vineyard. About 50 wineries operate there today.

Present at the Manhatta lunch were sixth-generation winemaker Steven Kent Mirassou of The Steven Kent Winery; fifth-generation winemakers Karl Wente of Wente Vineyards and Darcie Kent (no relation to Steven) of Darcie Kent Vineyards; and two first-generation winemakers, Wood Family Vineyards' Rhonda Wood and Longevity Wines' Phil Long. What struck me most about them—aside from the high quality and affordability of their

wines—is that they aren't afraid to experiment. Aside from very good Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, Livermore winemakers are succeeding with grapes like Mourvèdre, Cabernet Franc, and Petite Sirah. The results are the perfect antidote for the high-price blues, and the region is now on my radar for a visit.

Traversing from a skyscraper to a barn would make many city dwellers' heads spin, but the Pinot Noirs of Kenwood's new winemaker, Zeke Neeley, helped ease the transition. Over lunch at BLACKBARN, chef John Doherty's restaurant on Madison Square Park, I got to know Neeley and taste expressions that included the aptly named Sonoma Coast effort The Barn. (After hearing we'd be sampling it, I actually suggested the similar-sounding restaurant, thinking that Doherty and Neeley would hit it off—which they did.) The Barn is made from select lots of Dijon Clone 777 grown in the Amaral Vineyard near San Pablo Bay. I tasted the limited-production 2016 vintage (\$85), and it is a stunner. It's available to select restaurants, so order it quickly before it's gone. ■■