

FOOD // WINE, BEER & SPIRITS

Sonoma wine pros take on a new vineyard that's extreme in every way

Sara Schneider

Oct. 13, 2023 | Updated: Oct. 13, 2023 8:33 a.m.



— Ojai Mountain's vineyard sits at 2,800 feet atop Sulphur Mountain, about a 20-minute drive from the town of Ojai.
Provided by Ojai Mountain/Quoc Ngo

Erich Bradley and Phil Coturri have had a new vineyard project up their sleeves for some time now. That should surprise no one.

The well-known Sonoma-based winemaker and grower each have a long resume. Bradley's includes Repris, Pangloss, Texture and Sojourn wines, among others. And the land Coturri and his team at Enterprise Vineyards farm stretches across Sonoma and Napa. Their projects together in Sonoma's Moon Mountain District alone have made the appellation a powerhouse for high-elevation wines.

But Bradley and Coturri's newest collaboration — held close to the vest since 2018 — is a stretch even for these two intrepid wine pros: a vineyard on virgin land at 2,800 feet, 10 miles from the Pacific Ocean, in Ventura County. The team, including local viticulturist Martín Ramírez, has quietly tackled the challenges of the remote, untested site, and they're going public with their first two Ojai Mountain wines this month.

Bradley explained the pull of the unlikely location, casually mentioned to him by the property owners, Olga and Mikhail Chernov, at a wine club event: “As soon as they said 2,800 feet, I stopped them and said, ‘OK, how about I come down next week to see it?’ I mean, nobody says 2,800 feet!”

Coturri’s reaction synced up: “Oh, well, that must be interesting!”

The potential for vibrant, concentrated, tannic — ageable — wines that both were familiar with from their work above other fog lines was irresistible.



— Erich Bradley and Phil Coturri’s new vineyard project is Ojai Mountain in Ventura County.
Provided by Ojai Mountain/Quoc Ngo

Conditions at the vineyard site — actually atop Sulphur Mountain, a 20-minute drive from the town of Ojai — are extreme in every way. “Lack of soils, wide diurnal shifts (high daytime temperatures, low nighttime ones, encouraging vivid acidity), deep and minimal water sources and fierce coastal winds,” explained Bradley.

Coturri embraces the fruit-character-building conditions, as well as the newness of growing grapes so far south — learning the effects of warm fog filling the lower valleys, for instance. “Whenever you can see the Channel Islands from a vineyard, you know you are in for a treat,” he said.

Only there's never been a vineyard on the 290-acre property before — or anywhere close. No guide to local grapes. Intuition pointed toward red and white Rhône varieties like Syrah, plus Tempranillo. But it's a work in progress: The first 7 acres they've planted will double in three years, with 100 to 120 available in the long run.

There was never a question of conventional farming (i.e., synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, etc.) on this pristine land. In line with the team's longstanding winegrowing ethos, Ojai Mountain ticks all the sustainable boxes: organic, biodynamic, regenerative.



— Winemaker Erich Bradley at Repris Winery. Bradley has teamed up with Phil Coturri for a new project in Ventura County, Ojai Mountain. Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

Over the centuries, the soil eroded to the valley floor, said Bradley. So Ramírez builds the top layer with organic additions: cover crops that become fertilizer; oyster shells that integrate calcium; fish and kelp; and manure from local ranches.

The challenge, as Coturri sees it, in these “carved canyons, battled by onshore winds,” is to “capture flavor as unique as the vista,” he said. “An adventurous attitude is what we all must possess because the site demands it.”

Are the first wines fulfilling the expectations of electric acidity and edgy minerality the team hoped for? “So far, very much so,” said Bradley, in spite of the fact that they’re just getting the vines established, learning how to coax them into expressing the vineyard.

“We’re finding the wines are extremely compelling even when things are so dynamic and fragile in these early stages,” he said. “And that’s a very, very good sign. Still, we’re nowhere near the ceiling for this vineyard.”



— The first two Ojai Mountain wines are now available.
Provided by Ojai Mountain/Quoc Ngo

Allocations are available now for the first two Ojai Mountain wines: the 2020 Estate Red (\$60), a Rhône-Bordeaux blend with Grenache in the lead (the Bordeaux varieties have since been grafted over to Rhône), and the 2021 Estate White (\$75), combining Grenache Blanc, Picpoul and Roussanne. The inaugural Syrah — Ojai Mountain’s potential signature — will come next spring.

ojaimountainestate.com

Sara Schneider is a freelance writer. Email food@sfchronicle.com