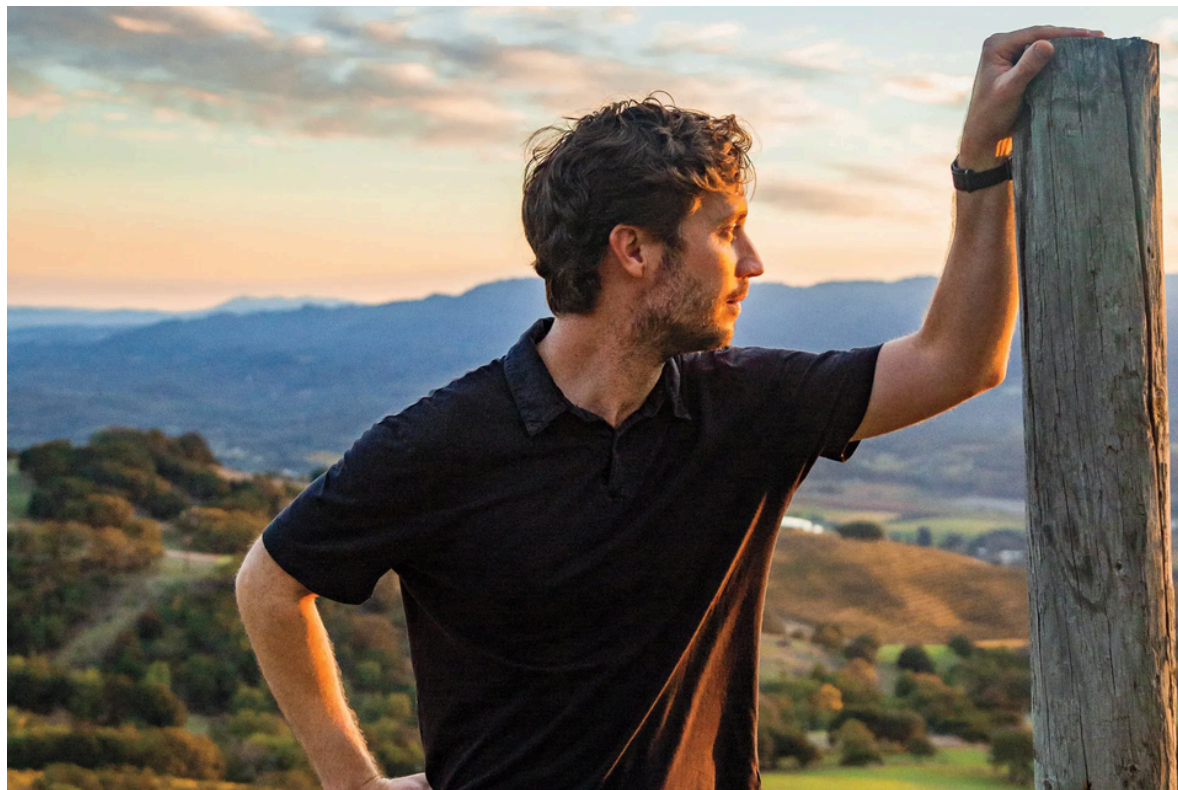


# WINE ENTHUSIAST



Nun's Canyon Vineyard/Photo courtesy of Hamel Family Wines

## The Sonoma Winemakers Devoted to 'Complete Control and a Sense of Place'

The French word for a monopoly, *monopole*, refers to a **vineyard site** from which one producer sources grapes exclusively, a place where no one else has access to make wine.

These aren't common in **California**. Given its relative youth vis-à-vis other renowned growing regions of the world, **Sonoma** is not a place where it's typical for generations of one family to own a piece of land over centuries and continuously plant and farm it to wine grapes.

Of course, when it comes to making wine, the *monopole* estate model is just one approach. Another approach is to lease land from someone else, which can be close to having an estate. The third approach is to buy grapes from someone else's vineyard.

# The Monopole Comes to California

When Ambassador James D. Zellerbach envisioned planting **Pinot Noir** and **Chardonnay** outside of the town of Sonoma in 1953, he was inspired by what he had seen and tasted in **Burgundy**, and that included the concept of a monopole.

Thus, **Hanzell Vineyards** was born. Today, its 46 acres of vines are certified **organic** and aim to be 100% self-sustained through regenerative agricultural practices, a substantial commitment that requires total oversight and control.

**Laurel Glen** on Sonoma Mountain is another example of a successful mono – pole, first planted in 1968. Its 14 acres of **Cabernet Sauvignon** are also farmed organically; Phil Coturri has been looking after them since 2011.

These are two of the most prized and respected properties in Sonoma County, both monopoles.

Today, there are a handful of Sonoma wineries built around this model that make impressive wines year to year, proving the benefits that can be had from the level of detail that is possible within a monopole mindset.

Some of the newer ones include Steve Kistler's **Occidental Vineyards** on a Sonoma Coast ridge above Freestone-Occidental, where the highest levels of farming Pinot Noir are happening. The 85 acres of Pinot Noir grapes go into several exquisite estate bottlings.



Winemaker Elizabeth Tangney of Cornell Vineyards. / Photo by: Paige Ricks



# A Sense of Control

One of Sonoma's most exciting new monopoles is [Cornell Vineyards](#).

"There's an intimacy with the grapes when you farm them yourself," says Elizabeth Tangney, Cornell's winemaker and vineyard manager. "The understanding I gain from watching the season, bud break to harvest, is invaluable and increases my understanding of how to make the wine."

A vineyard of 20 planted acres in the [Fountaingrove District](#) appellation, on the Sonoma side of [Spring Mountain](#), Cornell is surrounded by another 200-plus acres of wild land. Devoted to producing small amounts of high-quality Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, it requires fierce devotion to stay on top of everything that happens at this site every year.

"The only downside to a monopole is there's no off-season," Tangney adds. "I watch closely areas of variability, berry size, color accumulation. These details allow me to make better picking decisions and better winemaking decisions."

The same is true for John Hamel, winemaker for [Hamel Family Wines](#) in Sonoma. Hamel has developed and acquired four vineyards throughout Sonoma Valley and the Moon Mountain District that have evolved into four individual monopoles, the most important of which is [Nuns Canyon Vineyard](#).

"In a certain sense it is more difficult to be a young winery focusing on a specific vineyard site and its expression than relying on the cachet of a well-known vineyard that is farmed by a grower," he says. "But we strongly believe that something is missed when the fruit is grown by one entity, and the wine is made by another."



From left: Winemakers Paul and Kathryn Sloan of Small Vines Wines. / Photo by: Paige Ricks

The monopole route can be riskier than going for a fruit-purchase model with a famous or renowned vineyard. The stakes are higher, but ideally the rewards will be too.

“The most important decision a winemaker makes is where to grow vines and the second most is how the vineyard is farmed,” says Hamel. “With those two facets as the most consequential, the opportunity to develop a monopole is the ideal.”

At **Small Vines** in the **Russian River Valley**, Paul and Kathryn Sloan farm several estate Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vineyards to make their own wines. Beginning in 1999, they planted European-style, high-density vineyards with the intent of achieving smaller yields, inspired by Burgundian monopoles.

“With a monopole, you have complete control and the ability to make wines that express a sense of place most of all,” says Paul Sloan. “We have an Old-World focus on the place where the grapes are grown and how the vineyard was planted.”

For Andy Smith of **DuMOL**, achieving monopole status was a process. From 1996 through 2006, the winery was buying 100% of its grapes. Then it began planting its own parcels, beginning with three in 2004, which produced the first of DuMOL’s estate-grown fruit in 2007.

Smith planted another parcel in 2015 and 2016, and now the combined vineyards provide two-thirds of all the grapes he needs to make his world-class Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays from the Russian River Valley.



Andy Smith of DuMOL. / Photo by: Paige Ricks



# Playing the Long Game

“You can make world-class wines from all approaches, but if you want to be taken seriously on a global scale, you need to be an estate winery,” says Smith. “It’s why, in 2003, I knew to take DuMOL further, I needed a piece of land.”

He knows the price of land in a region like Sonoma makes it prohibitive for so many winemakers to grow their own vines.

Still, Smith has planted 70% of the vineyards he works with, but it has taken time.

“It comes down to how you prepare the land, the decisions you make based on quality, not logistics or a return on investment,” he says. “It’s 100% your vision and the detailed, nuanced choices that boost quality, from vine spacing to the long-term soil health and genetics of the plant material matter after decades. You’re building up intimacy with the vineyards and the land.” Indeed, a monopole demands thinking for the long term, with the hope that over time, site and wine become one.

“With a monopole, the wine and site are so connected. There is a deeper expression of place,” says Tangney. “At Cornell, the grapes are grown year after year by the same team, the wine is produced year after year from the same source. With every season we have a better understanding about how to achieve the outcome we want, which is to make a truly special wine.”



From left: Winemakers Anthony Beckman and John Balletto of Balletto Vineyards. / Photo by: Paige Ricks

To that end, Tangney can't think about the vineyard without thinking about the wine. The growing season informs every decision she will make about the wine and without the intense tie to the vineyard, she feels she has only half the information.

"This [the 2021] season in particular, some of my pick dates were called based on what I saw in the vineyard," she explains. "Brix and pH's were quite low indicating the fruit may not be ready, but when I tested anthocyanin numbers, they were enormous. The fruit was much more mature than originally indicated, so we picked."

John Balletto is a longstanding grower of high-quality Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and **Pinot Gris**, with 700 acres of vineyard planted across the Russian River Valley. While he sells 95% of his fruit to wineries across the region, 5% is kept aside for Anthony Beckman, the winemaker for the **Balletto Vineyards** label.

Within that 5% are the Sexton Hill Vineyard, Cider Ridge Vineyard, Pelletti Ranch, Mill Station and Mary's Vineyard, all monopoles from which nobody but Beckman makes wine.

"These are vineyards I walked before they were vineyards," says Beckman. "With a monopole, it's about how you plant, which clones you plant, the row direction and how you'll pick. I made these blocks to fit my fermenters in the winery, the vineyard and cellar are designed to work as one."

So much so that for Beckman, the relationships he has with his monopoles become personal, and the sites push him to aim for the best.

"There's an intent, I don't share them, they're just too precious," he says of his exclusive vineyards. "There are not that many locations in the world that have that pull. I call them bulletproof vineyards, in a great year they're great and in a bad year they're good. A monopole is a lifetime commitment, like a good friend you don't want to let down."

*This article originally appeared in the December 31, 2021 issue of Wine Enthusiast magazine.*