

The Origins of Allen Vineyard

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Fourth-generation Californian and real estate developer Howard Allen, who already owned a small vineyard in Oakville, came to the Russian River Valley in 1970 because he thought it would be an ideal place to grow Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. There were barely any Pinot Noir vines in Sonoma County back then, with a few notable exceptions like Rochioli Vineyards, farmed by trailblazer Joe Rochioli, whose early-'80s vintages were made by Gary Farrell, and Dehlinger Winery, with the wines then made by Fred Scherrer. Allen purchased a block of land adjacent to Rochioli Vineyard and planted it in 1974, using cuttings from Rochioli Vineyard's West Block; at the time these were referred to as old Wente selections but they quickly became known as Rochioli selections, as the West Block essentially became the "mother block" for subsequent Pinot Noir plantings in Russian River Valley. The land Allen bought is mostly on the western, hilly side of Westside Road, in a spot where, as it turned out, acidity levels in the grapes remained sound even as sugars increased (previously the site's lower, flatter section had been the home of a prune orchard, and sheep grazed on the hillside). The soil at Allen Vineyard is mostly pebbles, river rock and dark loam with streaks of red clay, while Rochioli Vineyard, which is across Westside Road along the Russian River, features a lot of loam over 50 feet of gravel.

Beginning in 1980, Allen started selling some of his fruit to Burt Williams, then a garage winemaker with his partner Ed Selyem. Burt and Ed, as they were widely referred to by their customers, officially established their Hacienda del Rio winery in 1981, but in short order re-named their operation Williams & Selyem after receiving a cease-and-desist order from Hacienda Winery. The first vineyard-designated Pinot Noir released by Williams Selyem was the 1985 Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir. It was followed two years later by the Allen Vineyard Pinot. In 1989, the Williams Selyem operation leased an old barn adjacent to Allen Vineyard and turned it into a low-tech winery. As the Williams Selyem wines in the late '80s received rave reviews, the winery quickly developed a cult following. Demand soon outstripped supply, so much so that by the mid-'90s there was a two-year wait to get on the mailing list.

I have long considered Rochioli Vineyard to be an undisputed grand cru for California Pinot Noir. On that scale, Allen would rate as an exceptionally fine premier cru, on the order of a Chambolle-Musigny Les Amoureuses or Gevrey-Chambertin Clos Saint-Jacques. But that's a debate for another day.