

FERRINGTON VINEYARD

For the first of a new series on what makes some vineyards special, **Anne Krebiehl** went to see the people and the place that are winning well-deserved recognition for one in Northern California

There is something incredibly brisk and pristine about Anderson Valley. There is a stillness, too, and a palpable sense of infinity—the cold and endless Pacific begins just beyond those brooding redwoods that cover the Coastal Range. Anderson Valley wines have some of that briskness, too; their fruit has a certain purity, something of that coniferous ocean air. Some of America's most compelling Pinot Noirs grow here in Northern California's Mendocino County. The very best, however, prized across California, are not bottled under the Anderson Valley AVA. They are singled out by wineries in other regions and bottled under their vineyard name, thus slightly obscuring their origin. One of those names, flanked by a small number of peers, is Ferrington Vineyard.

Russian River Pinot pioneers Williams Selyem first bought Ferrington fruit in 1992 and have made a single-vineyard Pinot Noir from it ever since. More recently, MacPhail Family Wines in Healdsburg, Arista Winery in the Russian River Valley, Schramsberg's red-wine label Davies Vineyards in Calistoga, Saxon Brown Wines in Sonoma, Breggo Cellars, and the now sadly sold Londer Vineyards in Boonville all make or have made vineyard-designate Pinot Noirs from Ferrington Vineyard. All agree that Ferrington fruit is distinctive and warrants such special treatment. Unsurprisingly, there is more to this than just soil and climate.

Côtes to coast

Ferrington Vineyard sits on a very gentle, south-facing slope at the foot of the Coastal Range that frames the valley on either side, just to the north of Boonville, at the valley's warmer end. It was originally planted in the 1970s and must have been among the first commercial vineyards in the valley. Considered too cold there, earlier attempts at viticulture had been abandoned: Anderson Valley cuts laterally into the Coastal Range along the Navarro River that runs into the Pacific, a conduit for wind and fog. Naturally, such marginality is suited to sparkling wines.

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Ferrington Vineyard nestling in Anderson Valley, whose potential it quickly proved



Photography courtesy of Kurt Schoeneman

## feature / **genius loci** / Ferrington Vineyard

The establishment of Scharffenberger in 1981 and Roederer Estate in 1982, both in cooler Philo, put Anderson Valley on the map and encouraged others. Today, there are a few tasting rooms, but none of them is swish. Both Boonville and Philo, with their refreshing absence of Starbucks and fast-food joints, feel a lot farther than just two and a half hours' drive from San Francisco. While logging and apples no longer dominate life here, lumber trucks pass and farming still sets the pace. You see deer early in the morning and hear of coyotes and mountain lions killing livestock. The sense of remoteness is intensified by the long drive along Highway 128, winding through forest and passing isolated farmsteads to turn into Boonville's, and later Philo's, Main Street.

In the 1980s, the vineyard was bought by Dr Richard Ferrington, who sold it to the current owner, Kurt Schoeneman, in 1996. Ferrington's son John was instrumental. He worked as Burt Williams's assistant winemaker at Williams Selyem. Bob Cabral—winemaker at Williams Selyem since 1998, when Williams retired—remembers, "John Ferrington had studied at Montpellier, and he brought back some budwood from Burgundy—a suitcase clone, if you will. But having known John Ferrington, it was probably all from grand cru vineyards in the Côte de Nuits somewhere, that was John's passion." It was a mere 2 acres (0.8ha) of fruit, but Ferrington Jr and Williams tried it and, says Cabral, "it was pretty great stuff." Ever since, Williams Selyem has made a single-vineyard Ferrington Vineyard Pinot Noir. In doing so, it led the way for Anderson Valley Pinot Noir, inspiring others to seek out fruit from this northerly region and this particular vineyard.

Today, John's heavily virused suitcase clones are gone. The family had run into difficulties, and the sale was not smooth. Schoeneman recalls, "The sellers made it difficult. All the big winemakers tried to buy it, got frustrated, and gave up." But Schoeneman, who is 72, longed to relive childhood memories: "My family had a place outside Healdsburg on the Russian River. On the last day of school, my mother piled us all—I was the oldest of five—into this 1947 DeSoto Suburban, and we spent the whole summer up there. This was in the 1950s. The old Italian families had half an acre of Zinfandel or something going in their backyards, and dad used to get a barrel of wine. He sort of introduced us to wine at the table." As a veteran of real estate, Schoeneman put time and energy into making the deal. It took him eight months, but he also had a hunch, having spotted the misspelled Williams Selyem name on the list of grape buyers in the paperwork. Coincidentally, he had been taken to Williams Selyem's tasting room a few months earlier. "It was an epiphany," he says. "I had never tasted anything like that before." Seeing that name in connection with Ferrington convinced him. "I knew they were special. And if they were buying fruit from here, there must be something good about the place. I was going on very limited information. When we looked at it, it was a wreck, but I

**Schoeneman's vision goes well beyond good management. His aim is to grow the best fruit possible and sell it to winemakers who will do it justice**

love fixing things up," he confesses, almost boyishly. "I got lucky. I would never even have seen this place, because I am an amateur. The pros would have grabbed it off me. It's a wonderful vineyard."

### Holistic vision

He then set to work in early 1997, hiring the local viticulturist Norman Kobler, who had grown up tending his parents' Lazy Creek Vineyard in Philo. "It really was a wreck," Kobler remembers. "All the good vines, what was left of them, we pruned. They had not been watering large parts of it. It was just dying. There were 16 acres [6.5ha] of Sauvignon Blanc, 2 acres [0.8ha] of Pinot Noir [John's clones]; the rest of it was Riesling, a little Cabernet, and Chardonnay, and it was dead." But it was not just a matter of replanting; Schoeneman did not want to have a lifestyle vineyard but a proper, long-term business. He invested fundamentally and ripped the soil to break the clay layer, installed irrigation and drainage that allow him to recoup up to 30 percent of water that is scarce here—from rain, deficit irrigation, and anti-frost sprinklers. Soon the system will be solar-powered. Kobler is still in charge today, via Paul Ardzrooni's vineyard management company. Schoeneman also ensured that a well-looked-after permanent workforce lives on-site: The Mexican field workers know the vineyard and vines intimately. Now, Schoeneman and his wife Heather also live on the ranch, as does Kobler and his family. They raise livestock, and Schoeneman, who talks fondly of lard-fried *carnitas* and *chiles rellenos*, says, "Norman and some pretty good field workers who live here, we all share the farm-grown vegetables, the goats, and sheep."

Crucially, Schoeneman's vision goes well beyond good management. Knowing that his poor soils will never yield much more than 2–3 tons per acre, his aim is to grow the best fruit possible and sell it to winemakers who will do it justice. He recalls early on being asked to deliver Pinot Noir at 28° (!) Brix to a large Sonoma négociant, only for them to water it back down and save on the purchasing weight—such insulting deals taught him a lesson. His long-term winemakers always get fruit from "their" rows, have a say in planting and viticulture, and call the harvest date.

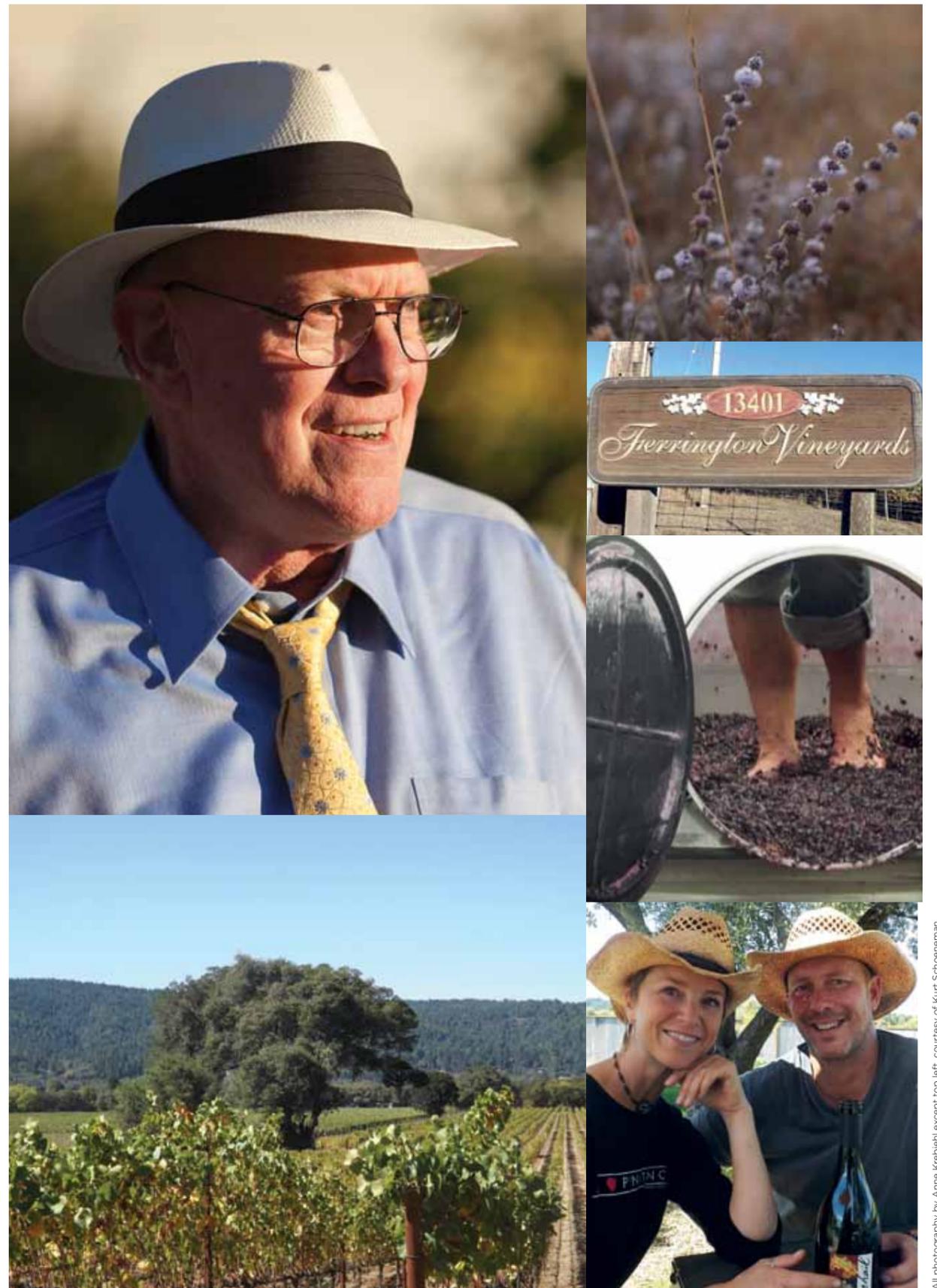
Today, Ferrington Vineyard has 74 acres (30ha) in total: 45 acres (18ha) of Pinot Noir, 16 acres (6.5ha) of Chardonnay, 12 acres (5ha) of Gewurztraminer, and about an acre (0.5ha) of the original Sauvignon Blanc. There is 3–4ft (0.9–1.2m) of sandy loam on top of the ripped clay layer that sits on Franciscan sandstone bedrock. A little farther south toward the river, in the neighboring Cakebread vineyard, there is already 8ft (2.4m) of alluvial topsoil. The bordering vineyards to east and west are Elke's Donnelly Creek and Roederer, respectively. All the Pinot Noirs are trained in a double cordon, which, so Kobler believes, yields the most uniform clusters. The row direction is such that the canopy shades the fruit zone at noon. Organic fertilizer is applied via the fine-tuned deficit irrigation system, via plowed-under cover crops or their grazing sheep. Morning fogs are regular. "The Pacific is 15 miles [24km] away," explains Kobler. "We get coastal breezes and warm sun in the afternoon, and it really cools down at night. We sometimes have a 50–55°F [28–30°C] temperature swing."

Ferrington's clonal mix is one of the great attractions to winemakers, as are the excellent farming and management. All

Top left: Kurt Schoeneman. Bottom right: James MacPhail and Kerry Forbes



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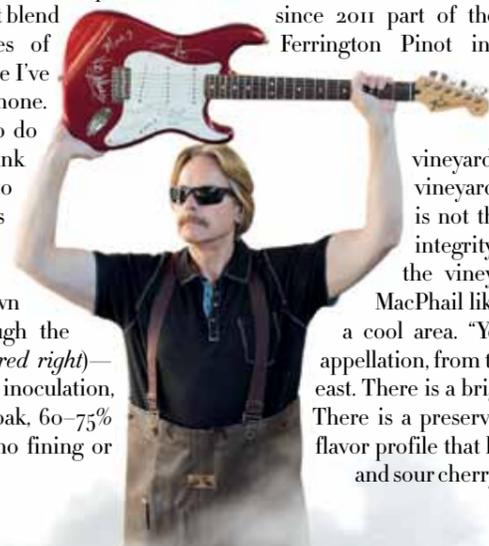


All photography by Anne Krebiehl except top left, courtesy of Kurt Schoeneman



rootstocks and clones are matched to site but show unusual diversity; there is UCD 4/5/6, the 1950s Davis selections of French clones known in California as “Pommard”; UCD 2A, a Davis selection of Wädenswil; as well as the French ENTAV-INRA clones 113, 114, 115, 667, 777, 828, and most recently the new 943. Every winemaker gets a slightly different mix, farmed identically, apart from a few tweaks in yield and harvest date. What they make of it are fascinating expressions of Ferrington, facets of brisk, breezy, and brilliantly sunny Anderson Valley.

Bob Cabral at Williams Selyem and Kurt Schoeneman cooperated. “I saw that the original block that Burt had been making the wine from was starting to deteriorate and Kurt [Schoeneman] was putting the new vines in, so we started migrating to those new blocks from about 2000–04,” explains Cabral. “Kurt gives me the opportunity to play around with some of the other blocks on his ranch, and it’s really a great thing to be able to try to figure out what in my mind best represents the Ferrington Ranch when I am putting that blend together.” Having now made 15 vintages of Ferrington, Cabral says, “It’s a vineyard where I’ve done little acidulation—and in most years, none. It’s just so well balanced, you don’t have to do anything to it, just try to pick it when you think it’s at a mature level for what you are trying to make.” Cabral harvests and vinifies all blocks separately, treating them all the same: 15–20% whole clusters, cold soak, inoculation with a starter of Williams Selyem’s own isolated yeast strain that is walked through the tanks—yes, they go in with waders (pictured right)—regular punch-downs, immediate malolactic inoculation, press-off, and maturation in 100% French oak, 60–75% new, from François Frères for 16 months, no fining or filtration.



### Distinction, diversity, personality

Cabral makes numerous single-vineyard wines. “In the case of Ferrington, Rochioli, or Allen, they are what they are. No matter how light-handed or heavy-handed people may feel we are with the wines, if you do the same thing to everything then the differences do have to be the sites.” Cabral adds, “In California, we tend to celebrate the winemaker more than we do the vineyard. That’s great if you are one of them. But look at this as a business, for longevity: Nobody knows who the winemaker is at Romanée-Conti; nobody cares. Aubert de Villaine is the director, but who actually racks the barrels? It doesn’t matter, because Romanée-St-Vivant tastes like Romanée-St-Vivant, Richebourg like Richebourg, and that’s all you need to worry about. Williams Selyem has taught me to just be moderate and respectful. Be happy with what you have and not try to force a personality on to something. We are who we are.”

James MacPhail, at his eponymous winery in Healdsburg, since 2011 part of the Hess Collection, made his first Ferrington Pinot in 2005, after being invited by Schoeneman to buy some fruit: “For me, Ferrington always stood out in Anderson Valley as a unique vineyard. It’s one of the most easterly vineyards in the appellation. And while Kurt is not the original owner, he maintains its integrity. The selection of clones is really the vineyard’s hallmark.” Just like Cabral, MacPhail likes the fact that it’s a warmer site in a cool area. “You have a lot of disparity in that appellation, from the very cool far west, to the warmer east. There is a brightness of fruit that just stands out. There is a preservation of acidity and a very unique flavor profile that borders more on the tart: cranberry and sour cherry.” MacPhail also introduces another

Photography by Anne Krebiehl

distinct aromatic marker: “Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*), which grows a lot in and around the vineyards, tends to make its way into the wine. It’s almost lavender-like, very fragrant, not as pungent or disturbing as eucalyptus.” (Whoever thinks this is fanciful should read the AWRI study on eucalyptus.) He co-ferments his different Ferrington parcels, usually works with native yeast, does manual punch-downs, presses off, finishes fermentation in French oak from various coopers, no more than 40% new, lets malolactic fermentation happen naturally, and ages on lees. He remarks that when he started out in winemaking in the late 1990s, “the new frontiers were the extreme Sonoma Coast and Anderson Valley.”

Hugh Davies, CEO of Schramsberg Vineyards, was on the lookout for Pinot Noir vineyards for a dedicated single-vineyard project under his red-wine label Davies Vineyards. (The Schramsberg label is reserved for sparkling wines.) Schramsberg buys a lot of sparkling-wine fruit in Anderson Valley and also leases and farms a vineyard there—also under Paul Ardzrooni’s capable management. It was he who suggested Ferrington to Davies. Not only was the quality right, Davies liked that he could enter into a longer contract with Schoeneman. “We looked at six different sites, also in Sonoma and the Sonoma Coast; Ferrington was one of them. In the end, we did settle on the three that emerged as our favorites; one was the Ferrington,” which Davies and his winemaker Sean Thompson liked for its “lightness, delicacy, and polish.” Their first vintage was 2009. Coming to this project as a sparkling-wine maker, Davies loved the idea of working with different clones. His endeavor is to create as many different facets of this one vineyard as possible—with various clones, yeasts, coopers, and so on. “I think inherently at Schramsberg, whether we’re doing red or sparkling wines, we are thinking about the blend. Having more elements to work with to fine-tune, it is inevitably going to produce a better product. Not just for one year, but we’re going to learn that much more every year, because we are trying a broader range of things. The prospects are exciting for us.” Davies is unequivocal: “This particular vineyard is distinctly different from some other locations, in that it is a large enough site with good exposure, enough sun throughout the day, on gently sloping ground. I like that better than some of the sites on the flat; it is not a bench but gently sloping. What’s fascinating about it is that the blocks really show a range and diversity. It’s been panted to ensure that.”

Paul Ardzrooni also connected Schoeneman and Jeff Gaffney, owner of Saxon Brown Wines in Sonoma and consultant winemaker at Anderson Valley’s Black Kite Cellars. He is making his very first Ferrington vintage in 2013 (for Saxon Brown). The just-fermented, pre-malolactic wine already tasted spicy and charmingly red-fruited. He remembers being approached by Schoeneman: “They made me an offer I couldn’t say no to. It’s almost a drug-dealer model—they wanted me to get hooked on it,” he jokes. “There’s this really pretty, lifted characteristic that I have now fallen in love with.” He also loves the diversity. “They have also let me have a few different clones to play with, which I co-ferment. I am a huge advocate of co-fermentation. I think something mystical is coming together. It’s like cooking: You wouldn’t cook your ingredients separately;

Top left: Ferrington Vineyard, largely replanted from 1997 with a rich mix of clones  
Bottom left: Bob Cabral, winemaker at Williams Selyem, wading in and waving

“Ferrington always has this really pretty red-fruit character, and it’s across producers—all the other Ferringtons have it” —  
Ryan Hodgins, Breggo

you want them to dance with each other. The clones all bring different things that we all like, but to me it’s more important to present the site—I am a site-signature guy. Rather than define who you are, you should define what the vineyard is.” He inoculates with a Burgundy yeast and extracts gently; he uses no stems and will use perhaps 40% new French oak.

When Ferrington’s neighbor Breggo, owned by Napa’s Cliff Lede, started in 2005, Ferrington’s reputation was already established. Winemaker Ryan Hodgins also makes the Ferrington Sauvignon Blanc and Gewurztraminer, which works brilliantly here, due to the fresh acidity. Of the Pinot Noir he says, “We wanted to work with the very best vineyards in Anderson Valley, and Ferrington has clearly been among those. It has always been one of my favorites. The Pinot Noirs are unique among Anderson Valley Pinots. The fruit profile is distinct; it is, if anything, a little atypical. I think of the Anderson Valley fruit profile as very dark: black cherry, plum, cola, spice. Ferrington always has this really pretty red-fruit character and it’s across producers—all the other Ferringtons have it: the crushed strawberry/raspberry brightness, the lifted, high-toned aromatic. They are very distinct and always appealing.” He never uses stems, cold soaks, works with spontaneous ferments if possible, and ages in about 50% new, all-French oak. He loves the acidity of the 2A clone. “Here in Anderson Valley, it’s rare that I ever have to pick because I worry about my Pinot becoming too ripe. I can pick when the flavors are ripe.” His expression of the site is probably the most ethereal.

### Expressing and commemorating Ferrington

Hodgins, just like MacPhail, Davies, and Gaffney—and, of course, Kurt Schoeneman—had all tasted the Williams Selyem Ferringtons. This is what convinced and inspired them. What started with a few suitcase clones is now one of the iconic vineyards of Anderson Valley. Schoeneman’s experience, investment, and long-term view made it possible. Cabral’s cooperation and continued custom was decisive. Any great vineyard, just like any great play or opera, shines in numerous interpretations and varying vintages. Cabral is optimistic: “I think Ferrington has a bright future because we’ve got all those really great young winemakers. They are looking at so many things that I didn’t think about as a young winemaker. Everything’s coming to their attention because we do have these extremes: We’ve got the guys still picking at 28° Brix, and we’ve got guys picking at 20° Brix. They’re able to go out and taste and talk to those winemakers and pull out information and have those taste reference points. They can formulate how they can go about expressing Ferrington.”

John Ferrington died tragically in 2001. Today, there is a John Ferrington scholarship at UC Davis for “a student in the Department of Viticulture and Enology with a strong interest in crafting high-quality Pinot Noir wines, John’s passion.” ■