

# North Coast Wine Challenge nets perfect 100 for Kokomo

**DIANE PETERSON**

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## North Coast Wine Challenge winners

**Best of the Best:** Kokomo 2016 Pinot Noir Gopher Hills Block Peters Vineyard Sonoma Coast

**Best of Show Red:** Kokomo 2016 Pinot Noir Gopher Hills Block Peters Vineyard Sonoma Coast

**Best of Sonoma County:** Kokomo 2016 Pinot Noir Gopher Hills Block Peters Vineyard Sonoma Coast

**Best of Show White:** J. Rickards Winery 2017 Sauvignon Blanc Croft Vineyard Alexander Valley

**Best of Show Rose:** Rodney Strong Vineyards 2017 Rosé of Pinot Noir Russian River Valley

**Best of Show Sparkling:** Domaine Carneros 2013 Brut

**Best of Show Dessert Wine:** Sonoma Cutrer Vineyards 2015 Late Harvest Chardonnay

**Best of Lake County:** Cache Creek Vineyards 2014 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon Lake County

**Best of Marin County:** DeLoach Vineyards 2015 Pinot Noir Marin County

**Best of Mendocino:** Soda Rock 2016 Chardonnay Mendocino

**Best of Napa County:** Mudita 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon Circle S Ranch Atlas Peak Napa

**Best of Sonoma County:** Kokomo 2016 Pinot Noir Gopher Hill Block Peters Vineyard Sonoma Coast

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The 2018 North Coast Wine Challenge invited 28 wine judges from across the country to sniff and sip a total of 1,014 wines last week during the sixth annual North Coast Wine Challenge at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds, resulting in 177 gold-medal awards, five Best of Show winners, five Best of County winners and one, record-breaking Best of the Best champion.

Kokomo Wines, a family winery run by a winemaker in partnership with a grower, took home the Best of the Best prize for its Kokomo 2016 Pinot Noir Gopher Hills Block Peters Vineyard Sonoma Coast. The pinot scored the highest points ever awarded by the contest in its six years: a perfect 100 out of 100.

“The wine was seamless and achieved our first 100 point score,” said Chief Judge Daryl Groom, who coordinates the contest. “It was clearly a delicious, well-made, high-quality wine.”

Rising to the top as the Best Pinot, the vibrant wine entered the sweepstakes round last Thursday with 17 other red wines and easily captured Best Red Wine, then received 70 percent of the judges’ votes to win Best of the Best over four other wines: the Best of Show White, Sparkling, Rosé and Dessert wines.

The judges awarded a total of 177 gold medals to wines entered in the contest, or 17.6 percent of the entries. A total of 185 wineries making wine from grapes grown on the North Coast entered the contest this year, including 39 new wineries.

“I was very impressed with all the wines — there were no clunkers at all,” said Chris Munsell, a contest judge and director of winemaking for E&J Gallo. “There were really stellar wines, and some of these are the top representatives I’ve seen, ever.”

As for the Best of the Best pinot noir, Munsell said that he knew it was a top winner as soon as he raised the glass to his nose.

“It jumps out of the glass. It has what they call that pinocity — a pinot characteristic that is so vibrant,” Munsell said. “The mouthfeel was silky and smooth, with no rough edges.”

The majority of the 31 wines that made it into the final sweepstakes round were from Sonoma County, Groom said, reflecting the high percentage of wines entered from the diverse AVAs of the county.

Not surprisingly, the Kokomo 2016 Pinot Noir came from the Peters Vineyard in the Sebastopol Hills area, which is on the border of the cooler Sonoma Coast and Russian River AVAs. The former apple orchard off Elphick Road is low lying and is swept by cooling fog from the Two Rock Gap, which provides a longer hang time.

Kokomo Owner/Winemaker Erik Miller, who makes wine only from grapes grown by Kokomo owner and grower Randy Peters, said the two-man team works together to pick the single-vineyard grapes multiple times in order to blend different ripeness levels.

“We want the complex levels of flavors so that when we put them together, we can play music with them,” Miller said. “Our main objective is to show that purity of place that no one else gets ... that’s where we have to hang our hat.”

The award-winning Kokomo pinot noir costs \$44, a relative bargain for a wine sourced from grapes from the Sonoma Coast. “I want to make affordable wines that people in Indiana want to buy,” said Miller, who hails from the Midwest.

The pinot noir grapes were planted in 1982 by the visionary Peters, who had access to only two pinot clones at the time, the Pommard and the Waldenswil. Nowadays, growers can plant 60 different clones of pinot, but Miller said that many growers are going back to the Pommard because the clone works better for the late ripening climates of Sonoma County.

“The vines are 30-plus years old,” Miller said. “And I think that gives the wine huge character.”

A native of Kokomo, Indiana, Miller graduated from Purdue University with a business degree and immediately moved West. He had visited Sonoma County on one of his college spring breaks and could not wait to go back.

“I just fell in love,” he said. “Where is this place from? You’re an hour from San Francisco, but you’re in the country?”

After college, he started working as a harvest intern at Belvedere Winery in Healdsburg, then took as many winemaking classes as he could at UC Davis. Then he continued his wine apprenticeship with winemaker/owner Rick Hutchinson at Amphora Winery in Healdsburg.

Miller started his own winery in 2004 with a cabernet sauvignon from Dry Creek Valley, then in 2005, he made his first pinot noir from the Peters Vineyard, which was a success right out of the barrel.

“I got a 91 or 92 points from the Wine Spectator ... and it definitely kicked the winery off,” he said. “That was how I got the attention of Randy ... he sold that fruit to four other wineries, and it (the Kokomo) was his favorite pinot of the vintage.”

Kokomo is located on 120 acres of prime benchland vineyards at the former Timber Crest Farms site and makes about 15 different wines, all sourced from various vineyards that Peters farms in the Sonoma Coast, Alexander Valley and Dry Creek Valley. Peters used to manage the fruit orchards at Timber Crest Farms, providing additional roots to the site.

“Where our cabernet is, at Ruth’s Vineyard, that was all pears, and Randy knew where the pears tasted the best,” Miller said. “That happens to be the block where we get our cab.”

The longtime Dry Creek grower Peters, 64, and winemaker Miller, 41, work together as a team, especially during harvest, when they must make the all-important decision of when to pick.

“That’s what Randy is very involved in, because he knows the vineyard well and he knows the flavors,” Miller said. “He goes out there four or five different times for different picks — that’s a commitment he’s making to different levels of ripeness.”

Working with Kokomo allows Peters to understand his grapes better, because he gets to taste them as a singular expression — made into one wine, from one spot, with no blending with other grapes.

“He gets a lot more intimate with his farming, and he shares in the glory,” Miller said. “Does he feel responsible for that? Heck yeah ... he says, ‘I farmed these grapes 364 days a year, and Erik gets them for one day.’”

A long-time Cloverdale basketball coach, Peters brings a competitive edge to the winery, where all of his grapes show up cold, at 7 a.m., no matter what contingencies may happen.

“One of the things that Randy says — it’s his mantra — is ‘Is good good enough?’ ” Miller said. “‘We settle for mediocrity?’ ”

For his part, Miller approaches winemaking like a Wine Country chef, paying attention to the details, not messing up the ingredients, and relying upon his experience to make the right decisions.

“2016 marked the eleventh vintage that I had the honor of being able to make Peters Vineyard pinot,” he said. “It takes 10 years to get to know a vineyard because you’ve really gotten to know the terroir.”

Picking at multiple times for varied ripeness allows Miller to create a well-balanced and complex wine with the craft of an artist.

“First pick, I want to preserve acidity, which can be mid-palate and makes it food-friendly,” he said. “The finish is more represented by the ripest pick. I use them almost like the bass and treble in music, to compose it together as one song.”

With a food-friendly wine like pinot noir, Miller said one of his favorite dishes is a classic mushroom pairing, but salmon and pork also make delicious dance partners.

“Pinot is versatile,” he said. “It goes with the earthy mushroom and yet it’s delicate enough to pair with salmon and robust and spicy enough to go with pork.”

On the other hand, he also strives to make wines that are completely satisfying and enjoyable all by themselves.

“You get off work and put your feet up,” he said. “That’s an American way of drinking wine.”

In the end, he perceives himself as an artist, with no patience for chemistry-driven winemaking.

“Get those numbers out of here, it clutters me,” he said. “I would rather walk through the vineyard and see the bud break and taste through my barrels ... let’s taste the damn thing and see where it’s at.”

### Best of Show Awards

Pinot noir was the largest category entered in the contest this year, followed by cabernet, chardonnay and zinfandel. A pinot noir wine also won the competition in 2014 and 2016. All of the Best of Show awards for the North Coast Wine Challenge scored 95 points and above.

During the final day of judging, the judges tasted the 31 wines with the highest scores and voted to determine the five Best of Show awards, giving the Kokomo pinot noir the Best of Show Red.

Best of Show White went to J. Rickards Winery 2017 Sauvignon Blanc Croft Vineyard Alexander Valley. Located on the southern end of the Alexander Valley AVA near the Russian River AVA, the vineyard enjoys morning fog from the coast, which helps develop the aromatics of melon and exotic flavors. The judges awarded it 98 points and described it as “delicate, aromatic, floral ... sauvignon blanc at its best.”

“It had the best nose by far of any of the whites that made it to the sweepstakes,” said judge Chris Sawyer, a sommelier. “They put the vineyard inside the bottle and that’s what made it special.”

“The Rodney Strong Vineyards 2017 Rosé of Pinot Noir Russian River Valley won Best of Show Rosé. The vibrant wine offers the classic aromas of strawberry and white peach, with bright acidity and a lasting finish. It got 98 points from the judges, who praised its “fresh outdoor quality” and “beautiful acidity.”

“This was way better than your average porch pounder,” Munsell said. “The way consumers’ tastes are evolving, it’s nice to see alternatives to an everyday wine.”

The Domaine Carneros 2013 Brut won Best of Show Sparkling for its bouquet of aromas, from pear and honeycomb to brioche. It offers a creamy texture, elegant structure and a long finish. The judges complimented its flavors of “yellow apple and Bartlett pear.”

“That one had more of the yeasty, bread qualities that we don’t see often in California,” Munsell said. “I think that’s why it stood out.”

Finally, the Sonoma Cutrer 2015 Late Harvest Chardonnay, grown in the Russian River area, won for Best of Show Dessert/Late Harvest wine. It has fruity flavors of peach, apricot and pear, with a sweet richness and creamy mouthfeel balanced by crisp acidity. The judges described it as “luscious” with “delicious notes of honey.”

## Best of County Awards

Only wines grown in the six counties of the North Coast are eligible to enter the contest, which is presented by The Press Democrat. This year, there were five Best of County awards given to wines from Lake, Marin, Mendocino, Napa and Sonoma counties.

Best of Lake County went to the Cache Creek Vineyards 2014 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon Lake County. The classic cabernet, grown in vineyards located along Cache Creek in the eastern foothills of Clearlake, earned 94 points. The judges enjoyed the wine’s flavors of “Chambord, red fruit, butterscotch and caramelized wood tones.”

Best of Marin County went to the DeLoach Vineyards 2015 Pinot Noir Marin County. The winery, which is part of the Boisset Collection, sources grapes from two vineyards bordering the Petaluma Gap. The wine earned 91 points, and the judges praised its “good varietal character” and “Christmas-type spice notes.”

Best of Mendocino went to the Soda Rock 2016 Chardonnay Mendocino, which was grown along the Russian River north of Hopland. The judges gave it 98 points and quipped, “I’d swipe right for this wine,” in a reference to Tinder, the dating site.

Best of Napa County went to the Mudita 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon Circle S Ranch Atlas Peak Napa. The small wine company sourced its grapes from a vineyard on the Atlas Peak Beach, and winemaker Zack Robinson made the wine in a Sebastopol facility. The cabernet earned 95 points from the judges, who enjoyed the flavors of “cassis” and “layers of decadent chocolate.”

Best of Sonoma County went to the Kokomo 2016 Pinot Noir Gopher Hill Block Peters Vineyard Sonoma Coast.

Reds before whites

Under Groom’s leadership, the contest has continued to grow and evolve since its launch six years ago by Steve Falk, CEO of Sonoma Media Investments, which owns the Press Democrat.

This year’s blind tasting, held at Saralee & Richard’s Barn at the fairgrounds, started out with the more challenging red wines for the first time, then moved onto the white wines in the afternoon, in order to keep the judges’ palates fresher. The red wines dominated during the sweepstakes.

“From memory, it’s the most reds we have ever had,” Groom said. “The additions came from many, new varietals making it to that round — lagrein, sangiovese, barbera and tannat, along with wines from other smaller classes like grenache, cab franc and malbec.”

Imagery Estate Winery, which is known for making interesting red varietals, had the most wines in the sweepstakes round and took home eight gold medals, the most earned by any winery.

Last year, Groom launched a mentorship program for young associate judges nominated from the wine industry. This year, those nine associate judges were also invited to taste through the sweepstakes round, although their votes did not count.

“It’s fun to sit down and taste with people at the forefront of where wines are going and to taste 100 wines coming out of our own back yard,” said Associate Judge Drew Damsky, 30, a winemaker for Palmeri Wines of Geyserville.

On June 9, the public will have a chance to sip samples of the winning wines and enjoy bites from 18 top chefs from the region during the North Coast Wine & Food Festival from 1 to 4 p.m. at the SOMO Village in Rohnert Park. To reserve: [northcoastwineandfood.com](http://northcoastwineandfood.com).