

The Other Wine Country

Santa Cruz's remote and rugged mountains harbor dozens of wineries

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Headline-making fires, impenetrable fog and snow-covered vines aren't images that come to mind when considering California's wine country. But the Santa Cruz Mountains, a vast and diverse appellation stretching from Half Moon Bay to Mount Madonna, has the makings of a world-class winegrowing region. So why haven't you been there?

Among the 70 wineries, you're probably familiar with Bonny Doon and its wacky labels. Perhaps you've been to a concert at Mountain Winery in Saratoga. And if you've heard of the 1976 Judgment of Paris, you know it was Ridge Vineyards, a Cupertino winery, that beat out the French in a blind tasting of cabernet sauvignons that put California on the global wine map.

Like Napa and Sonoma, the Santa Cruz Mountains area has been producing premium wines since the late 1800s. Yet its jagged topography and winding roads don't exactly make it bus-tour friendly.

Even though the appellation is the same size as Napa County -- about half a million acres -- only 1,500 acres are devoted to vineyards (compared to Napa's 45,000). That means trails are not manicured, building permits for tasting rooms are hard to come by, and grapes are scarce. Vintners, most of whom are small, family-owned and sustainable, typically produce a few wines from grapes grown in the region. They source the rest of their fruit from around the Central Coast.

But it is the complexity and depth of character of the Santa Cruz Mountains' Burgundian wines, particularly pinot noir, that can leave you in awe.

I mused about these wines on a recent slog up twisting Highway 17 in Los Gatos. I'd carved my own trail (careful to select wineries unaffected by the recent Lockheed fire), beginning at Burrell School Vineyards and Winery, a converted 19th-century red school house at an elevation of 1,600 feet.

Owner and winemaker David Moulton, a retired Silicon Valley executive dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, made his way through a gaggle of customers to greet me. As we tasted through his wines, Moulton, who started the winery in 1973 with his wife -- and high school sweetheart -- Anne, explained how the property's estate chardonnay and pinot noir vines benefit from the cooling Monterey Bay breezes and complex loam and shale soils.

You could taste it in the wines. Most of the chardonnay and pinot noir I would taste in Santa Cruz was elegant and restrained without skimping on fruit and power, a result, I think, of the area's cool and long growing season, thin mountain soils and low yields.

Moulton's were certainly no exception. In many cases, however, it was the unusual that stayed with me. At Burrell School, that was the 2005 Cabernet Franc Estate Pinchon Vineyard Extra Credit. It was smooth and earthy, with notes of berry tea and cedar, and reminded me of the best I'd tasted in Central France's Bourgueil.

Because I had an appointment (many Santa Cruz wineries keep limited hours or require appointments, so just call ahead), I made only a brief stop at Loma Prieta Winery, a new property three miles up the road.

At 2,600 feet elevation, it has sprawling views of Santa Cruz and Monterey and a spacious, resort-vibe patio. Loma Prieta, which gets its name from the neighboring mountain, not the earthquake, is a place to linger. Owner Paul Kemp encourages picnickers.

A full-time attorney, Kemp has been making wine for years but opened his tasting room only a year ago. After tasting his lineup, I sneaked into the barrel room with him for a sample of his pinotage, which will be bottled this week and released to his wine club in October. He's one of three in the state making wine from the South African variety (a hybrid of pinot noir and cinsault), and while I usually find pinotage a bit flat and almost metallic, this one intrigued me. I sensed meat and cheese characteristics on the palate and a sweet, perfumed nose.

There are currently 21 acres of pinotage in California bearing fruit (Kemp gets his grapes from a Lodi wine family). But he is so fond of the stuff that he's considering planting an acre on his estate, which is predominately pinot noir.

A pinotage from Santa Cruz? Shouldn't those precious acres be reserved for noble grapes? Not according to Kemp. "It's kind of fun to do something different, " Kemp said. "And there's almost none of it in North America."

From Loma Prieta, I made my way south to Soquel and Silver Mountain Vineyards. With its rainwater collection system and 6,000-square-foot solar roof, the winery is possibly the most energy self-sufficient in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Owner and winemaker Jerold O'Brien shares the grounds with assistant winemaker Tony Craig, who makes his own pinot noirs under the Sonnet Wine Cellars label.

I dug these guys. They had a charming, yin-and-yang banter between them. The straight-talking O'Brien, known as "Scary Jerry" in his Air Force days, bought the property and planted his first organic chardonnay vineyard in 1979.

Craig is a Shakespearean actor from the English town of Newcastle who moved to the Santa Cruz Mountains and fell into winemaking after tiring of the Hollywood thing. He developed a reputation for pinot noir as winemaker for David Bruce Winery in Los Gatos. And since launching Sonnet in 2003, the wines have developed quite a following among collectors. Both men make some of the most honest, terroir-driven California pinot noir I have tasted.

Each of Craig's labels bears a selection from the bard's 156 sonnets, so it's no surprise that Craig regards winemaking the same way he works a stage.

"The mark of a good actor is one who listens and responds truthfully ... there should not be a rubber stamp response, " he said. "Same is true for the winemaker. You listen to the vineyard, the vines, the weather, and you respond."

Based on my day of tasting in the Santa Cruz Mountains, I think there's a bit of poetry in all the wines.

If you go

Suggested trail: Burrell School Vineyards (24060 Summit Road, Los Gatos, 408-353-6290); Loma Prieta Winery (26985 Loma Prieta Way, Los Gatos, 408-353-2950); Silver Mountain Vineyards/Sonnet Wine Cellars, Soquel, call for location and appointment at 408-353-2278).

If you have time: Soquel Vineyards (8063 Glen Haven Road, Soquel, 831-462-9045); Hunter Hill Vineyard & Winery (7099 Glen Haven Road, Soquel, 831-465-9294); Bargetto Winery (3535 N. Main St., Soquel, 831-475-2258).

Stock up on picnic goodies: Summit Store (24060 Summit Road, Los Gatos); Gayle's Bakery & Rosticceria, 504 Bay Ave., Capitola)

Overnight stays: Dream Inn, 175 West Cliff Drive, Santa Cruz (oceanfront boutique hotel starting at \$269/night; 831-426-4330); Holiday Inn Express Hotel & Suites, 1410 Ocean St., Santa Cruz (starting at \$197 w/ AAA discount; 831-466-9100).

Dining: Foodies do dinner at the new American seafood restaurant, Aquarius, located on the water at the Dream Inn; 831-460-5012. Eat breakfast with locals at Zachary's, 819 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz, 831-427-0646.

One last wine romp: Swift Street Courtyard Wineries, a warehouse of tasting rooms in Santa Cruz, features five wineries. Bonny Doon Vineyards, 328 Ingalls St.; Pelican Ranch Winery, 402 Ingalls St., #21; Santa