

SANTA BARBARA

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A TOAST TO THE COAST: *Santa Barbara County's Cool Wine Country*

SANTA BARBARA, Calif. — Any winemaker worth his toasty oak will tell you that great wine presupposes great grapes. And a prerequisite for great grapes is that the elements of *terroir* – geography, topography, sun, rain, temperature and soil type among them – align in a rare and highly favorable way. In Santa Barbara County, the elements are literally *aligned* to inspire.

The region is defined by two rows of mountains – the Santa Ynez in the south and the San Rafael in the north – that run east and west, not north and south as is commonly found in the Americas. The mountains form a big funnel that ushers in fog and breezes from the nearby Pacific, cooling the area and extending the growing season. Add well-drained soils, plentiful sunshine and a wide variety of microclimates, and you have that rare alignment of elements that defines a world-class grape-growing region.

The county has three American Viticultural Areas (AVAs). The largest is the Santa Ynez Valley AVA, which is home to more than 50 wineries and many grape growers. The valley has two parts, the warmer eastern part, which is farther from the ocean and receives less cooling ocean breeze and fog, and the area west of the Santa Rita Hills, which is closer to the ocean and much cooler. In fact, the two parts of the valley have climates so different from each other that the Santa Rita Hills, located mainly between Buellton and Lompoc, was recently designated its own AVA. Home to the renowned Sanford & Benedict Vineyard, the new district is an Eden for such cool-climate grapes as syrah, pinot noir and chardonnay.

The third AVA, Santa Maria Valley, is bounded by the San Rafael Mountains (as they curve northward) to the east and the Solomon Hills and the city of Santa Maria to the west. Windy, cool and often foggy, this is another cool-climate growing area more similar to Burgundy, the French home of pinot noir and chardonnay, than to Bordeaux or the Rhône, where merlot and cabernet sauvignon are the mainstays. *Those* grapes are grown in the warmer, eastern, part of the Santa Ynez Valley.

Out-of-area winemaking giants Beringer, Robert Mondavi and Kendall-Jackson all have major vineyard holdings here, but none provides better fruit than the independently owned Bien Nacido Vineyard, whose name is found on many elite vineyard-designated pinot noirs. Babcock Vineyards is another area grower that also produces award-winning wines, especially cool-climate chardonnay and pinot noir.

Of course, **Father Junipero Serra** knew nothing about the abundant promise of Santa Barbara County viticulture when he brought the first grapevine cuttings from Mexico to California in 1782. He just needed wine for communion. **Mission vineyards** were established in Santa Barbara, and the first winery, an adobe put up in 1804, stands as Goleta's oldest landmark today. In 1884, the first cuttings arrived from France and were planted on **Santa Cruz Island**. Carpinteria also had vines, including one planted in 1842 that eventually had a trunk with a nine-foot circumference, an arbor covering two acres and an annual yield of ten tons of grapes.

Wine continued to be made during the pueblo and rancho days, but after Prohibition, things slowed in Santa Barbara until the late 1960s and early '70s, when such maverick winemakers as Au Bon Climat's Jim Clendenen and Sanford's Richard Sanford came to the area. Sanford planted the first pinot noir vines on cool north-facing slopes beside the Santa Ynez River in 1971. At the time, most of California had given up on the fussy, hard-to-grow grape, which had, until then, been planted incorrectly in areas more suitable to such warm-weather grapes as cabernet sauvignon and merlot.

In the early 1970s, a mere 200 acres in Santa Barbara County were planted with wine grapes by the pioneers of Firestone Vineyard, Rancho Sisquoc Winery, Sanford Winery, Santa Barbara and Lafond Wineries, and Zaca Mesa Winery. Most of the grapes from those early harvests – mainly cabernet sauvignon, chenin blanc, riesling and chardonnay – were sold to Napa and Sonoma to be used for blending.

In the 1980s, such now-famous winemakers as Bruce Babcock, Foxen founders Bill Wathen and Dick Doré, Lane Tanner, Qupé's Bob Lindquist, Chris Whitcraft and Sunstone's Fred and Linda Rice moved in and started making wine reflecting the local *terroir*. As a result, the next two decades (1980-2000) saw a massive change in the mix of grape varieties. White riesling and chenin blanc made way for Burgundian varieties chardonnay and pinot noir. Merlot, cabernet sauvignon and sauvignon blanc became localized, giving way in the cooler regions – the Santa Maria Valley and Santa Rita Hills in particular – to such Rhône varieties as syrah, petite syrah, mourvèdre, grenache, viognier, rousanne and marsanne.

Zaca Mesa had planted syrah way back in 1978, and Byron Vineyard and Winery was another early entry. It was founded in 1984 by winemaker Ken Brown, who saw the potential for Burgundian-style wines and Rhône varieties in the east-west-oriented funnel of Foxen Canyon.

Larger operations like Byron, Gainey, Cambria and Fess Parker brought deeper pockets to the party, and the regional sensibility has been further refined by such young winemakers as Andrew Murray, whose estate is planted exclusively with Rhône varieties, all growing at elevations between 1,200 and 1,500 feet. In 1990, the Robert Mondavi family purchased Byron, home to Foxen Winery and the renowned Julia's Vineyard.

Today, some 80 wineries operate in Santa Barbara County, and new ones are opening all the time. They produce more than a million cases of wine a year and generate roughly \$360 million in annual revenue. The \$100 million earned by wine grapes alone (only about half the crop is vinified in Santa Barbara County) make it the county's most valuable crop.

And the innovation continues. Lately a number of passionate winemakers have been opening some rather unorthodox "wineries." After rising through the ranks while working with the best winemakers at top local wineries, these entrepreneurs have leased garage-sized spaces in industrial park warehouses or rented corners of larger wineries or bought time at winemaking cooperatives to produce micro amounts of exquisite handcrafted wines. Among the newcomers are Core, Duo, Holus Bolus, Jelly Roll, Kaena, Paolo Lato, Samsara, Ethan Lindquist, and Margerum Wine Company – the latter made by Doug Margerum, owner of the Wine Cask restaurants and Intermezzo wine bars in Santa Barbara and Los Olivos.

Focusing primarily on pinot noir and syrah, these producers have become part of the continuing debate about winemaking style. The discussion is especially lively in Santa Barbara County, a region whose history relevant to the currently prominent varietal wines goes back only about 25 years as opposed to, say, France, where the larger issues have been settled for hundreds of years.

One lively current debate concerns local syrahs, many of which are big and jammy – "fruit bombs," they are often called – and have high alcohol content. They impress critics, but some say such wines are not as drinkable as syrahs from cooler climates, such as the Rhône itself, and that their overpowering fruit and high alcohol content overwhelms the nuances of *terroir* found in lower-alcohol wines made from lower-sugar grapes grown in cooler areas.

“An important factor for syrah is the role of cool-climate growing conditions,” says Qupé’s Bob Lindquist, who has been credited with bringing the syrah grape to prominence in the U.S. “They allow you to achieve ripe flavors and more regional character at lower alcohol levels.”

As new vineyards are planted in cooler areas, look for the emergence of Santa Barbara syrahs that emulate their leaner, more peppery counterparts from Burgundy’s vineyards. But even as the debate continues and the prime plots are found – or planted – winemaking practices evolve, with quality-minded producers increasingly emphasizing all the little details that make the difference.

Brewer-Clifton partners Greg Brewer and Steve Clifton, for example, are unwavering in their pursuit of the best grapes, convincing vineyard owners to grant them access to the best sections of the best rows. They then fastidiously sort the grapes, tossing out all but the most perfect fruit before even thinking about *making* the wine.

Equally punctilious is Arcadian. The winery uses only whole-cluster fruit (stems attached), first cold-soaking for a couple of weeks, fermenting them in small open-top wood vats, turning the cap by hand – or foot, to be precise – three to five times daily. The wines are aged in new French oak, bottled unfiltered, and then held back until ready. While they could conceivably earn greater profits selling more wine that is less fastidiously made, that is not their mission – nor is it the direction things are going in Santa Barbara Wine Country.

Another trend more wineries are looking into is organic farming. When Au Bon Climat owner/winemaker Jim Clendenen planted his own “Le Bon Climat” vineyard in 1997, he had viticulturalist Jeff Frey create it as an organic enterprise, and it remains so today. Sunstone, too, uses organic methods to farm its entire 77-acre estate, and Sanford has three certified-organic vineyards.

A BIG STEP SIDEWAYS

Santa Barbara Wine Country received a huge boost from an unexpected source when Hollywood came calling in 2003. Much of the Oscar-nominated hit film *Sideways* was shot at locations in the heart of this booming wine region. Kalyra Winery, for instance, has received thousands of visitors who arrived knowing only that Sandra Oh’s character, the sexy, sassy Stephanie, poured wine for Miles and Jack in the tasting room there. Elsewhere in the movie, the characters have dinner at Los Olivos Café & Wine Merchant and at the Hitching Post II. They roam the cellar at Firestone, steal extra gulps of wine at the Foxen tasting room, schmooze at a Fess Parker Winery event, cruise in a convertible along Santa Rosa Road, and

banter with Sanford's real-life tasting room manager, Chris Burroughs, who played himself in the film. The "Sideways tour" has become great fun for film-going wine lovers and introduced the pleasures of wine to a new audience. For a map of the movie's locations, go to the Santa Barbara Conference & Visitors Bureau and Film Commission website at santabarbaraCA.com.

WINE LOOPS AND TASTING ROOMS IN SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

Knowing about all that wine is one thing, but the real joy is getting out there – seeing the countryside and tasting the wines in the environment that enables them to be created in the first place. While some wineries remain private, dozens are open to the public, and tasting rooms both at the wineries and in towns and cities throughout the county make sampling the best of Santa Barbara easy.

Santa Ynez & Los Olivos

This quick route covers the wineries nestled on the north side of the coastal mountains, near the western-style town of Santa Ynez. Wineries are located off of Highway 246 on Refugio Road, on Highway 154 and in downtown Los Olivos. That charming town hosts tasting rooms for six wineries. A broad selection of wines is available for tasting at the **Los Olivos Wine & Spirits Emporium**, the **Los Olivos Tasting Room and Wine Shop**, and the **Los Olivos Wine Merchant**.

Foxen Canyon & Alisos Canyon Roads

Just north of Los Olivos, these two narrow, extraordinarily scenic country roads twist and turn through rolling hills and ranchland dotted with old oaks and grazing cattle. The route also leads to vineyards along Zaca Station Road and Alisos Canyon Road.

Solvang Loop

Driving north from the famous Danish town along Alamo Pintado Road leads you past farms, ranches and vineyards to lovely wineries set among the rolling countryside. Ballard Canyon Road is also part of this loop.

Santa Rita Hills Loop

Established in 2001 and occupying an area west of Highway 101 between Buellton and Lompoc, the Santa Rita Hills AVA is known for producing world-class pinot noir and chardonnay from grapes grown in its cool-climate vineyards. Two parallel roads – Santa Rosa Road and Highway 246 – are the conduits for this loop.

Santa Maria

This windy, foggy, cool region is exactly what the doctor ordered for growing Burgundy varietals pinot noir and chardonnay. Superb tasting and gorgeous scenery await the adventurous visitor who is willing to leave the beaten track and explore Betteravia Road, Maria Mesa Road and the northern portion of Foxen Canyon Road.

Solvang

The hills around Solvang are home to many wineries, but even more accessible are the city center's nine tasting rooms. They're all within easy walking distance of each other, and all but one are located on just two streets – Copenhagen, the main drag, and Alisal, which intersects it on the eastern end of town.

Santa Barbara: The Urban Wine Trail

Don't worry if you missed a winery you planned to visit or couldn't visit wine country at all, because the city of Santa Barbara has lots of tasting rooms where you can try the best of the county's offerings just minutes from the beach.

East Beach Wine Company stocks local and international wines, creates gift baskets and hosts Friday-evening tasting events featuring local vintners. **Stearns Wharf Vintners** offers deli sandwiches, light wine-friendly foods and wine tasting on its second-story outdoor deck overlooking the Pacific, the city and the mountains. The **Wine Cask Wine Store** downtown boasts the largest collection of retail wines in Santa Barbara County, with choice selections from around the world. Local wines by the glass are available at Intermezzo, the cozy wine bar next door.

Jaffurs Wine Cellars opens its downtown tasting facility to the public from noon until 4 p.m. Friday-Sunday and by appointment, and **Whitcraft Winery** is open for tastings Saturdays, Sundays and by appointment. **Carr Winery** is open daily from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. **Santa Barbara Winery**, the county's oldest winery, founded by Pierre Lafond in 1962, is open every day from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. Across the street, **Cellar 205 Winery & Marketplace**, a new downtown tasting venue, is the cooperative facility of four boutique wineries.

Home to some high-scoring selections, the county's newest local winery, **Summerland Winery**, owned by Barnwood founder Nebil "Bilo" Zarif, is open every day except Monday at its tasting room in downtown Summerland.

CELEBRATE THE GRAPE

Wine country's two biggest annual bashes are great fun and the perfect excuse to visit. The Santa Barbara County Vintners' Association **Vintners' Festival** in April starts with a weekend of wine and food tasting, and adds live entertainment, vintners' dinners, crush parties and a silent auction. At the other end of the year, the **Celebration of Harvest**, held each October, gets uncorked with countywide alfresco wine tasting, a traditional grape crush and an incredible line-up of gourmet winemaker dinners and other culinary delights.

SLEEPING IN THE (WINE) COUNTRY

In charming **Los Olivos**, **Fess Parker's Wine Country Inn and Spa** offers 21 rooms with fireplaces. In the quaint township of **Ballard** lies the luxurious Victorian-style **Ballard Inn**. The countrified 15-room bed and breakfast is a prime starting point for wine country touring by bike, car or even by foot. A great hideaway in the heart of downtown Santa Ynez is the **Santa Ynez Inn**, a Victorian-style property with 14 cozy rooms and easy access to the gaming and entertainment offered at the **Chumash Casino Resort & Spa**.

Just off of Highway 246 in Solvang is a world-class destination resort steeped in Western culture. The 10,000-acre **Alisal Guest Ranch & Resort** offers 73 luxurious cottages, two 18-hole championship golf courses, tennis, horseback riding and a 100-acre spring fed lake for fly-fishing. It's a great base for touring the nearly 20 wineries of the Santa Ynez Valley Wine Trail. And Solvang is home to several inns and hotels that suit a range of budgets.

Further north, the **Historic Santa Maria Inn** still glows from Hollywood's Golden Years, when celebrities headed north up Highway 101 en route to William Randolph Hearst's Xanadu by the sea in San Simeon.

WINE COUNTRY CUISINE

At the Hitching Post II restaurant on Highway 246 in Buellton (Hitching Post I is in Casmalia), pith-helmeted owner Frank Ostini serves up Santa Maria-style barbecue paired with his exceptional proprietary pinot noirs. Another *Sideways* stage set, the upscale roadhouse is a longtime local favorite with a whole new community of fans. In Los Olivos, **Los Olivos Café & Wine Merchant** has wonderful salads and pastas, and yes, it was in *Sideways*, too. **Panino's** is the place for gourmet picnics to go.

Just off the main drag in Los Olivos waits the surprise of Patrick's **Side Street Café**, where Chef Patrick Rand's carefully prepared, straightforward food is partnered with an extensive list of local wines. **Brothers**

at **Mattei's Tavern**, originally a stop for stagecoaches bound for San Francisco, is a standard bearer of wine country cuisine.

Nearby, the Ballard Inn's quaint **Ballard Inn Restaurant** welcomes guests with a crackling fire and globally-inspired wine country cuisine. In Santa Ynez, pizza from a wood-burning oven and a menu of mostly northern-Italian classics are served indoors or out at **Trattoria Grappolo**.

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