

Five great Santa Barbara vineyards to watch

If you're looking for the region's terroir, seek out wines made from grapes from these exciting up-and-comers.

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Santa Barbara wine country picnic

BALLARD, CALIF. -- Pick up a bottle of Santa Barbara County wine and, if it costs more than \$25, it's likely to have the name of a vineyard on the label -- a designation that tells you where the grapes were grown. Since almost all the region's better wines designate the vineyard source of their grapes, you've probably seen Bien Nacido Vineyard or maybe Clos Pepe or Melville on labels. Lately, some truly exceptional wines have been carrying a few new names: White Hawk, Purisima Mountain, Larner, Cargasacchi and Westerly. These are the exciting young vineyards to watch.

"The region has a lot of young winemakers looking for great fruit," says Kevin Merrill, vineyard manager for White Hawk Vineyard. "And you have a lot of rich guys coming here and buying vineyard land, hoping that they will develop the next Bien Nacido."

The most respected vineyard in Santa Barbara County, Bien Nacido is a sprawling 850-acre patchwork of plots the Miller family started planting in the Santa Maria Valley in 1973. Home to Jim Clendenen's Au Bon Climat and Bob Lindquist's Qupé wineries, the cool-climate vineyard has been an important incubator for independent winemakers.

Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are the dominant grapes, but the Millers have planted dozens of varieties. Thirty-five wines carry the Bien Nacido Vineyard designation on their labels, making the vineyard a brand name. Clendenen first bought grapes from Bien Nacido in 1987 and now makes 20 of his 75 wines with Bien Nacido fruit. "The Millers indulge me," Clendenen says. "And the vineyard has the variety of soils to support all of the obscure grape varieties I asked them to plant."

With the notable exception of warm-climate grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel, most of the varieties survived, in part because of the wide range of soils. Bien Nacido has both calcareous and loamy topsoils that are dominated either by sand, clay, silt or shale. Its subsoils shift from shale to clay to sandstone.

The lay of the land is just as varied, from flat lands at a mere 200 feet of elevation to steep hillsides that climb to 1,700 feet.

The most interesting up-and-coming vineyards are far smaller properties than Bien Nacido, with more homogeneous soils and less diversity in the grapes they grow. Located in very different corners of Santa Barbara's wine country, they represent some of the region's extremes: the warmest and the coolest spots, the sandiest soils, the steepest hillsides. Considered in the order in which they were planted, from oldest to newest, the vineyards are snapshots of Santa Barbara *terroir*.

Neil and Francine Afromsky were the first to plant wine grapes in Happy Canyon, Santa Barbara's warmest wine region when, in 1995, they started Westerly Vineyard, soon to be known as McGinley Vineyard. The 85-acre vineyard was planted with Bordeaux and Rhône grape varieties, including Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah -- but Sauvignon Blanc is the star.

Hot days, cool nights IN Santa Barbara's easternmost wine region, the summer's dramatic diurnal temperature shift of 40 degrees between daytime highs of 95 to 100 degrees and the cool nights allows the grapes to ripen without losing their natural acidity, says Seth Kunin, the winemaker for the Afromskys' Westerly Vineyard wines. The thick summertime marine layer rolls into the vineyard in the evening and clears by 9:30 in the morning.

The Sauvignon Blanc vineyards are relatively flat with loose sandy loam soils over calcareous ocean bottom and volcanic subsoils. The Sauvignon Blanc grapes were harvested the last two weeks of August.

The Afromskys sold their estate last year to Chicago financier Jack McGinley. The 2006 vintage will be the last to carry the Westerly Vineyard designation. The Afromskys retain the Westerly Vineyards brand and buy their grapes from McGinley. Ojai Vineyard, Margerum Wine Co., Fiddlehead and Brander wineries that buy Sauvignon Blanc from this vineyard will carry a McGinley Vineyard label on future vineyard designated wines.

In the heart of Santa Barbara's wine region, electronic keyboard pioneer Tom Beckmen bought a 365-acre Ballard Canyon ranch in 1996 and developed the 125-acre Purisima Mountain Vineyard. His son Steve turned the vineyard into a leading producer of Rhône variety grapes in the Santa Barbara region. The climate is cooler than Happy Canyon to the east but warmer than Bien Nacido to the north. In 2003, Steve Beckmen shifted to biodynamic viticulture, an extreme form of organic farming.

The Beckmens use 85% of the Purisima Mountain fruit in Beckmen Vineyards wines. The remainder of the grapes are harvested from plots that are custom-farmed for other wineries, including Qupé Winery, Hitching Post Wines, Margerum Wine Co. and Kenneth-Crawford Wines.

There are no flat vineyard plots in Purisima Mountain Vineyard; subsoils are limestone under loamy clay topsoils. Planted primarily with Syrah and Grenache, the steep hillsides rise to an elevation of 1,250 feet.

As he stands with a visitor on top of the highest hill, acres of grapevines cascading down the hillsides, Beckmen calls himself a "true believer" in biodynamics. A preparation of water and dead gopher ashes, it seems, rid him of a persistent gopher problem. He expects to start harvesting grapes in mid-September.

A couple of miles down Ballard Canyon Road from Beckmen is Lerner Vineyard, created when Stevan and Christine Lerner bought their 133-acre ranch in 1997, fulfilling a dream of owning a vineyard with their children. A Hollywood cinematographer whose credits include "Roots" and "Winds of War," Lerner had lived in Italy and so planted a little Malvasia Bianca, one of his favorite grapes, along with the Rhône varieties more typical of the region.

With loose, sandy soils, the vineyard rolls down a south-facing hillside. It's a fertile ranch with more trees than other in-vogue vineyards such as White Hawk or Cargasacchi. Closer to town, it feels almost suburban. Nineteen winemakers buy the fruit, including Herman Story Wines, McPrice Meyers Wines, Palmina, Gainey, Bonacorsi, Jaffurs and Kunin.

Michael Lerner took over management of the 34-acre vineyard after his father died in 2005. He plans to double the size of the vineyard in the next decade so he can make his own wines and complete his father's dream.

Steep, dry terrain NORTHWEST of Ballard Canyon, in cool, dry Cat Canyon near Los Alamos, pure sand soils make White Hawk Vineyard a most unusual site. The steep hillside vineyard feels like a desert. The anemic-looking vines survive on drip irrigation. Owned by Barry Henley of Chatsworth, the 77-acre vineyard was planted in 1997. There are 35 acres of Syrah and 30 acres of Chardonnay.

"We spoon-feed water to the vines," Merrill says. "We work to keep things in balance." But it's not easy in such an inhospitable environment. "We're almost growing these vines hydroponically," he says.

It's a vineyard favored by two of the region's cult hero winemakers, Manfred Krankl and Adam Tolmach. Krankl buys White Hawk grapes for his Sine Qua Non wines, as does his former assistant winemaker, Maggie Harrison, for her Lillian Winery wines. Tolmach makes a White Hawk Syrah and so does his former assistant winemaker, Michael Meagher, under his Vino V Wines label. Herman Story, Calera and Sashi Moorman's Piedrasassi are among the other wines using White Hawk fruit.

In 1998, in one of the coldest corners in the Santa Barbara region, Peter Cargasacchi planted a 16-acre Pinot Noir vineyard on his family's bean farm on the far western edge of Santa Rita Hills. On a recent afternoon, he pointed out the ancient calcareous seabed subsoils visible as white streaks in the surrounding hillsides under loamy clay topsoils and then launched into a monologue on vineyard soils. It's his favorite topic, and he shares his enthusiasm in a rat-a-tat recitation of facts about his land.

This is a difficult site for a vineyard, however. The gently sloping vineyards are buffeted much of the year by howling ocean winds. To mitigate the effect of the harsh climate, Cargasacchi allows a tangled mess of wild flowers and weeds to grow high between his vine rows. The vegetation, he says, delays grapevine flowering in the spring, decreasing the likelihood of frost damage. In the fall, the thick vegetation slows grape maturation to allow a balance of sugar and phenolic ripeness. A side benefit of the between-rows vegetation is that it attracts doves, which attract hawks, which scare away the starlings that like to eat grapes.

Ken Brown Wines, Brewer-Clifton, Siduri Winery, Loring Wine Co. and Hitching Post all produce Cargasacchi Vineyard designated wines. In 2002, Cargasacchi began making his own wine as well. He doesn't plan to harvest until early October this year.