

Santa Barbara

Pinot Noir comes on strong in Santa Rita Hills and Santa Maria Valley

By James Laube

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Standing on a windswept bluff overlooking the westernmost reaches of Santa Rita Hills, Peter Cargasacchi proudly points to his vineyard in the distance. From this vista, Cargasacchi Vineyard is but a tiny dot, almost invisible, blending in with the still stark, earth-tone colors of the early spring terrain.

For Cargasacchi, 44, these are exciting times. His family has lived in this area for decades, yet he's a relative newcomer to winegrowing. His 16-acre vineyard, planted to Pinot Noir, is one of the rising stars of the Santa Rita Hills appellation, which is enjoying its moment of glory as the hottest cool spot in Santa Barbara County.

Santa Barbara is home to 18,000 acres of vineyards, and while much of that is Chardonnay, it is Pinot Noir that has captured the hearts of most winemakers. Chardonnay helps pay the bills, but it's Pinot that inspires the greatest passion. It is, says Jim Clendenen, 53, of Au Bon Climat, what makes Santa Barbara special and what lured pioneers like him here in the 1970s. Today, that vision for Pinot Noir is clearer than ever.

Not that it's been an easy journey. There have been plenty of potholes on the road to recognition.

When Cargasacchi planted the first 12 acres of his vineyard, in 1998, it looked as if he had taken the ultimate risk - planting grapes in a damp, windy area famous for its bone-chilling proximity to the churning Pacific Ocean a few miles to the west. Now he looks less like a gambler and more like a visionary sitting on a gold mine of a vineyard. One of several quality wines from Cargasacchi's fruit, the Loring Pinot Noir Santa Rita Hills Cargasacchi Vineyard 2003 (\$46) scored 93 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale.

As Santa Rita Hills enjoys its role as the new darling of Santa Barbara Pinot Noir, it's about to get some competition from its older and bigger sister-appellation, Santa Maria Valley. It too is undergoing a Pinot Noir transformation, mirroring the advances made in Santa Rita. The reason? New clones and vineyard orientation, two of the same forces that have propelled Santa Rita Hills' success with this notoriously fickle grape. Vintners in Santa Maria say it's only a matter of time before the wines grown there show increased depth and character.

These two Santa Barbara appellations are headed for a friendly Pinot Noir showdown. And no matter what the outcome, wine lovers will reap the benefits.

Santa Rita Hills, its eastward extension into Santa Ynez Valley, and the Santa Maria Valley are unique in their proximity to the Pacific. Both valleys run east-west and are exposed to the ocean; most winegrowing valleys along California's coast run north-south and are protected by mountain ranges.

The climate forces vines to struggle to ripen their berries. "The main influence is the extreme length of hang time," says Cargasacchi, referring to how long the grapes remain on the vine to achieve ripeness. Budbreak (when the berries start to form) often occurs in February and harvest typically extends into October, he says, making for an unusually long season. "That it takes such a long time to ripen [adds] intensity to the aromatics and flavors," he explains.

While Santa Maria has been a key winegrowing region since the 1970s—and is home to well-known vineyards such as Bien Nacido and wineries such as Au Bon Climat, Byron and Cambria—its 5,000 acres of vineyards (including 1,500 in Pinot Noir) reflect the viticultural mindset of that era, with older clones, wider spacing among vines and different vineyard orientations. Now that's changing.

As Santa Rita vineyards were being planted, they benefited from new clones, new vineyard methods and lessons learned from mistakes made in Santa Maria Valley. "The clones are important," says Cargasacchi, "but new vineyard techniques are just as important." Adds Clendenen, who prefers his wines elegant and refined, "The main benefit is we'll get better ripening at lower sugar levels."

The timing, for Santa Maria Valley vintners specifically and Pinot Noir lovers in general, couldn't be better. Demand for Pinot Noir has never been greater, and Santa Maria Valley, with 400 more acres of Pinot than Santa Rita Hills (which has about 1,000), is in position to redefine itself through its next generation of wines. These two appellations provide grapes to dozens of producers; the county now has more than 100 wine brands, most of them small, artisanal operations that purchase grapes and vinify them in reconfigured warehouses, not fancy wineries or châteaux.

"For the masses, there are two reds that will remain king and queen—Cabernet and Pinot Noir," says Kris Curran, 39, winemaker of Pinot Noir-specialist Sea Smoke in Santa Rita Hills. For Cabernet Sauvignon, she says, no one can compete with Napa Valley. But other grape varieties grown in California enjoy a more level playing field. Sea Smoke's Pinot Noir Santa Rita Hills Botella 2003 (\$30) earned 93 points.

Beyond Pinot, the hottest red grape in Santa Barbara is Syrah, which is gaining a foothold in areas both warm and cool. And there are occasional breakthrough wines, such as the 2003 Grenache (94 points, \$32) from Rhône grape-specialist Beckmen Vineyards, a bottling rich and opulent enough to convince you of the quality and potential of that grape.

There are pockets of eastern Santa Ynez Valley that can support both Rhône and Spanish varieties, Curran says, but only on a smaller scale. And while there are large tracts of agricultural land visible throughout the county, the cost of developing huge parcels is prohibitive, making it unlikely that the valley will be planted as densely as Napa Valley, where vines carpet the valley floor.

"Syrah [in Santa Barbara] will never catch up [to Pinot]," Curran predicts, despite the fact that she makes a Syrah under her eponymous label. "Syrah doesn't inspire the passion of Pinot, which is a wonderful, approachable wine." Syrah is excelling elsewhere in the state, she says, and can be farmed on a larger scale. Not so Pinot Noir. The greatest Pinots come from small vineyards cultivated with loving care. The proof is in the wines.