

The Santa Barbara Edge: Grapegrowers at the frontier of California vineyard expansion help define a region

By Daniel Sogg

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PETER CARGASACCHI - CARGASACCHI VINEYARD

Still looking at those rocks?"

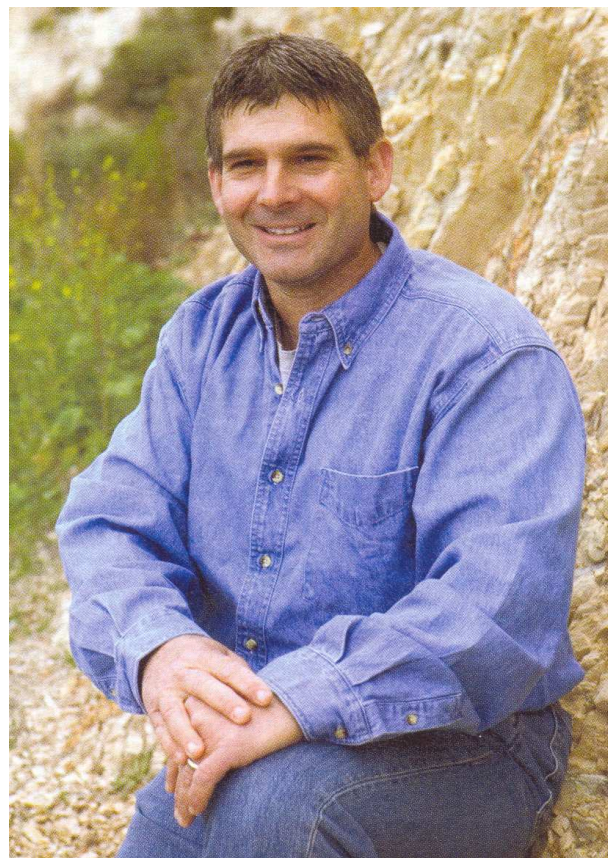
Sta. Rita Hills grapegrower Peter Cargasacchi is unfazed by the question, posed by a local farmer passing in a pickup truck. Cargasacchi knows he has a reputation for eccentricity, but he's got a point to make about the 700-foot striated rock formation at the western edge of the appellation. These rocks speak volumes about the region's geologic history, as well as the success of local vineyards with Pinot Noir.

The Cargasacchi Vineyard Pinot Noirs have been consistently very good to outstanding. Recent highlights include the Loring 2003, 2004 and 2005 vintages (93, 92 and 91 points, respectively) and the Bonaccorsi 2004 (92). The site usually yields a fairly hefty style of Pinot, with excellent depth to berry, blueberry, spice and earth nuances. Maritime winds limit heat spikes, thereby preserving lively acidity.

Cargasacchi, 44, manages two Pinot Noir sites owned by his family: the 16-acre Cargasacchi Vineyard, located in the southwestern quadrant of the Sta. Rita Hills, and Cargasacchi Jalama, a 15-acre site 5 miles southwest of Cargasacchi Vineyard. Ten wineries, including Bonaccorsi, Brewer-Clifton, Loring and Siduri, purchase about 90 percent of his grapes; Cargasacchi and his wife, Julia, also make 1,500 cases of their own labels: Cargasacchi, produced from estate Pinot Noir, and the Point Concepción brand, mostly from purchased Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio and Syrah.

His family started farming in the California Central Coast in the 1920s, producing hay and row crops, and raising livestock. They first planted vines (at what is now Cargasacchi Vineyard) in 1998 on land that had fared poorly with crops. The isolated site is at the edge of a broad valley planted with hundreds of acres of row crops. Hills frame the vineyard to the east and north. "[Winemaker] Richard Sanford had been telling me for several years that this block would be good for Pinot. It's some of the worst farmland in the area because the pH is too high and it doesn't retain water, but Richard knew it would be great for vines," he says.

Careful research preceded the planting. Cargasacchi read, consulted with neighboring vintners Sanford and Bryan Babcock, and took viticulture courses at the University of California, Davis, and at the local junior college. "Because he planted the land himself, a lot of it was trial and error. He wanted to learn on his own, and



he wasn't tied down by viticultural convention," says Jenne Lee Bonaccorsi, owner of Bonaccorsi Wines who has purchased Cargasacchi grapes since 2002.

Sometimes he has taken an unusual approach to vineyard design. At the Jalama property, Cargasacchi used steel fence posts to build what he called a "mini Stonehenge" to track the sun at crucial points in the growing season, such as flowering and harvest. He then applied that data to position the rows. "He's kind of a mad scientist out there, in that he does things a bit different every year, depending on the weather or his sense of the season," says Brian Loring, who has bought Cargasacchi grapes since 2003. "He tries a lot of stuff and isn't afraid to change it up."

Growing Pinot Noir in the Sta. Rita Hills presents challenges, says Cargasacchi. Unlike the change from summer to fall in California's North Coast, where a significant decrease in daylight hours signals vines to accelerate ripening, the seasonal shift down south is less pronounced. So Cargasacchi has learned that ripeness must be encouraged through appropriate viticultural practices, such as creating mild water stress.

Demand for the grapes currently exceeds supply. Next year, Cargasacchi plans to plant an additional 14 acres on the hills at the eastern edge of Cargasacchi Vineyard. Some of those grapes might go into his own brands, but growth will be modest.

"We'll probably grow, but very slowly because I'm still learning every day. I find that the winemaking and the viticulture go hand in hand. I can connect the dots, see the effects of specific input in the vineyard and the trajectory of those decisions down the line into the bottle," he says.