

# Hahn Family Wines: Santa Lucia Highlands' Sweet Spot Part 1

November 4, 2015

3:55 PM MST



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Hahn Family Wines' vineyards climb the slopes of the Santa Lucia Highlands, a perfect spot for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

*Patricia Decker*

World class [Pinot Noir](#) and [Chardonnay](#), born of fog, wind, and shattered soils, have put [Santa Lucia Highlands](#) on the map. Near perfect growing conditions condense into bright, intensely flavorful wines, with good acidity and mineral notes. [Hahn Family Wines](#), one of the largest producers in the area, embodies the essence of these wines, with their Hahn SLH and Lucienne single vineyard designate labels.

The [Santa Lucia Highlands](#) has earned a reputation for growing some of the best Pinot Noir in California. But it hasn't always been so. Once home to ranches where cattle, horses, and sheep grazed, change came over 30 years ago. In 1979, newcomer [Nicolaus Hahn](#) saw the winegrowing potential, and planted winegrapes just like Spanish missionaries once did over 200 years before. A decade later, Hahn and a few other growers pushed for their own American Viticultural Area (AVA), realizing the potential for distinctive wines. In 1991, their wish was granted, and the grand experiment was on. Today, tinkering with clones, trellises, and sustainable farming techniques,

winegrowers work 37 vineyard properties, where over 6000 acres of **vineyards** cling to the hillsides, many planted at elevations of more than 1000 feet. Forty-six **wine producers** interpret this terroir, in addition, superstar winemakers clamor to buy whatever fruit is leftover for their own labels. The Santa Lucia Highlands **wine** district, twelve miles long and 1-1/2 miles narrow, hits the sweet spot for the notoriously difficult **Pinot Noir**, and the quality is climbing.



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Hahn cultivates **four estate vineyards** in the Santa Lucia Highlands AVA: Lone Oak, Smith, Doctor's, and Hook. Over 650 acres in total, more than 10% of all the Highlands vineyard acreage, are planted to mostly Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. This is a Goldilocks situation for Hahn's vines, not too hot, not too cool, just right. Perched on the sloping hillsides, the vines bask in the morning sun. Coastal fog blankets the vineyards in the early hours, and lingers longer on the northern sites, such as Lone Oak. As the day evolves, and the heat rises from the valley floor, the vines are cooled by afternoon breezes funneled in from Monterey Bay. The quality of light, reflected from the Pacific Ocean, helps the grapes slowly ripen, without getting sunburned. In this climactic cradle, where the temperature swings only 20 degrees between day and night, the infant grapes develop gradually, amplifying the phenolics, throughout a very long growing season, one of the longest hang times in California. And while Hahn is blessed with Mother Nature's ways, the key to quality wine, for the winemaking team, is the soils. "Layers of soil equals layers of flavor", according to **Director of Viticulture Andy Mitchell**, and the geography provides that in spades. Ancient alluvial fans, cone shaped soil deposits built up by flowing mountain water, are layered with granitic soils along the ridges. These soils give excellent drainage, and contribute to the mineral backbone of the wines.

Family owned and operated, Hahn is focused on expanding their higher end wines, replanting to mainly Pinot Noir that thrives in the Santa Lucia Highlands. For over a decade, Hahn has transitioned to the Burgundian varieties of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, ripping out the Cabernet Sauvignon and other Bordeaux grapes that struggled to fully ripen in the Highlands' cool climate.

The **Hahn SLH** Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are a blend of the four estate vineyards. These wines are made from the best fruit of the estate, rich and expressive blends that mirror this vineyard paradise. The **Lucienne** label is mostly single vineyard Pinot, limited production, crafted from the best lots of the four, manifesting the individual spirit of the plots. Subtle differences in each of the vineyards' ecosystem reflect back into the grapes, and gives each wine its own personality. These are the flavor profiles, according to vineyard:

**Lone Oak Vineyard** has more fog, less wind, and is at a lower elevation, so with less wind, the grapes have thinner skins and less tannin intensity, resulting in a softer, silky wine. This cooler vineyard preserves the natural acidity of the grapes, and makes the wine brighter, more tart and crisp, with raspberry and red cherry fruit, accented with notes of wild game, mushrooms, and spice.

**Doctor's Vineyard** is a bit higher in elevation, and sticks up out of the fog, getting more sun and heat, and absorbs the most intense afternoon wind. The grapes are more concentrated, darker in color, and more intense in their aromas and flavors. Although there is tannic grip to the wine because of the thicker grape skins, it is balanced, voluptuous with dark cherry, strawberry, and plum fruit, spice, good acidity, and a long finish.

**Smith Vineyard** is further up the slope, and warmer, with plenty of sunshine and little fog, since it is above the fog line. It experiences less wind than neighboring Doctor's Vineyard, yet still shows the same intensity and depth of flavor, and has more tannic structure than Lone Oak. The vine clones are different and so has a slightly different flavor profile. Red and black fruit in the guise of strawberry, blackberry, and plum, accented with spice and cocoa, and an earthy undertone shapes the silky and persistent finish.

**Hook Vineyard** shares the same morning fog and windy afternoons that the other vineyards experience, but is warmer. It's planted with 14 clones of Pinot Noir, making for a complex, intense wine. Raspberry and cherry fruit, with a smokiness encircling notes of licorice and plum, and soft tannins round out this supple Pinot.

continued in [Part 2](#)



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