

The diverse and divine wines of Santa Barbara County Part 1

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Santa Barbara wine country, a sweet spot of climate, soils, geology, and geography, boasts a diversity of wine that would make Noah and his Ark proud. Burgundian, Bordeaux, and Rhône grape varieties, from Sauvignon Blanc to Syrah, has spread throughout the region, offering a wide range of wines. While the movie “**Sideways**” brought attention to this vineyard paradise, it’s the winemakers that have led the charge, with a rapid rise of quality and expression in their wine. Just a couple of hours north of the sprawl of Los Angeles, **Santa Barbara County** has become the nexus of a stunning spectrum of wine.

What makes the region so special? More than 50 different **varietals** are grown, on acreage that is half the size of Napa Valley, **200+ wineries** are open for business from five approved AVAs, and the top three varieties are **Chardonnay**, **Pinot Noir**, and Syrah. And, oh, it’s an intimate wine scene, where the majority of wineries and vineyards are family owned, with relatively small production, under 10,000 cases per year.

The terroir is unique, instead of mountain ranges running north to south, geology dealt the region a “tectonic train wreck”, according to Michael Lerner, geologist, winemaker, and President of the Ballard Canyon AVA. As the tectonic plates collided, the pressure spun Santa Barbara County around, creating transverse, or east-west mountain ranges, that funnels the cool Pacific breezes across the region, like a vacuum. The soils originate from the deep ocean; limestone, sand, and diatomaceous earth, which are great for wine grapes.

Dramatic oceanic currents collide at Point Conception, which brings warmer water to the coastline, and adds to the nightly fog phenomenon that blankets the valleys as far inland as Happy Canyon. Fog helps moderate the



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temperatures, and the fog's moisture helps develop aromas and flavors in the grapes. Huge temperature swings from day to night develop great natural acidity, and the cool weather helps grapes ripen slowly, giving complexity from the long hang time.

Currently, there are 5 distinctive **winegrowing regions**, known as American Viticultural Areas (AVAs), within Santa Barbara County, with more on the horizon. Each area is ideally suited to different wine grapes, yet some varietals, like Chardonnay, take on different incarnations, depending upon the climate and soils, and of course, winemaking styles.



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The **Santa Maria Valley AVA** is a cooler area, foggy and windy, a perfect nursery for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The **Santa Ynez Valley AVA** is warmer, less marine influence, with gravelly soils, giving rise to Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, and Sauvignon Blanc. The **Sta. Rita Hills AVA** is breezy, with coastal influences and fog, a haven for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The **Ballard Canyon AVA** is moderate, with less breeze and well-drained soils, the diurnal temperature swings flatter Syrah and Grenache. And finally, the **Happy Canyon AVA** is the incubator of Santa Barbara County, warm to hot in the summer, with soils low in nutrients and high in minerals, giving rise to smaller vines and higher quality grapes, suited to Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc.

Chardonnay is the most widely planted varietal in the area, with Sauvignon Blanc coming in as the Number 2 white grape, while Pinot Noir and Syrah dominate the reds. That doesn't mean you won't find Sangiovese, Mourvedre, Malbec, Tempranillo, and a host of other European varietals!

Recently, the Santa Barbara Vintners Association came to Los Angeles to get the word out, that the wines are world class and coming into their own. Morgen McLaughlin, Executive Director, and Michael Larner, Ballard Canyon AVA President, conducted a trade seminar, pouring 25 wines that best expressed the various terroirs. From Viognier to Cabernet, from single vineyard wines to regional cuvees, there was a sense of place. According to Morgen, "There's a lot of nuance and a lot to discover in Santa Barbara County". So much so, that some Napa winemakers are starting to take notice, moving here to participate in the region's vast potential that is just being realized. Diversity of wines and micro-climates is Santa Barbara County's winning lotto ticket, hitting the "trifecta" of grape varietals, from the classic Old World regions of Bordeaux, Burgundy and the Rhône, with a decidedly California spin.

Some of the standouts of the tasting:

Fess Parker 2013 Viognier, Camp 4 Rodney's Vineyard, Santa Barbara County - rich floral nose, a splash of Grenache Blanc added (3%), medium body, well balanced, ripe stone fruit (apricot, peach), long finish, 91 pts. & Editors' Choice Wine Enthusiast, \$mid-20's

Sanford 2012 Pinot Noir, Sanford & Benedict Vineyard, Sta. Rita Hills - floral and spice aromas,

cherry and cranberry fruit, dried herbs, earthy, medium acidity, well balanced, ripe tannins, medium finish, \$64

Consilience 2013 Pinot Noir, Santa Barbara County

Alma Rosa 2012 Pinot Noir, La Encantada Vineyard, Sta. Rita Hills - big, round, blackberry, black cherry, tea, orange zest, well balanced, extremely long finish, \$60

Rusack 2013 Estate Syrah, Ballard Canyon - dense, blueberry, boysenberry, black pepper spice, dark chocolate, well balanced, yummy, \$29

Palmina 2011 Alisos, Alisos Vineyard, Santa Barbara County - Old World style, 80% Sangiovese/20% Merlot blend, boysenberry, plum, dark cherry, nutmeg, lavender, sage, medium acidity, earthy, very good, \$32

Municipal Winemakers 2013 Syrah - savory, umami, very much like Northern Rhône St. Joseph, pepper

Larner 2010 Syrah, Larner Vineyard, Ballard Canyon - deep and complex, dark berry fruit, spice, roasted meats, black olive, mineral, medium plus body, medium tannin, medium plus finish, gorgeous, \$40

Michael Larner explained that what makes his Syrah so special is the location of his **Ballard Canyon** vineyard. The confluence of fog and wind, with loose soils, provides his Syrah, known for its “Goldilocks syndrome”, with the right conditions, not too cold, not too hot, just right. Syrah can then express its delicate balance of red and black fruit, black pepper, and black olive characteristics. Ballard Canyon producers are so proud of their Syrah that they’ve designed a custom molded bottle just for their Estate Syrah, a distinctive brand of quality that they hope will set them apart.

Larner also noted that there is a flinty character to many [Santa Barbara County wines](#), and the Pinots are noticeably darker in color, higher in alcohol, but have a clarity of fruit that sets them apart from other California regions.

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