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Santa Cruz Mountains wines reach a peak, quietly



Jeffrey Patterson, Owner, Mount Eden Vineyards smells a Cabernet

Next week, Paul Draper and his team at Ridge Vineyards will pause from their work at the legendary Monte Bello vineyard and raise a glass to 50 years of winemaking, high above the streets of Cupertino.

Ridge's half-century history is a testament to the improbable. Neither Draper nor any of Ridge's founders, all Stanford scientists, were wine people by training. And Monte Bello is the exception that proves the rules in California Cabernet: made in American oak and not French; rarely exceeding 13 percent alcohol.

This would be reactionary if not for the fact that its style (with the exception of more new oak) hasn't wavered much in more than 40 vintages - a tribute to the old-fashioned techniques that Draper pioneered after arriving in 1969.

"We, in a sense, turned the clock back when the rest of California was turning the clock forward," he says.

Ridge's milestone offers the opportunity to look at the broader neighborhood. The Santa Cruz Mountains - less a cohesive wine region than a patchwork of vineyards from Woodside to Watsonville - is a downright puzzle. It hosts some of California's defining wines and vineyards, and yet fame has eluded the region itself.

Yet for more than a century, these coastal ridges have been a magnet for wine pioneers. Immigrants first headed up the slopes in the 1860s, and by the 1880s thirsty adventurers were hunting vineyard sites along a ridge dubbed the *Chaine d'Or* ("chain of gold"), which stretches from Woodside to south of Los Gatos.

Soon its reputation for outstanding wines would be sealed. In 1886, Osea Perrone, an Italian doctor who settled in San Francisco, began building the Monte Bello Winery.

Paul Masson in the mix

There was also Paul Masson, the Burgundian whose wines were known nationwide in the early 20th century. In 1936, Masson sold his winery - now known to fans of Steve Miller as the Mountain Winery - to a quixotic stockbroker named Martin Ray, who would acquire another site just to the north.

Ray's impact is legendary; his varietal wines, always extravagantly priced, were by turns brilliant or undrinkable. When finances faltered, that second property became Mount Eden Vineyards which, under the watch of winemaker Jeffrey Patterson, consistently makes one of California's best Chardonnays. These wines are not simply impressive; they are historic, with an untrammelled lineage.

But discuss the Santa Cruz Mountains as a region, and even savvy wine types squawk. For all the famous wines, there is no coherent image. "The appellation's confusing, and it always will be," Patterson suggests, "because it's big and it's not known for any one wine."

If most of its 70 or so area wineries have not shared in the acclaim that falls upon a top tier of labels like Ridge or **Mount Eden**, things aren't necessarily easier for those famous labels.

Despite a loyal following, the Kathryn Kennedy Winery may lose its estate vineyard after the death of its namesake founder last year. Randall Graham of Bonny Doon Vineyard, perhaps Santa Cruz's most outspoken winemaker, found fame in grapes grown far afield; his dream of a Pinot Noir vineyard near Santa Cruz was dashed by Pierce's disease. Dreams of a lavish wine lifestyle are fleeting.

"We have our private lives. We don't have to walk down the street in St. Helena and see 20 other winemakers," Draper says. "Up in these hills you're not looking for social connections and glossy articles about your lovely garden. You're here because you want to do your own thing."

That solitude has favored a generation of pioneers like Bob and Jim Varner, who found an opportunity in the late 1970s to turn pristine Santa Cruz Mountains land into a perfect jewel of a vineyard, even replanting their Chardonnay on its own roots. Even now, it is a fully self-contained entity; Bob Varner and his crew hand-hoe the entire vineyard.

The raw materials are impressive. Monte Bello is not simply a great Cabernet site. It is one of those special self-regulating places where the right conditions fall into harmony. At 2,700 feet, Monte Bello sits on a rare patch of limestone. In geological terms it is "exotic terrain," a remnant of the Pacific plate left behind as the plate continued to shift.

The entire area offers similarly astounding geography. The mountains are sliced in half by the San Andreas Fault. The North American Plate's sandstone and Pacific Plate's uplifted ocean floors are constantly grinding. The result? An utter jumble of shallow, rocky soils, not unlike portions of the Sonoma Coast.

Two converging climates are also at work - cool moderating influences of the ocean to the west, and a similar, if warmer, influence from San Francisco Bay to the east. Slightly warmer sites can ripen a subtle style of Cabernet, while delicate Pinot Noir and Chardonnay thrive nearby.

Terrain, however, has also been the mountains' downfall. Wine historian Charles L. Sullivan, author of "Like Modern Edens," a history of local winemaking, notes that only one large winery, the pre-Prohibition Ben Lomond facility, was ever situated there.

A lack of ready transportation or contiguous vineyards made the region a hard sell for the big companies that have helped propel Napa and Sonoma.

"It's replete with really important historical places," he says, "but it's not the kind of thing that's going to excite corporate investment."

Even when the best wines are noticed, there's not much to be found. Exact figures vary, but despite the region covering some 400,000 acres, just a tiny fraction - perhaps 1,500 acres - contain vineyards. That's less than 4 percent of the vineyard land in far smaller Napa Valley.

Little land potential

There's not likely to be much more. Land may have been more accessible to a previous generation of pioneers like David Bruce. But when you take away the rocky screes, deep forests and swaths of open space on the western side, and add in encroaching development and stratospheric real estate prices on the eastern, it becomes evident that new projects are the domain of the deep-pocketed: someone like Kevin Harvey of Rhys Vineyards, for instance, or T.J. Rodgers, founder of Cypress Semiconductor, and his spare-no-cost Clos de la Tech project. So long, economies of scale.

"The Santa Cruz Mountains," Harvey says, "is never going to make inexpensive wines."

Yet the isolation and lack of attention have also made the region a perfect laboratory for winemaking not held hostage to fashion. That has sometimes meant wines that were more than a touch rustic. But it also allowed a style of wine to flourish that skipped the industry's steroidal tendencies of the past 20 years.

Even Monte Bello has escaped the whims of modernity. Ridge's founders wisely kept their vines on hearty St. George rootstock, making it the rare property to escape the traumas of phylloxera; rather than select fashionable new vine clones, Ridge replanted Cabernet over the years primarily with selections traced back to Emmet Rixford's old La Questa winery, which in turn traced its lineage back to Margaux. Genetically, these vines have resided in the mountains for more than a century.

The use of American oak - a Monte Bello signature - would barely pass muster elsewhere. Nor would the delicate flavors or fruit that typically has higher acids than in Bordeaux.

"If someone else was here and they tried to make the Napa style, they could make it maybe two years out of five," Draper says.

That restraint is a selling point for newcomers. Consider the Rhys wines - pure, soil-influenced Pinot Noir and Chardonnay that deliver power at around 12 or 13 percent alcohol.

Such delicacy favors Pinot, which is becoming the region's bellwether. Thirty years ago, wines from David Bruce and Ken Burnap's Santa Cruz Mountains Vineyard drew attention - and controversy. Today, Pinots made by Jeff Emery, Burnap's successor, radiate a clarity of flavor, even though their style can be rough-edged. But always, the quality of fruit shines through. It's what attracted Harvey, a software entrepreneur who sought to grow Pinot that paid homage to Burgundy.

That's a frequent inspiration, of course, but few in California have done their homework as well as Harvey, who began planting his Home vineyard in his backyard in 1995.

What drew him to hunt parcels on the hillsides near Portola State Park was that shifting mix of soils.

His five vineyards each offer distinct signatures, depending on which side of the fault they're located. The North American plate's sandstone and Franciscan shale offers more red fruit; the Pacific plate trends toward black.

Little of this has drawn broader attention. Despite its proximity to San Francisco and San Jose, thirsty tourists typically turn their gaze farther afield. And the area has never made itself convenient.

Even now, a day of wine touring is a matter of navigating winding roads or else trawling the stretch of tasting rooms in Santa Cruz, far from the vineyards, where Bonny Doon Vineyard recently set up shop. Most wineries are so small that their wines rarely appear on retail shelves. A visit might feel like a throwback to a couple generations earlier.

"There're people down here who are happy to have a few cars drive up their driveway over a weekend, and pour their wine over a barrel," says Marty Mathis, president of Kathryn Kennedy Winery.

Mathis' estate vineyard, 7 acres tucked into a residential slice of Saratoga, is a perfect demonstration of the region's other limitation: the encroachment from Silicon Valley's sprawl.

Indeed, it was fear of losing the area's rural charms that inspired Mathis' mother, Kathryn, to plant the vineyard in 1973. After her death last year, it's become increasingly likely that the vineyard won't survive; quite simply, the land underneath has become too valuable. Mathis is looking for new sites, though he insists there's plenty of estate wine left to buy.

Signs of hope

Will the Santa Cruz Mountains ever rally? If you believe that less oak and alcohol, and more subtlety, hold the future for California wines, here is a place that fits the bill. The increasing focus on top-notch Pinot offers added hope.

"I feel it's just a matter of time before it happens," says Ryan Beauregard of Beauregard Vineyards of Bonny Doon, whose grandfather Amos established a vineyard in 1949. Beauregard moved into the old Bonny Doon Vineyard tasting room in 2008.

Another novel solution might be found in Mathis' Small Lot Cabernet. He buys and blends the tiny lots produced by new vineyards funded by dot-com money.

And there's still new terrain to explore. Big Basin Vineyards has shown potential for Syrah in the western hills above Ben Lomond. South near Corralitos, east of Santa Cruz, labels like Alfaro show potential with new Pinot plantings.

But the region might well remain a string of fiefdoms. And not everyone resents that. Patterson, for example, acknowledges that his isolation - at the end of a 2-mile dirt road - is the price of chasing perfection.

"Here, that uniqueness in the wine comes naturally," he says. "It's a little vineyard in a forest on top of a mountain. There's nothing else."

From the notebook

A sampling of wines from some top Santa Cruz Mountains producers.

2006 Kathryn Kennedy Small Lot Santa Cruz Mountains Cabernet (\$42) Almost floral in its delicate berry fruit, with deeper oak-edged scents of violets, cassis, coffee and charred herbs. Bright, pure Cabernet that's showing charms young.

2007 Mount Eden Vineyards Estate Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir (\$48): A drought year and steady weather produced a gorgeous 2007, with lots of spice and dark fruit, plus heather and sage accents. The powerful mineral presence and supple texture mark that Mount Eden ability to age with grace. Keep an eye out for the forthcoming 2007 Estate Chardonnay - an absolute knockout.

2008 Rhys Vineyards Alpine Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir (price n/a): The forthcoming Rhys 2008s are intense and radiant, including this one from a steep, tightly-planted site just 8 miles from the coast. A darker expression for Rhys, more blackberry and bark edged with an intense mineral twang. Almost leathery, yet remarkably light on its feet.

2006 Ridge Monte Bello California (\$145): Oak is more evident right now, offsetting sappy, meaty Cabernet fruit, with bright watermelon-skin highlights. But the tannins are plenty supple, and as the oak folds in it should gain that great Monte Bello seamlessness. Also watch for the plush 2007 Santa Cruz Mountains Estate, due in April.

2007 Varner Amphitheater Block Spring Ridge Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$39): Bursts with but scents of lemon oil, darker mineral and apple skin. Slightly closed at the moment and marked with a bit of grape skin-like bite, but it has classic structure and ripeness to keep improving for years.