

## On Wine: Earthy pinots from the Santa Cruz Mountains

Posted: 01/07/2013

By Laurie Daniel

In much of California, pinot noir can be ripe and bruising or brimming with sweet fruit. You'll find a few examples of these pinot styles in the Santa Cruz Mountains. But the best pinots I've tasted from this appellation, which encompasses parts of Santa Cruz, Santa Clara and San Mateo counties, go beyond pretty fruit.

The wines have an earthiness or forest-floor character that plays off the fruit and balances it. Jeffrey Patterson, winemaker at Mount Eden Vineyard, describes them as "more savory than sweet." It's a character that makes Santa Cruz Mountains pinots some of the most intriguing in the state.

The mountains weren't always known for pinot noir. The area has a long history of wine production that goes back to the 1860s. But pinot noir didn't come along until the end of the 19th century, when Paul Masson, a Burgundian who was focused on making sparkling wine, planted some above Saratoga, at the property now known as the Mountain Winery. Martin Ray, who bought the property from Masson in 1936, took cuttings from the vineyard when he sold it and established a new property nearby. That estate went on to become Mount Eden Vineyard, an acclaimed producer of pinot noir.

Others, including David Bruce of the winery by the same name and Ken Burnap of Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard, went on to champion pinot noir in the region. And when Randall Graham started Bonny Doon Vineyard in 1981, it was with the goal of creating great pinot noir. (The vineyard succumbed to disease, and Graham turned to Rhone varieties.)

Now, according to the Santa Cruz Mountains Winegrowers Association, there are about 400 acres of pinot planted, out of total grape acreage of 1,500 acres in the appellation. Much of the pinot planting these days is happening in the Corralitos area, outside Watsonville, but pinot vineyards dot the appellation in other cool sites.

The interest in Santa Cruz Mountains pinot noir even spawned a festival called Pinot Paradise. This year's event was the ninth annual Pinot Paradise, and the technical seminars returned to the place where the first mountain pinots were planted, the Mountain Winery. That was also the site of something called the Tastemakers Gathering, where half a dozen writers and people in the wine trade blind-tasted about 50 pinots from the area.

There were pinots of all styles, though the ones I was most interested in were the wines with that brushy, savory character. It reminds me of the Languedoc region of southern France, even though the vintners in Languedoc work with very different grapes, like syrah, grenache and carignan. A lot of Languedoc wines are scented by garrigue, the umbrella term for the aromatic, scrubby plants that grow wild everywhere. Most vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains are small parcels surrounded by forests of fir, redwood, bay, madrone and assorted brushy plants -- the mountains' own version of garrigue.

And it definitely showed up in some of the wines -- like the 2010 Mountain Winery Estate Pinot Noir (\$47) and the 2011 House Family Pinot Noir (\$45), both of which are made by Mount Eden's Patterson. The former is on the tannic side now, while the latter is more approachable.

Another good example was the 2009 Clos LaChance Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir (\$32), whose bright raspberry and cherry fruits are accented by notes of earth and hard spices. The 2010 Big Basin Lester Family Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$44) blends dark fruit, cinnamon and clove with that brushy note, while the 2011 Cinnabar Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir (\$42) is also quite savory but has delicious cherry fruit.

The mountain garrigue character didn't seem to be dependent on ripeness or power (or lack thereof). The 2010 Sante Arcangeli "Split Rail" Pinot Noir (\$35, but sold out) is pretty and delicate but also has notes of lavender and forest floor. At the other end of the spectrum, the 2010 Pelican Ranch Amaya Ridge Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$35) has a hefty level of alcohol but isn't a big fruit bomb. And the 2010 Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard's Branciforte Creek Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$39) is another big wine, with lots of spicy, dark fruit, but it's also savory and earthy.

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## TASTING NOTES

Consumers looking for a prettier style of pinot should enjoy the 2009 Muns Estate Pinot Noir (\$40), with its crushed strawberry, spice and hint of vanilla, or the 2009 MJA "DaVine Cellars" Pinot Noir (\$38). The 2010 Savannah-Chanelle Muns Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$45) is still a little primary, with dark fruit and spice, but it shows promise.

For a more full-bodied, even powerful wine, the 2010 Big Basin Alfaro Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$44) is round and flavorful, with ripe cherry and berry, cola and spice. It could use some time to come together. The 2009 Black Ridge Vineyard Estate Pinot Noir (\$39) could also use some time; it's powerful, with dark fruit, cola, spice and drying tannins.

A pair of wines from Windy Oaks were also very flavorful. The 2009 "Wild Yeast" Pinot Noir (\$55) is full-bodied, with dark fruit, cola, spice and a floral note. And the 2010 "Proprietor's Reserve" Pinot Noir (\$60) offers spicy cherry and crushed strawberry, accented by some herbal notes.

It's hard to say what the aging potential of many of the wines will be, although there clearly are some Santa Cruz Mountains pinots with a reputation for aging, like those from Mount Eden. Before the blind tasting, Jeffrey Patterson poured four vintages of Mount Eden pinot, from 2007, 1997, 1987 and 1977. The youngest wine was aromatic and elegant, with pretty fruit and notes of earth and spice. The 1997, from the last vintage when wine was made from Martin Ray's original pinot plantings, was showing beautifully, with spicy fruit and a note of sassafras. The two oldest wines were still holding on, although they displayed flavors like mushroom, truffle and forest floor rather than fruit.

-- Laurie Daniel