

Decanter California 2015

Take 10 terroirs • Vineyards with altitude

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Take 10!

With so much focus on Napa and Sonoma, it's easy to overlook the thrilling variety of terroirs across the whole of the Golden State. As approaches to marrying soils, sites and varieties become ever more successful, Jordan Mackay highlights 10 great Californian terroirs

THINGS MOVE FAST in California. Eluding me, among other things, are trends in street food, computerised watches, diet breakthroughs and superhero films. It can even be difficult to keep up with AVAs, our acronym for wine appellations, which, in the noble effort to define their terroir, California vintners are ever in a hurry to draw up. Using all the modern tools at their disposal – deep soil analysis, sophisticated climate data and classic geographical boundaries – vintners are delineating distinct areas. Whether or not the wine from these places consistently tastes unlike wine from other nearby places is another matter. Nevertheless, appellation boundaries are drawn and ratified with the faith that the wines made within them will at some point reveal the typicity that winegrowers believe is there.

Yet for years in California the enemy of terroir expression was style. The state's famous predilection for very ripe, juicy wines made 'typicity' difficult to define. Jammy flavours, oak, low acidity and high alcohol amounted to wines shrouded in layers of fat and baggy tracksuits that made their true forms hard to decipher. But a new focus on slimming down, training wines into shape, is giving us a better glance at their physiques. And with this improving definition, terroir is beginning to gently announce itself.

In addition, California has spread its wings in recent decades beyond the familiar locales of Napa and Sonoma. In the market, a new openness to unfamiliar grapes and styles has sparked the revelation that California's

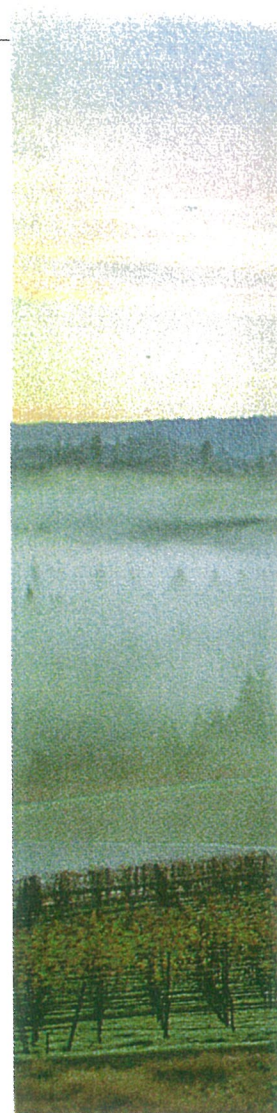
promising winelands stretch far beyond the old haunts and sometimes even appear in overlooked corners of familiar ones. New ground is being covered at a breakneck pace. Thanks to smarter vine growing and winemaking, and a new self-assurance in the feasibility of daringly original wines, now more than ever is the time to discover California terroir.

I invite you to look at California wine through the lens of the 10 following terroirs, listed here as they occur from north to south. Some are single vineyards, others are entire zones. Some are established and well-known, others astonishingly new. All are worthy of your attention.

Savoy Vineyard, Anderson Valley, Mendocino

Lying just north of Sonoma on the border with Oregon, Mendocino county keeps the rugged, frontier spirit alive. In the last 15 years, the remote Anderson Valley has burst on the scene as one of the charmed sites for California's Pinot Noir revolution. Terminating at a coastal redwood forest, the valley stretches from its cooler, westerly 'deep end' up and east toward the coastal range.

As always, temperatures rise as you move east, and to me the most emblematic and charming example of Anderson Valley's Pinot Noir potential comes from the Savoy Vineyard, which is one of the warmer sites of that westward deep end.



Above: Littorai-owned vines in the Savoy Vineyard, which has exciting potential for Pinot Noir

Kirschenmann Vineyard, Lodi

Fine wine enthusiasts used to scoff at Lodi, but today they sit up and take note. Clinging to the edge of the Central Valley at the base of the Sierra Foothills, the Lodi region remains a workhorse of California wine. Hot weather with cooling influences from the river delta to the west has allowed Lodi to effortlessly ripen (and overripen) grapes at high volumes.

Anything and everything has been planted here for ages, much of it destined to be lost in the anonymous blends of bulk wine houses. But, much as with the Sierra Foothills which loom above, today Lodi's dynamic is changing, as winemakers priced out of the coast discover a treasure trove of old vines in a spectrum of interesting flavours, from Zinfandel to Chenin Blanc to Cinsault.

A great example of what's taking place comes from the soil of the Kirschenmann Vineyard, planted in 1915 and recently purchased by the young, ambitious Tegan Passalacqua, vineyard preservationist and winemaker for Turley Cellars and his own Sandlands label. He knew he could use the integrity of the vineyard's old vines to produce wines for contemporary tastes – that is, with more acidity and restraint. Produced by many different vintner friends that Passalacqua sells to, Kirschenmann Zinfandels are still robust, ripe and rich, but they also possess a subtlety and grace not seen too often in the region.

Straight Line, Lodi Zinfandel, Lodi 2013 18.5 (95) N/A UK www.couloirwines.com

Symphony of ripe berries, raspberry to blackberry with hints of violet, spice and orange zest. Rich, but fresh and elegant. **Drink** 2015-2023 **Alc** 15.2%



Above: with Mount Eden Vineyards since the 1980s, Jeffrey Patterson produces wines with potency which remain 'beautifully modest'

Below: with its ancient bush vines and small grapes, Kirschenmann Vineyard is the source of Zinfandels which are both rich and subtle

Above: Mount Eden Vineyards produces fantastic, often underrated Cabernet Sauvignon, says Mackay

Mount Eden Vineyards, Santa Cruz Mountains

What is some of California's most compelling terroir might always exist in a degree of obscurity simply because there's so little plantable land. Hemmed in by the Ferraris and hillside mansions of Silicon Valley on the one side and the crashing Pacific on the other, the Santa Cruz Mountains possess complex, thin and rocky soils, vertiginous slopes, and a range of microclimates that work wonders with a range of grapes. These mountains are but 45 minutes from San Francisco, possess the vineyard that's produced the country's most decorated wine (Ridge's Monte Bello Cabernet), and have been producing historic wines for over a century – yet they still are somewhat unsung thanks to the paucity of wine they produce.

Nevertheless, the terroir of the Santa Cruz Mountains is worth seeking out. There are many superlative vineyards here, from Monte Bello to Rhys Vineyards' Horseshoe Ranch to Peter Martin Ray. Mount Eden Vineyards, however, is exemplary for its quality and diversity. It makes superior Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, but often its most underrated and delightful wine is its Cabernet Sauvignon, which, while not as outsized and mouthfilling as a Napa Cab, still has plenty of potency delivered in a beautifully modest, well-proportioned package. It can age for decades, blooming in complexity.

Mount Eden Vineyards, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 2010 19 (96) £53.95 **Roberson**

The great, cool 2010 brings out the wine's inspiring complexity, as layers of black fruits find depth with a panoply of savoury accents. Balanced, earthy and integrated. **Drink** 2017-2035 **Alc** 13.5% ➤