

Regional profile

Santa Cruz Mountains

Born of the geological turmoil that created the California landscape, this high terrain is home to a tenacious breed of winemaker, with the focus on wines of balance and longevity, reports William Kelley

PERCHED HIGH ABOVE the Pacific, the hillside vineyards of the Santa Cruz Mountains bask in splendid isolation. Exploring this landscape's precipitous escarpments and wooded ridges, the hustle and bustle of nearby San Francisco feels a world away. It's only at sunset that modernity intrudes, the lights of Silicon Valley shimmering on the horizon below.

Both Burgundy and Bordeaux varieties excel in this rugged appellation, conveying a singular sense of place: vibrant fruit is tempered by savoury nuance, while tensile tannins and bright acidity offer the promise of remarkable longevity. These qualities play into the hands of producers committed to a classical aesthetic that emphasises balance and complexity over ripeness and impact.

Standard bearers such as Ridge and Mount Eden have led the way, eschewing the fashions of the moment and crafting wines built for the cellar, and their ranks are being bolstered by increasingly confident newcomers, attracted by the potential of these mountains and inspired by their heritage of high quality.

Vineyards in the sky

One of this appellation's defining features is its maritime climate. On this stretch of the California coast, two nearby bodies of water moderate the warmth of the state's balmy Mediterranean climate: to the west, the Pacific

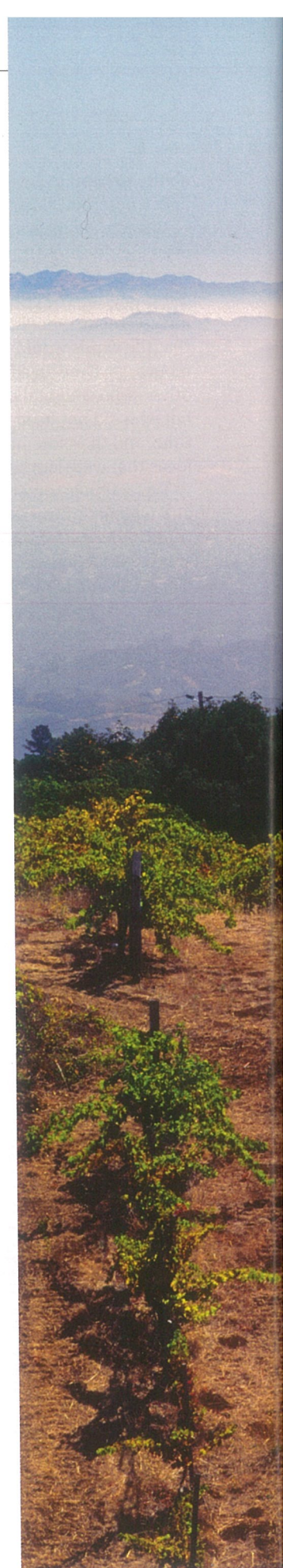
Ocean itself; and to the east, the gentler cooling influence of the San Francisco Bay. While the mountains' eastern sector is correspondingly somewhat warmer, the mountains as a whole are decidedly cooler than most of California's landlocked grape-growing regions.

The impact of altitude sharpens – and complicates – the picture. This American Viticultural Area (AVA) was among the first to be defined by elevation, and its official boundaries trace the fog line around the mountains. From that threshold, which begins at between 120m-300m, the highest vineyards extend up to fully 820m. At these higher elevations, daytime temperatures are cooler than on the valley floor below. Nights, by contrast, are somewhat warmer up here, out of reach of the chilly maritime fog that rolls in from the coast every evening. This felicitous confluence of climate and topography favours a long, even growing season; unhurriedly ripening grapes while retaining the vital acidity that can be so easily lost in warmer regions.

On the fault line

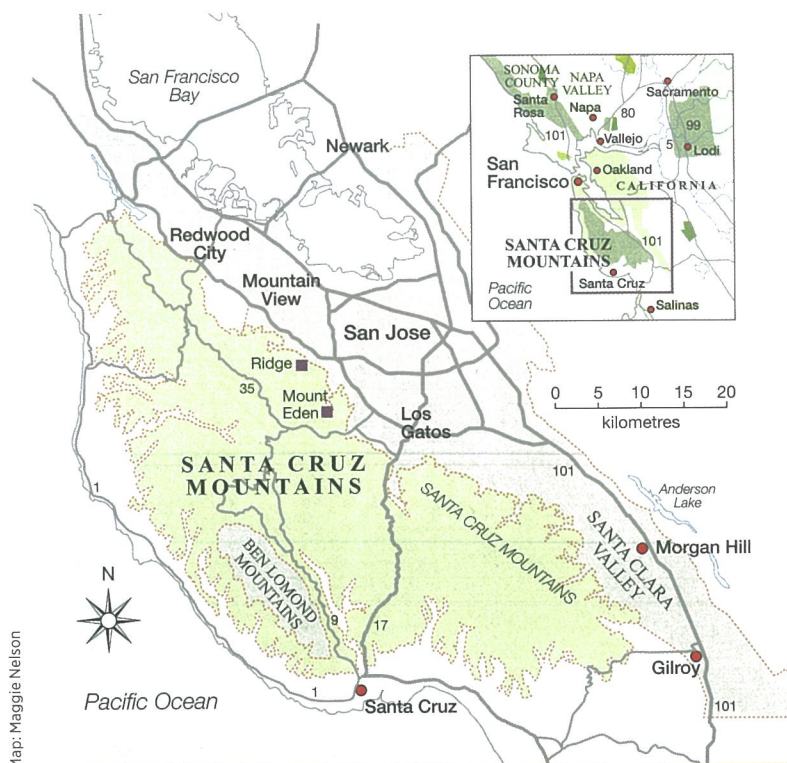
Lifted up by tectonic forces some 15 million years ago, the Santa Cruz Mountains reveal a faulted and folded geological jumble of bewildering complexity, neatly bisected by the San Andreas fault. To its west lies the so ➤

Photograph: Mick Rock/Cephas





Above: the Ridge Vineyards
Monte Bello property was
originally planted to vines
in the late 19th century



Map: Maggie Nelson

Santa Cruz Mountains at a glance

Established: 1981

Location The appellation encompasses approximately 194,250ha of the California coast south of San Francisco, running from Woodside in the north to Watsonville in the south and including only land

above the fog line.

Planted area 526ha

Most-planted varieties About 25% each Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir

Soils Rocky, well-drained and geologically complex

called Salinian Complex: an ancient continental crust, overlain with sedimentary rocks mingled with volcanic basalt. To the east we find the Franciscan Assemblage: an equally confusing melange that includes sand, silt, volcanic lavas and metamorphic schists – all scraped from the bottom of an ancient seabed. It's hard to believe, but the limestone of Monte Bello ridge actually represents the remains of a Pacific atoll.

So the Santa Cruz Mountains comprehend amazing geological diversity. What vineyard soils here have in common, however, is that they're nutrient-poor and well-drained – though they often retain sufficient water to permit farming without irrigation. That limits vine vigour and yields, encouraging intense flavours and natural concentration.

Many winemakers also believe that these soils impart a distinctive signature to the wines, and when the likes of Ridge's Eric Baugher and Rhys Vineyards' Kevin Harvey invoke the notion of minerality, it's hard to argue with them – or the evidence in the glass.

Quality over quantity

A mere 526ha (hectares) of this 194,250ha appellation are planted to grapevines – a drop in the ocean compared with Napa Valley's 18,615ha of vineyards. That's partly because comparatively little of the Santa Cruz Mountain's extreme terrain is actually suitable for vineyard development.

'Planting vines here requires a certain amount of obstinacy,' admits Harvey, whose hillside Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays from

Six names to look out for

Rhys Vineyards

Bitten by the Burgundy bug, software entrepreneur Kevin Harvey planted vines in his Woodside backyard in 1995. Before long he had founded Rhys Vineyards, which soon emerged as the source of some of California's most interesting Pinot Noirs. Harvey and Rhys winemaker Jeff Brinkman spare no expense to farm five extreme hillside sites in the Santa Cruz Mountains, planted at high density with an exciting variety of vine material. The wines are some of California's most Burgundian in style and character.

Thomas Fogarty

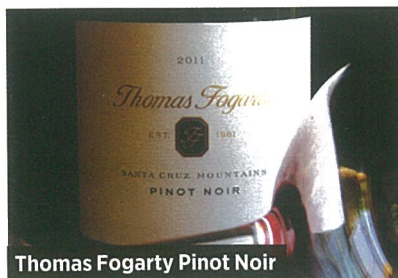
Established in the 1970s by Dr Thomas

Fogarty, a heart surgeon and medical inventor, this winery farms eight estate vineyards – in total some 10.5ha – in the cool northern Skyline sub-region of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Recent vintages from winemaker Nathan Kandler emphasise nuances of geology and

climate: it's the more restrained ripeness and more moderate oak influence that set these bottlings apart from the wines of yesteryear.

Arnot-Roberts

Dynamic duo Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Lee Roberts work with three sites in the Santa Cruz Mountains for their Sonoma County-based Arnot-Roberts label, the source of some of California's most interesting small-lot wines. Attaining ripeness at moderate sugars and retaining vibrant acidity are priorities. Their Peter Martin Ray Vineyard Pinot Noir hails from a site that's still owned and farmed by the





Above: Rhys Vineyards' Skyline vineyard sits at elevations up to 720m, among the highest for Pinot Noir in California

marginal sites within the AVA are pushing the boundaries of what's possible in California. 'Growing grapes here can end up being very expensive,' agrees Randall Grahm, whose winemaking experience in the region stretches back to the early 1980s.

As well as some hostile wildlife and the challenging terrain, winemakers in the Santa Cruz Mountains also have to contend with competition from real estate developers, who have already claimed many of the appellation's most propitious vineyard sites. Among their victims numbers Emmett H Rixford's famed La Questa Vineyard, source of California's

most celebrated 19th-century Cabernet Sauvignon. Planted in 1884 with cuttings from Château Margaux, La Questa's wines won international acclaim in their day. Today, the few remaining vines languish in the backyards of suburban Woodside as an intriguing reminder of what might have been.

Illustrious history

Rixford's ambitions may have been consigned to history, but elsewhere the Santa Cruz Mountains' vinous heritage is very much alive and well. One of the appellation's shining lights is Mount Eden Vineyards, an estate ➤



John Raytek

legendary Martin Ray's son: an interesting connection between the Santa Cruz Mountains' past and future.

Domaine Eden

Born when Mount Eden Vineyards

acquired a neighbouring property in 2007. Today, winemaker and proprietor Jeffrey Patterson supplements Domaine Eden's own Cabernet Sauvignon plantings with grapes purchased from the region's best growers, and sometimes with wine that doesn't meet the exacting standards to go into Mount Eden. The wines share the classical aesthetic of Mount Eden Vineyards, with refreshing acidity, moderate alcohol and fine structuring tannins, but their window of drinkability begins a little earlier.

Ceritas

Ceritas is another Sonoma-based winery with a passion for Santa Cruz Mountains fruit. Winemaker John Raytek (who formerly worked at Arnot-Roberts) and

his partner Phoebe Bass produce a range of single-vineyard Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays from cool-climate sites, three of them being located here in the Santa Cruz Mountains, emphasising elegant tannins and pure fruit in an almost minimalist style.

Kutch

Jamie Kutch has built a reputation as a Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir specialist, but his greatest wine might just be his new Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay. A blend of grapes from two sites, the Zayante and Trout Gulch vineyards, Kutch's debut vintage bears a strong stylistic kinship with contemporary white Burgundy: taut, mineral and framed by a lick of reduction. A bottling to watch.

with the longest lineage of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in all North America.

Their story begins in the 1900s, when a young Frenchman named Paul Masson planted a vineyard overlooking the Santa Clara Valley with cuttings from his native Burgundy. There he specialised in high-quality, Champagne-method sparkling wines, earning himself the soubriquet 'California's Champagne King'.

The Paul Masson Champagne Company thrived until the crippling blow of Prohibition in 1921. The enterprise endured through the ensuing 12 years, beset by bootleggers and extortionists, producing medicinal wines. But by 1933, Masson was ready to sell.

Enter Martin Ray, a San Francisco stockbroker, captivated since childhood by the elegance of Masson's wine-grower lifestyle and seeking a change of profession. Ray purchased the estate, pioneering varietally labelled bottlings of Pinot Noir to complement the winery's sparklers. But after a devastating fire in 1943 he sold the brand, planting a new vineyard on an adjacent ridge with Cabernet Sauvignon taken from Rixford's La Questa Vineyard, as well as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from Masson's vines.

Here, for the next three decades, Ray would pursue his ambition to rival the great wines of France, launching blistering diatribes against the state of the California wine industry all the while. Today, Ray's vineyards and winery live on as Mount Eden Vineyards, stewarded since 1981 by Jeffrey Patterson and his wife Ellie. Patterson's priority is 'to let the site speak for itself', his focus therefore in the vineyard: uncomplicated winemaking produces elegant and extraordinarily long-lived wines.

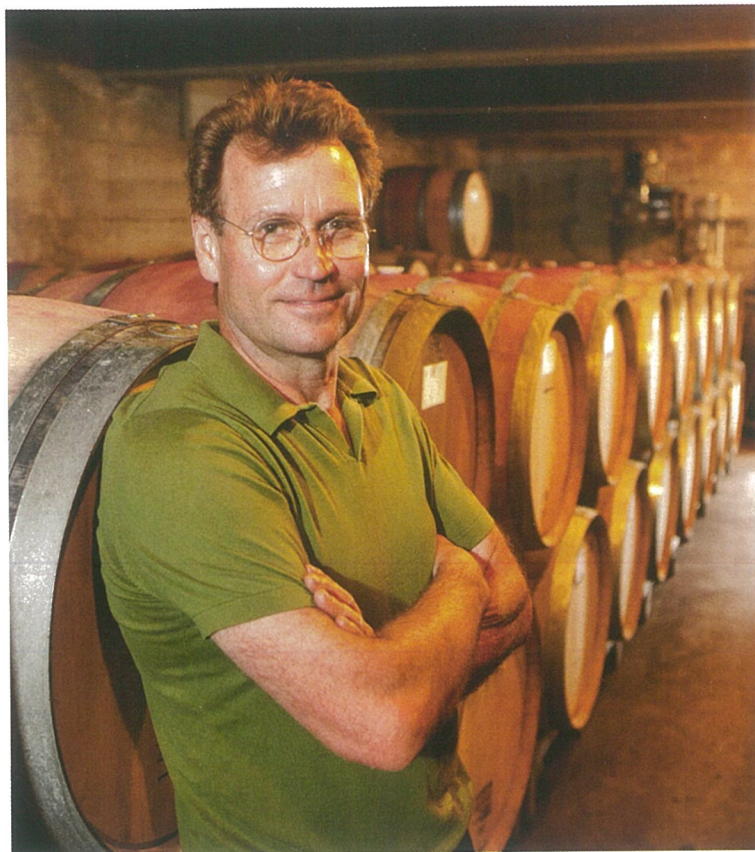
By now, Patterson's run of vintages here is longer than even Martin Ray's.

A ridge apart

If Mount Eden's history is a story of continuity, then that of Ridge Vineyards is a tale of resurrection. A San Francisco doctor, Osea Perrone, planted Monte Bello Ridge to vines in the late 19th century, producing his first vintage in 1892. By the 1940s, however, Perrone's limestone winery had fallen into disrepair and its vineyards lay abandoned.

The seeds of Monte Bello's revival were sown by William Short, a theologian who planted Cabernet Sauvignon here using cuttings from Rixford's La Questa Vineyard. But it wasn't until 1959, when four Stanford Research Institute engineers purchased the property, that Ridge Monte Bello as we know it today was born.

Using the basic techniques of pre-industrial



Above: Jeffrey Patterson, winemaker at Mount Eden Vineyards since 1981

winemaking, the group produced a series of magical Cabernet Sauvignons, and in 1969 their success persuaded a young Paul Draper to join Ridge as winemaker. Draper, who retired last year, won the winery a global reputation as a bastion of classicism. That tradition is being ably perpetuated and carefully refined by the team that succeeds him, led by winemaker Eric Baugher.

New arrivals

For decades, Ridge and Mount Eden were voices in the wilderness, neglected by a wine press in awe of ripeness and opulence. But with balance becoming the new buzzword in California wine, the Santa Cruz Mountains are enjoying renewed popularity: new labels are rubbing shoulders with wineries from elsewhere in the state, all anxious to work with the appellation's characterful grapes.

One of the outsiders is Arnot-Roberts, a cutting-edge winery based in Sonoma County. 'We were drawn to the region for its distinctive combination of cool, coastal weather and geologically diverse, well-drained mountain soils,' explains Duncan Arnot Meyers – conditions which help foster the vivid flavours and vibrant acidity that are the label's hallmark.

Arnot-Roberts' lithe, savoury Santa Cruz Mountains Cabernet Sauvignon hails from Monte Bello Ridge itself, and a bottling of

Kelley's picks: top buys from the Santa Cruz Mountains



Mount Eden Vineyards, Chardonnay 2013 94

£63 Roberson

Lovely, reliably ageworthy cuvée. A reserved bouquet of almond cream, poached pear, wet stones and spring flowers introduces a deep, full-bodied wine with bright acidity, minerality and tension. Still tightly-wound and will unwind with a few years in the cellar. **Drink** 2019-2040 **Alcohol** 14%

Ridge Vineyards, Monte Bello Chardonnay 2014 94

POA **Berry Bros & Rudd/Fields Morris & Verdin**
This wine flies somewhat under the radar, and the soon-to-be-released 2014 is a beauty. Ripe citrus, orchard fruit and pastry cream lead into a glossy, textural palate underpinned by bright acidity and minerality. **Drink** 2018-2033 **Alc** 14.2%



Arnot-Roberts, Trout Gulch Chardonnay 2015 93

£49 Roberson

Notes of apple, lemon pith and subtle praline are followed by a vibrant, medium-bodied palate with zingy, Chablis-like acidity and a pure, penetrating finish. **Drink** 2019-2030 **Alc** 13.5%



Ridge Vineyards, Monte Bello 2013 100

£132-£150 **Bentley's of Ludlow, Berry Bros & Rudd, Fine & Rare, Handford, Hedonism, Noel Young**

A Monte Bello for the ages, the brooding 2013 nose unfolds to reveal notes of black raspberry, blackcurrant, burning embers and deep-pitched, rich soil tones. On the palate the wine is simply stunning, with a beautifully three-dimensional, refined

tannic chassis. Analytically, this is the most tannic Monte Bello of the millennium, but that structure is clothed with a wealth of fruit – so much so that Ridge forwent its habitual egg-white fining this year. Watch this profound wine begin to blossom after a decade in the cellar. **Drink** 2023-2060 **Alc** 13.6%

Mount Eden Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon 2013 95

£63 (2012) Roberson

A classic, bursting with red and black fruit, vine smoke and pencil shavings, and structured by fine tannin and vibrant Santa Cruz Mountains acidity. Complex and elegant, but structured for the long haul. **Drink** 2023-2040 **Alc** 13.5%

Rhys Vineyards, Skyline Vineyard Pinot Noir 2012 95

POA **Hand Picked Burgundy**

A complex bouquet of cherry, pot pourri, sweet soil and fallen leaves introduces a silky, supple wine. Pitch-perfect balance and amplitude, sapid with saline minerality on the finish. Beautiful, very Burgundian. **Drink** 2018-2033 **Alc** 12.8%

Ridge Vineyards, Monte Bello 1968 95

N/A UK www.ridgewine.com

A complex, vibrant bouquet of cedar, dried cherry, cassis, forest floor and a touch of leather is the prelude to a wine of striking intensity and power; firm, savoury tannins and bright acidity still make an impression. This early Monte Bello gives the measure of the site's potential. **Drink** 2017-2030 **Alc** 12.7%

Arnot-Roberts, Fellom Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon 2014 94

£78 (2013) Roberson

From a vineyard on Monte Bello Ridge, planted to Cabernet in the early 1980s. Aromas of bright cherry, herbs, a framing of cedary oak and a balsamic top note lead into a vibrant palate with

juicy fruit, fine but tensile tannins and bright acids. **Drink** 2019-2040 **Alc** 14%

Arnot-Roberts, Peter Martin Ray Vineyard Pinot Noir 2015 94

£68 Roberson

Aromas of griotte cherry, raspberry, peony and a touch of currant leaf spice. Supple and silky wine with nice sap and energy on the palate; graceful and elegant.

Drink 2019-2030 **Alc** 12%



Rhys Vineyards, Swan Terrace Pinot Noir 2012 94

£166-£190 **Christopher Keiller, Hedonism**

More taut and precise than the Skyline bottling, the Swan Terrace opens with a more reticent bouquet of cherry, wild strawberry and a subtle framing of herbs.

Tense, soil-driven, pure and bright. **Drink** 2020-2035 **Alc** 12.6%

Domaine Eden, Cabernet Sauvignon 2013 91

£34 Roberson

More open-knit and approachable than the Mount Eden Cabernet, the Domaine Eden bottling bursts with exuberant, but sophisticatedly savoury, notes of red plums, cassis, cedar and mountain laurel; succulent briary fruit is framed by fine tannins and juicy acidity on the palate. **Drink** 2017-2026 **Alc** 14%

Rhys Vineyards, Alpine Vineyard Pinot Noir 2006 90

£115 **Hand Picked Burgundy, Hedonism**

Some tertiary nuances of soil, grilled squab and herbs marry with glossy cherry fruit tones, with a full-bodied, complex palate still framed by firm tannins. A very creditable, intriguing Pinot Noir. **Drink** 2017-2026 **Alc** 13.4%

For full details of UK stockists, see p106

delicate, high-toned Pinot Noir is sourced from a vineyard owned and farmed by none other than Martin Ray's son Peter.

The juxtaposition of old and new couldn't

be more intimate, and the combination of dynamic new entrants and heritage producers at the top of their game makes the Santa Cruz Mountains very exciting indeed. **D**

William Kelley is Decanter's US correspondent