

CALIFORNIA'S NEW GROOVE

Everyone knows the wines of Napa and Sonoma, but some of California's lesser-known wine regions are producing vintages that are equally appealing

WORDS ZEREN WILSON

An allure and romance permeates many of the world's wine regions, but the Golden State can attract a maniacal kind of devotion in some wine lovers. The vast 800 miles of coastline that enjoy the benign influence of the Pacific Ocean contain a myriad spread of microclimates and mesoclimates, all of which help to produce a great variety of wine styles across the state. As we head south from the twin winemaking heavyweights of Napa and Sonoma, the landscape of the Pacific Coast unfurls a patchwork of prime wine-growing territory on the Central Coast through Santa Cruz, Monterey, San Benito, and San Luis Obispo, all the way down to Santa Barbara.

"Abundant sunshine during a long growing season is tempered by the cooling influences of coastal breezes and fogs. Hillside vines get a mixture of cooling air and bright, unfiltered sunshine, while warmer interior valleys benefit from the cooling influence of rivers, lakes, and deltas," explains John McLaren, UK director of the Wine Institute of California. "The movement of tectonic plates has thrown up a vast array of soils: sand, clay, loam, granite, volcanic ash, and seabed soil, which leads to a huge diversity of wine styles."

There is a significant boom in Californian wine at the moment, some fresh impetus. Jon Bonne's book *The New California Wine* distills much of what has been happening in the Golden State, highlighting winemakers who are producing wines in a less blousy, more elegant style than their predecessors; wines that offer balance and freshness as the antidote to the ripe fruit bombs that dominated the 1980s and '90s. Among the names that typify this movement are Jamie

Kutch's Sonoma Coast Pinot Noirs; Scott Schultz's Jolie-Laide label and his Trouseau Gris; and Leo Hansen's Leo Steen Chenin Blanc, Syrah, and Grenache. Alongside this new groove, lesser-known regions within the state are grabbing a share of the limelight from their more famous neighbors – Santa Barbara's Santa Maria Valley and Santa Ynez Valley, for example. Per Holmberg, Head of Wine Sales for the Americas at Christie's, feels that the reasons these two names are "hot" right now are clear to see: "It is pretty simple. Compared to Napa Valley, farmland is still pretty affordable. There are a lot of younger producers with a lot of talent in Santa Barbara who are trying new, exciting things: Sandhi, Domaine de la Côte, Wenzlau, Whitcraft, Brewer Clifton..."

Sandhi Wines is one of the most dynamic and exciting current ventures. It is owned by Rajat Parr, Charles Banks, and Sashi Moorman – a trio whose unwavering commitment to making Pinot Noir and Chardonnay of great finesse and balance from vineyards in Santa Barbara and Santa Rita Hills has garnered great press around the world. Parr also heads up a collective of wineries under the banner of In Pursuit of Balance, a not-for-profit organization that promotes more elegant styles of Californian Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

So has it been a challenge to convince drinkers to their cause? "Yes, it has. Not necessarily because of the wines. People haven't heard of Santa Barbara as a wine region. Everyone seems fixated on Napa and Sonoma," Parr observes. "It takes an effort to convince them that we produce high-quality wines, too." He is very specific



Vine times: The hills of Santa Barbara County (above) are attracting a younger generation of winemaker. *New vintage:* Santa Barbara wines from Sandhi and Qupé (below).



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about the grape varieties he feels flourish best: "Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grow very well in Santa Rita Hills. The soils are silica- and clay-based. In Santa Ynez (specifically Ballard Canyon) we have limestone, which works well with Syrah, Grenache, and Mourvèdre."

While there is a fresh energy from a new breed of winemakers – among them Angela Osborne and her A Tribute to Grace label (Grenache), and Michael Roth and Craig Winchester's Lo-Fi (Cabernet Franc, Chenin Blanc, Cinsault) – early adopters Qupé and Au Bon Climat in Santa Maria Valley have been ambassadors for Santa Barbara since the '80s.

Bob Lindquist, founder and winemaker at Syrah specialist Qupé, stresses the uniqueness of their location: "Santa Ynez and this part of the Central Coast are the only places on the coast of California where the mountains and valleys run east to west instead of north to south. That geographical

aspect is like having the windows open to the cooling effect of the Pacific Ocean."

Sandhi Wines and Qupé both report growing export sales, while figures from John McLaren reveal the bigger picture: "Worldwide exports from the USA were worth more than \$1.1 billion in 2014, over 95 per cent of which were Californian wine, with Canada, the UK, China, and Japan being the largest markets."

It may have been more than 10 years since a certain film captured the imagination of wine lovers, but Lindquist still feels its relevance when asked what would persuade people to visit his winery: "Watch the movie *Sideways* again while drinking some Pinot Noir and Syrah grown here... that should do the trick."

There's a palpable sense that Californian wine is in the throes of a vibrant stylistic renaissance. New groove, new bounce: the Golden State is truly glittering. ● *Zeren Wilson is a wine writer and consultant, and has written for Noble Rot and Christie's Magazine.*

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