

WINE News

We're back on the road in California wine country.



JUNE 28, 2021 FEATURES

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Extra! Extra! K&L's Domestic Wine Buyers Go Big!

By Ryan Woodhouse

Welcome to this XL edition of *Wine News*! Fully vaxxed and back on the road, Team USA has been scouring wine regions up and down the California coast for the latest and greatest finds. And we found such a haul, we had to *more than triple* the size of the newsletter this month! Join us on our journey through California's "windy places" as I explore some of the most ocean-influenced, cool-climate, breezy places that are producing some of the state's most impressive wines. Next, my colleague, Kaj Stromer, makes a stop in Paso Robles to check out the powerful and ever-intriguing wines of Sans Liege, Field Recordings, and Groundwork. And, he brings us up to speed with the current lay of the

land in Monterey and surrounding areas after our mind-boggling tour there earlier this month. Then we're up into the Santa Cruz Mountains where I check out some very cool, up-and-coming small producers, as well as some of the region's iconic stalwarts. Meanwhile, our Domestic Department's SoCal champ, Shelby Griffiths, gives us some great insights into present-day Lodi, home to some of the country's oldest vines but also a dynamic culture of grape growing and winemaking. And last, but honestly not least, I implore you to take a look at some world-class wines made from a much-maligned grape... Merlot — *the next big thing?* Enjoy!

2018 Brave & Maiden "Estate" Santa Ynez Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$24.99)

Previously \$45. This wine was originally intended for restaurants, but we were given the option to secure a significant cache if we loved it, and we did! Stylistically, this is more reminiscent of some of the elegant Cabernets from Sonoma County than their bigger Napa Valley cousins. There's plenty of dark berry, plum, and cocoa on the palate, while fresh and lifted acidity helps the fruit glide across your palate. But the tannins remind you it's Cabernet all the way.



2018 Saintsbury "Sangiaco Vineyard" Carneros Chardonnay (\$19.95) Elsewhere

\$28. A fantastic Chardonnay from one of the region's best grape-growing families, crafted by one of the region's stalwart producers. It combines the classic richness of Sangiaco Vineyard with a deft touch in the cellar. This wine can easily stand shoulder-to-shoulder with bottles selling for twice the price, maybe more. This wine shows perfectly ripe fruit, subtle, classy oak, wonderfully vibrant acidity, and sea spray salty minerality. **93 JS**



2019 Tatomer Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir (\$29.95)

Wow! Explosive aromatics of crushed flowers, Asian spices, black raspberry, and liquored cherry, all on a subtle framing of sweet oak tones, make this one of our candidates for wine of the year — already! Juicy acidity balances the lovely fruit profile, and the texture is polished and silky for such a fresh, young wine. This is just delicious Pinot Noir, that's all there is to it. The only problem is that the bottle seems to empty too soon. **95 WE**



Cover: Little Lilo Vineyard looks out on Monterey Bay from its perch in the Santa Cruz Mountains AVA.

Windy Places at the Edge of a Continent

By Ryan Woodhouse

I'll never forget my first proper visit to the Santa Rita Hills. Our opening visit for the day was at Sandhi and Domaine de la Côte at the far western end of the appellation (which is officially titled Sta. Rita Hills for legal reasons of the international wine trade). We drove along a canyon with sheer walls of bright white rock and took a dirt road up to the top of an escarpment where vines cling to the earth in tightly spaced rows trained low to the ground. As we got out of the car, I had to hold the door handle extra tight so it wasn't ripped from my hand. Feeling the air temperature outside, we all reached for a jacket, despite the fact that it was mid-August. We stood looking southwest into the dazzling sun and leaned hard into the constant wind battering us from the Pacific Ocean, shrouded in fog on the horizon. The meager canopy on the vines shook in the wind, and the dusty diatomaceous earth whipped around our feet. It was an eye-opening experience that gave me a real feel for exactly what it was like to grow grapes in this region.



Bien Nacido vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley.

While Domaine de la Côte's very exposed, elevated, and far western location makes it one of the most extreme sites in the appellation, the entire region is defined by the fact that it's a west-to-east running valley where transverse mountain ranges funnel cold ocean air inland, generating a near-continuous onshore flow during the spring and summer seasons. The vines here are "trained" by the wind, the canopy and fruit under near-constant assault from the gusts. It reminds me of back home in southwestern England, where ancient trees grow leaning toward the northeast, bent by the strong and unrelenting southwesterly winds that batter the coast. In the Sta. Rita Hills, canopy growth is stunted by the wind, yields are limited by wind during flowering, and grape clusters and berries grow smaller and thicker-skinned because of the wind. The wind is perhaps the most defining characteristic of the region; and Sta. Rita Hills is far from alone in that regard.

In fact, many of the best growing regions in coastal California share these topographical and climatic phenomena. Just to the north of Sta. Rita Hills, the wide mouth of the Santa Maria Valley similarly channels onshore airflow over famed benchmark vineyards such as Bien Nacido and even more exposed sites such as Solomon Hills and Presqu'île. A few hours drive north again and you'll find the Santa Lucia Highlands, where vines cling to the midslopes of the Santa Lucia Range that forms the backdrop to the Big Sur coastline, fighting against the howling winds that rip down the Salinas Valley from the Monterey Bay. The deep offshore submarine canyon there fuels some of the most consistent and powerful onshore winds anywhere on the California coast. North of the Golden Gate, in the newly defined Petaluma Gap AVA, this concept of a growing region open to the west, and the powerful influence of the Pacific, became the very basis of the appellation. A physical gap in the Coast Range allows ingress of cooler air and winds that make this specific corridor dramatically different than surrounding areas.

Grapes grown in all of these areas share a few things in common: They generally have thicker skins and less juice in the berries; they typically have higher acidity from the diurnal cooling effect of Mother Nature's powerful air conditioning; they also often experience longer hang times, and thus greater flavor development, as the high winds periodically shut down photosynthesis, delaying the ripening process.

But for now, I'll stop my relentless flow of (hot) air pontificating about these regions, and share with you a few wines from these places to see what you think!

Sta. Rita Hills

2018 Gainey Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$19.95) *Elsewhere \$30.* One of the best, if not the best deal in Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir is Gainey's 2018 bottling. This is the epitome of fresh, bright, easy-drinking Pinot Noir. Packed with spicy, earthy red

fruits, silky tannin, lovely fruit purity, and immaculate balance, this is an absolute steal. **93 VN**

2017 Brewer-Clifton Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$29.95) Always a go-to for a more fruit-intense expression of Sta. Rita Hills, the 2017 from Brewer-Clifton is right on the money with lashings of bold red fruits, macerated cherry, ripe strawberry, and baking spice. Lush and rich, but with lovely freshness and lift to the finish. **94 WE**





Above Sanford & Benedict.

2018 Melville “Estate” Sta. Rita Hills Syrah (\$34.95) The Northern Rhône is famed for its Syrah. Many growers there believe the cool *mistral* wind that funnels through the valley is an important factor in the quality of the wines. No surprise then that Syrah also excels in the Sta. Rita Hills. Melville’s estate bottling is one of the finest examples and is packed with the quintessential black fruits, cracked pepper, smoked meat, and savory spice that lovers of this varietal crave. **95 WE, 94 JD, 94 W&S**



2019 Sandhi Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$34.99) With fruit that’s more than 80% from the Domaine de la Côte estate, Sandhi’s Sta. Rita Hills bottling is one of the best deals in the region. Fermented 30% whole cluster and aged in neutral oak, this wine really shows the vibrancy, brightness, and lift you get from Pinot Noir grown here. Crunchy wild berries, lots of mineral tones, bramble leaf, and spiced citrus peel.



2019 Arnot-Roberts “Sanford & Benedict Vineyard” Sta. Rita Hills Chardonnay (\$54.95) Not to be out done by the incredible Pinot Noirs from the region, Sta. Rita Hills is also home to phenomenal Chardonnays, perhaps none as special as those made from these old vines planted in 1971 at Sanford & Benedict. Several folks make wine from the precious few tons of this fruit; I love Arnot-Roberts’ light touch that gently issues forth a wonderfully transparent and elegant expression of this renowned site. **96 VN**



Santa Maria Valley

2018 Foxen “Bien Nacido Vineyard Block UU” Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay (\$26.95) A perennial favorite of mine, this comes from a parcel of vines that was originally Riesling and now has Chardonnay grafted on top. Santa Maria’s almost constant ocean breezes make for a complex, mineral-intense, layered wine with tons of intrigue. **93 VN, 93 JD, 93 WE**



2017 Au Bon Climat “Nuits-Blanches au Bouge” Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay (\$39.95) The crème de la crème of Chardonnay from the late, great Jim Clendenen. Last month many folks in the wine industry and beyond were crushed by the sudden passing of this iconic vigneron. This bottling is the perfect example of Jim’s pure genius. A best barrel selection from Bien Nacido and Le Bon Climat, the wine shows both the power and precision Santa Maria can deliver, with huge intensity of flavor and impact on the palate and yet pin-point focus and linear intensity. World-class. **96 VN, 94 WE, 93+ RP**



2019 Scar of the Sea “Vino de los Ranchos” Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$24.95) Another rocking value in contemporary, fresh, vibrant Pinot Noir that really shows its cool climate, maritime-influenced growing conditions, this is sourced from the historic Rancho Sisquoc Vineyard and “Grand Cru” site, Bien Nacido. Lots of brambly fruit, forest floor, and distinctly wild notes that Santa Maria is known for make this a stunning bottle of Pinot for the price. **93 RP, 93 W&S, 93 WE**



(Continued on page 4)

The Paso Robles Power Duo

By Kaj Stromer

It's becoming ever more apparent to me that we are seeing a greater batch than ever of locally produced value wines. Though, calling them "value wines" may be a misnomer, as they're simply great wines that also represent tremendous value. It's always up to the next generation to innovate and energize, so here we are featuring a pair of innovators. They each have their own solo project as well as a shared piece of a combined project. These mavericks are taking vines and wines in totally new and creative directions. They're looking for untapped potential both in the vineyard and in how they configure their operations.

Andrew Jones and Curt Schlachlin are two rising stars of the Central Coast wine scene. Their wines have become some of my favorites, and based on our sales, are clearly client favorites as well. Andrew is the man at Field



Recordings and Curt is Sans Leige. They pool their resources to make Groundwork. Together they strive to create unique wines loaded with personality and a one-of-a-kind experience.

These guys have an uncanny knack for seeking out the best off-the-beaten path vineyards. That comes as no surprise, as Andrew is also a viticulturalist and sells budwood to other wineries. He's got a keen eye for finding sites that are relatively unknown or under-appreciated and coaxing the best out of their untapped potential. Curt is the winemaker-mastermind behind both the Groundwork and Sans

Liege wines, based in Paso Robles. The Sans Liege wines carry the pedigree and gravitas of world-class bottlings while the Groundwork wines express a level of casual comfort.



If you're ever visiting Paso Robles, I strongly urge you to stop at Tin City and visit both of these local legends.

Groundwork

2020 Groundwork Paso Robles Rosé of Grenache

(\$14.99) It's firmly rosé season, and will be for a few months to come. This has become my "go to" rosé. It's exactly what you'd expect from a thirst-slaking style. There's plenty of fresh strawberries and juicy watermelon here with a just a gentle squirt of citrus to frame the wine and give it lift. This is complex enough to stimulate your every sip while still being easygoing and laid-back. It's 100% tank fermented, which means it retains a crisp and lively juiciness. It weighs in at a pleasantly low 12% alcohol and at \$14.99 it goes easy on the wallet. I recommend you put a case away in your pantry now, as not much was made. Enjoy a bottle every weekend with family and friends. This will be my summer fling.



(Continued on page 5)

Windy Places (Continued from page 3)

Petaluma Gap

2018 Keller "El Coro Vineyard" Petaluma Gap Pinot Noir (\$29.95) Elsewhere \$60. One of the founding wineries of the new Petaluma Gap AVA, Keller Estate has some of the best vineyards in the region. El Coro is a hilltop parcel of vines exposed to the full force of those westerly breezes. As a result the wine is focused and spicy, with brambly red fruits, garrigue, dusty earth, and leaf litter. Working winery-direct, we can offer the very best pricing on this wine, making it one of the best sub-\$30 Pinot deals in the store. **93 WE, 92 RP**



2019 Desire Lines "Winds of Change" California Red Blend (\$24.95) Cody Rasmussen's "day job" is as assistant winemaker at Bedrock Wine Co. Together

with his wife, Emily, they have embarked on their own project, Desire Lines. We've carried these wines from the outset and have been wildly impressed. The Winds of Change bottling basically echoes what I have been writing about in this article, taking grapes from cool, windy places in California and crafting wines from them. Much of this wine is from the very highly regarded Griffin's Lair Vineyard just outside of Petaluma. There are also dashes of fruit from 1880s Mourvèdre and Grenache vines in Oakley, and ancient Carignane from Evangelho planted in the 1890s. The wine is just seamless, showing wonderful saturation on the palate, but no lack of vibrancy. The blend is Syrah (73%), Mourvèdre (10%), Carignan (8%), Grenache (6%), and Petite Sirah (3%).





Andrew Jones lines 'em up at Groundwork.

Sans Liege

2019 Sans Liege “Côtes du Coast” Central Coast White Blend (\$23.99) As Curt says, “I am free to make the wine of my choosing because I follow no one.” That mentality lets him create the shape and outcome of all his wines, though I guess the grapes are the real bosses. This white blend plays loose homage to the legendary white wines of the Rhône. A blend of Viognier, Roussanne, Marsanne, Grenache Blanc, and Clairette. The fruit is sourced from some lofty addresses along the coast including Bien Nacido, White Hawk, and Alta Colina. Once poured, you smell the honeysuckle and lilac with white strawberries, vanilla bean, melon, lime zest, and guava. Who doesn't want that? I know I do.

2018 Sans Liege “The Offering” Santa Barbara County Rhône Blend (\$26.95) The Offering is the standard bearer for Curt. Here he balances a reverence for the traditions of the Rhône Valley with the freedom of making wine in California's Central Coast. The 2018 vintage is 39% Grenache, 36% Syrah, and 25% Mourvèdre. With a nod to Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Curt ably pulls this one off. It's no wonder that his wines are so popular around here.



Paso Power (Continued from page 4)

Field Recordings

2018 Field Recordings “Wonderwall” Central Coast Syrah (\$18.99) Andrew Jones, who began his wine journey as a nursery vine grower, has stepped foot in nearly all the vineyards on the Central Coast of California. All his vineyard expertise is translated into his bottled wine, Field Recordings and Wonderwall. This classic coastal Syrah is full-bodied, with savory notes of tapenade and roasted meat, balanced by plum fruit and a seasoning of white pepper. This should be a perfect backyard grilling wine.

2020 Field Recordings “Domo Arigato Mr. Ramato” Central Coast (\$19.99) I never thought that a Ramato-style Pinot Gris would become one of my top selling wines. I first tasted it at the winery a couple months back while visiting with Andrew. If you're all about the “orange” wine movement, this is for you, though it seems to me that just about everyone loves it. The fruit is sourced from vineyards in Paso Robles, Santa Barbara County, and Edna Valley. The wine is fermented on its skins, which gives it a lovely rosé hue and a more textural mouthfeel. This is a white wine that drinks like a red.



Curt Schlachlin hosts K&L's Kaj Stroman at Sans Liege.



Not all sea and surf: the Enz vineyard holds its ground in the Lime Kiln Valley AVA, just east of Monterey County.

Monterey Rising and the Wines of Ian Brand

By Kaj Stromer

When you hear the word “Monterey,” you likely think of crashing waves and gnarled cypress trees hanging onto seaside cliffs; Big Sur, Pebble Beach, and Carmel-by-the-Sea; perhaps a music festival or two, the songs of whales, or even a song by Erroll Garner; of iconic names like Henry Miller, Jack Nicklaus, or Clint Eastwood. Here at K&L Wine Merchants, however, when we think of Monterey County, we think of great wine; and lately we think of Ian Brand.

Ian Brand is one of several key winemakers who have dedicated their careers to bringing out the best in wines from the Monterey area (often including the viticultural areas of neighboring San Benito County). As Ian puts it, “Monterey is the last major coastal region of California that hasn’t been completely blown up.” Named “Winemaker of the Year” by the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 2018, Brand is the mastermind behind three labels—Le P’tit Paysan, La Marea, and I. Brand. He shows us that it is still possible to make distinctive wines of place for under \$25 while being committed to organic farming and the pursuit of quality.



Ian Brand talks with K&L’s team during a 2018 visit.

We recently had the chance to catch up with Ian at his winery. After a brief tour of the facility, we tasted extensively through the lineup and followed the thread of conversation wherever it took us. I can say that it was one of my biggest eye-opening experiences in quite a few years.

2018 Le P’tit Paysan “Jack’s Hill” Monterey County Chardonnay (\$14.95) *Elsewhere \$20.* The Jack’s Hill Chardonnay is a dead ringer for an entry-level Chablis. If your tastes have moved away from the butter bombs of the past, here is your chance to taste unadorned Chardonnay

fruit. The pear and apple fruit flavors fill the glass, yet with a hint of restraint, which encourages the taster to keep coming back for more. There’s plenty here to like at twice the price, but the low tariff of \$15 makes this a must-buy. **90 WE**

2017 Le P’tit Paysan “Le P’tit Pape” San Benito County Red Blend (\$14.99) This is hands-down our best-selling wine from Ian. It reminds me of a Côtes-du-Rhône blend made for easy and uncomplicated drinking. It’s quite balanced with bright red fruit, notes of smoke and pepper, with a touch of herbs on the finish. This is the perfect everyday simple red that keeps you coming back for more on account of its flat-out delicious character and even friendlier price. **93 WE**

2019 Le P’tit Paysan “Old Vine” San Benito County Cabernet Sauvignon (\$19.99) While this might be an “un” Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, it is still unmistakably pedigreed Cabernet. You’d be surprised to learn that a Cabernet at this price is sourced from 45-year-old vines. The result is a wine that is deep, complex, yet smooth as silk. You’d be forgiven if you assumed this was just your standard Tuesday night Cab. But copious amounts of black fruit, violets, and herbs inform the taster that there’s more here than meets the pocketbook.



2019 La Marea “Kristy Vineyard” Monterey County Albariño (\$19.95) The traditionally Spanish white grape Albariño has been the Galician “it” wine for decades. Its savory salinity and cool and juicy flavors make it a favorite of seafood lovers around the world. The cooling maritime influence that pours over Spain’s western flank works much the same way here. The result is a wine with crisp minerality, hints of citrus, and bright fruit. Millions of years ago, this region was a shallow ocean bed. Now the area is replete with deposits of limestone which give the wine lift and intensity. The La Marea line of wines is Ian’s homage to the best of Spain.



2018 I. Brand & Family “Bayly Ranch” California Cabernet Franc (\$19.99) *Elsewhere \$30.* Cabernet Franc can exist in two styles; the more elegant central Loire style or the more muscular style found in Bordeaux. The Bayly Ranch Cab Franc is more a nod towards the Loire Valley reds of Chinon, Saumur, and Bourgueil. Tobacco notes and plums frame the nose. The wine is medium weight and more of an Old World style that beguiles you with an ethereal expression of the grape. There’s plenty of bright berries, mild spice, and a long savory

finish. It’s no wonder this has become one of our best sellers.

2019 I. Brand & Family “Enz Vineyard Old Vine” Lime Kiln Valley Mourvèdre (\$39.95) Single-variety bottlings of Mourvèdre in the US are quite rare, making this gem all the more noteworthy. More commonly associated with Spain (Monastrell) and the French region of Bandol, where it’s known for its brooding power and earthy flavors, the grape has yet to find its footing in the US. Ian sources the fruit from the esteemed Enz vineyard located in the remote Lime Kiln Valley AVA in the Gabilan Mountains. His keen sense for pedigree led him here to an exceptional discovery. Enz is a planting where the vine age exceeds 95 years! I particularly like how it fuses the dark, brooding saddle leather and earth with the right amount of West Coast fruit. A “Bandol” red, kissed by the California sun!



Vibrant in the Valley: Classic California Varietal Whites

By Shelby Griffiths

When I am asked what region in the world am I excited about for wine right now, I am often met with shock when I reply with my enthusiasm for California’s Central Valley. This large, warm viticultural area has long been known for producing high-volume, easy-going blends. While this association holds some truth, the Valley is also a hotbed of heritage vineyards and rare grape varieties that are deeply rooted in the state’s winemaking history. This treasure trove of vines has been catching the attention of many small, independent producers who are flocking to the region and producing exciting, high-quality, and affordable wines from these viticultural gems. In the spirit of summer, here are a few varietal white wines that have recently caught my attention and should catch yours as well.



Craig Haarmeyer draws a barrel sample in his West Sacramento winery.

2020 Monte Rio Cellars Lodi Sauvignon Blanc (\$19.99) Sourced from 30-year-old vines deep in the heart of Lodi, this fresh, electrifying grapefruit expression of Sauvignon Blanc will turn heads and be the star of any summer outdoor bash. Decorated sommelier-turned-winemaker Patrick Cappiello and his business partner, cult winemaker Pax Mahle, are all about “the spirit of old California” at Monte Rio Cellars. A low-intervention return to an old style of California wine, when lower-alcohol wines were the norm.

2019 Haarmeyer “St. Rey SRV” Clarksburg Chenin Blanc (\$16.99) Deep in the Sacramento River Delta lies Clarksburg, where the strong Delta breeze sweeps through the vineyards and cool marine air mingles with the vines. It’s here that Sacramento native Craig Haarmeyer has been promoting his “Sacramento terroir” movement through his eye-opening single-vineyard bottlings of Chenin Blanc. In an area that’s often overlooked, Craig celebrates the region’s rich history with the variety, and captures the terroir in this bottling with notes of crunchy yellow apples, mineral oyster shells, and lanolin. The balance of savoriness in this wine makes a perfect match for a weeknight cheese plate on those warm summer nights you don’t feel like cooking.





Morning light at Ascona vineyard.

The Past, Present and Future of the Santa Cruz Mountains

By Ryan Woodhouse

I'll start this article with a couple of quotes from famed wine critic Antonio Galloni:

"The Santa Cruz Mountains remains one of the most fascinating regions in the United States... Mountain viticulture is by its own definition a struggle against the elements. But it is precisely that struggle that so often yields wines of singular beauty."

"I tasted more truly exceptional wines from the Santa Cruz Mountains this year than at any time over the past decade... I have long believed that the Santa Cruz Mountains is one of the world's preeminent regions for fine whites and reds that speak of place."

I must admit I couldn't agree more with Antonio on both these points. The Santa Cruz Mountains have long produced some of the most compelling wines in the country. And they're getting better and better, with a new generation of farmers and winemakers pushing the upper limits and keeping the old guard on their toes instead of resting on their laurels. Now fully vaccinated, and with many restrictions being removed, I recently headed out on a tour of the Santa Cruz Mountains (SCM) with my SoCal colleague, Kaj Stromer. Kaj hadn't spent much time here before, so I wanted to put together an itinerary that would show him the diversity of the region and the remarkable variety of producers who call these hills home.

Our first visit of the day was a memorable one. We headed up into the redwoods on Highway 9 until we hit Skyline, a meandering road that follows the ridge line of the mountains some 2,500 feet above

the ocean. We soon reached our destination, the Ascona vineyard, a fascinating planting surrounded by dense forest with many undulations and aspects planted to a number of grape varieties. Our hosts, Ken and Abbey, live on the property and farm the vines. Ken runs Rhizos Viticulture, a company that looks after dozens of small vineyards across the entire appellation. He's known to many folks in the region as one of the best farmers around, and his connection to the vines was palpable as we walked the rows in the early morning light. After a highly informative stroll, we stood overlooking the vines and tasted through a beautiful selection of wines that all came from Ascona, but were made by different winemakers. All had a thread of beautiful tension and freshness: the whites with a keen acid line, the reds having an intriguing, savory *sous bois* note that worked well with the powerful, naturally concentrated fruit, and again, lovely and vibrant acidity. Two of the wines were from Madson Wines, a small, young producer that I have written about before in these pages. Ken is also part of the duo that is Madson with his buddy, Cole Thomas. And I will say again, I think they're making some of the best wines in the region, a belief recently reinforced by some *huge* critics' scores.



Santa Cruz Mountains sandstone at Ascona.

2019 Madson “Ascona Vineyard” Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir (\$49.95) A stunning bottle of SCM Pinot Noir. Wonderfully focused fruits of the forest, small black and red berries, leaf litter, bramble, turned earth. Bright acidity that is beautifully laced through the perfectly ripe fruit. An ethereal texture on the palate but flavors that go on and on. **96 WE**

2019 Madson “Ascona Vineyard” Santa Cruz Mountains Syrah (\$29.95) Top-notch Syrah you can run up against challengers from anywhere. Classic aromas and flavors of lilac and lavender, smoky berries, cracked pepper, allspice, cured meat, and fried sage. The wine has lots of savory stemmy notes (it’s made 100% whole cluster) but they’re in perfect union with the core of fruit and work really well. It’s already drinking beautifully, but I imagine it will grow in breadth and depth with more years in bottle. World-class Syrah. **96 WE**

Leaving Ascona Vineyard behind, we descended from 2,400 feet almost to sea level in the town of Santa Cruz before heading up into the mountains again (the coastal side of the range this time) to visit the renowned Trout Gulch vineyard nestled in the hills above Aptos. Our host was Ryan Alfaro, winemaker at Alfaro Family Vineyards, which was founded by his father Richard in 1997. Along with their home estate near the hamlet of Corralitos, the Alfaros recently bought Trout Gulch, a vineyard they had been farming for more than a decade prior. Now that it’s a true estate property, Ryan’s pride was plain to see as he walked us around the blocks of mature, 41-year-old Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. The close proximity to the ocean and persistent morning fog means this is a very cool site and fruit often hangs until late October. The vines are farmed organically and without irrigation. Beyond the fruit Alfaro keeps for the winery, the prized grapes from this site are pledged (by handshake agreements) to top producers Ceritas, Arnot-Roberts, and Kutch. Ryan, now making the wines for his family’s winery, also recently launched a fledgling brand of his own, Farm Cottage, with the inaugural release being a Trout Gulch Pinot. So, with a simple trestle table put up in the vineyard, and the bottles chilled down in Ryan’s self-converted camper van fridge, we were treated to some wines.

2019 Alfaro “Trout Gulch Vineyard” Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$24.95) Ryan Alfaro uses a light touch here. A stainless steel ferment and aging in neutral oak preserves the site’s signature ocean breeze salinity and mouthwatering acidity. Bright, vibrant, and delicious.

2019 Arnot-Roberts “Trout Gulch” Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$44.95) The Arnot-Roberts style works perfectly with Trout Gulch fruit. The concentration of this old Wente clone produces flavorful wines while retaining great acidity. The nose is floral with a whiff of citrus oil and fern. The palate is full of stony minerals and baked bread lees notes. Piercing, focused acidity on the finish with incredible persistence. **96 VN**

2019 Farm Cottage “Trout Gulch Vineyard” Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir (\$39.95) A very small three-barrel production from Ryan Alfaro. This might be Ryan’s inaugural release under the Farm Cottage label, but his father has been farming this vineyard for more than a decade and Ryan has experience working with the fruit under his family’s eponymous label. The Farm Cottage Pinot is a stunning expression of this vineyard. Mount Eden Clone planted in 1980, fermented entirely whole cluster. The wine is light and translucent in the glass, the nose explosive with potpourri, exotic spiced berries, ripe raspberry, redwood grove, and warm earth. Vibrant, and so silky on the palate. This is a style I love, perfectly executed.



Early morning walk at Ascona with Ken Swegles.



The difference? K&L's wine buyers take the less traveled road.

Our next stop was just a few minutes away (via a mildly intimidating dirt road) on an adjacent spine of land looking out to the Monterey Bay. We met with Keegan Mayo of Assiduous Wines to check out a tiny but high-caliber vineyard called Lilo. One of the most picturesque vineyards you're ever likely to see, this little parcel of vines is surrounded by stands of coast redwoods with a clear line of sight out to the glistening Pacific and on to the Big Sur coastline in the distance. Sadly, Keegan's own bottling from Lilo is all but sold out. However, he brought the rest of his stellar SCM releases for us to try. The Assiduous wines are a perfect example of how non-interventionist, or so-called "hands-off" winemaking is actually very much hands-on! With a guiding principle of less is more when it comes to manipulative winemaking, Keegan is essentially making natural wines, but is not dogmatic about the process and not entirely comfortable with the label. His *assiduous* work in the vineyard and cellar means the wines are remarkably clean, pure and precise, traits not always found in this genre of wine.

2020 Assiduous Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Gris (\$17.95)

The prior vintage of this wine helped put Keegan on many people's radar when Esther Mobley of the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote it up as one of her "Wine of the Week" selections. Predominantly from the Regan vineyard, which Keegan picks early and uses a little extended skin contact to build texture and complexity (but without making this a full-blown orange wine), the 2020 vintage is very crisp, with a keen acid line and plenty of salinity on the finish. Great for shellfish or any manner of seafood.

2019 Assiduous "Bald Mountain Vineyard" Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay

(\$24.95) A phenomenal bottle of Chardonnay from one of my favorite vineyards in the region, Ryan Beauregard's Bald Mountain. This older planting of Chardonnay, in the western edge of the mountains near Bonny Doon, grows in a unique white sand soil made from ancient sea floor. The wines from here all share a piercing minerality and persistence on the palate. Keegan's expression deftly balances a nice, almost exotic ripeness, with good mid-palate density and lovely noisette quality along with the trademark minerality and focused acidity through the finish.



Assiduous winemaker, Keegan Mayo.

2019 Assiduous “Bates Ranch” Santa Cruz Mountains Cabernet Sauvignon (\$29.95)

When I heard Keegan had managed to get his hands on some highly sought-after Bates Ranch fruit I was excited to taste the result. And it was worth the wait! The iconic vineyard, set high on the Hecker Pass at the southern end of the AVA, has produced some of the finest and longest-lived Cabernet in the region. Keegan’s gentle but attentive hand in the cellar has resulted in a wonderfully pure and varietally correct wine bursting with black and red currants, briary tones, singed cedar, cigar box, and dried herbs. Keegan spoke of how this wine is made up of 50% old vine plantings (1972) along with younger vines, which he feels gives the perfect combination of bold fruit, powerful structure, and savory umami qualities. I couldn’t agree more!



This vineyard, immediately adjacent to Mount Eden Estate, consists of old, head-trained vines growing out of the red-tinged, iron-rich Franciscan shale soils. The vines are direct descendants of Paul Masson’s original plantings here, a distinct lineage from any other “clones” in California. We were shown around the vineyard by Frédéric Ballario, a Champagne native who now lives on the mountain and is the full-time caretaker of the vines. His connection to this place is undeniable, and he strives to uphold the site’s historic significance. Our visit was arranged by Alex Krause of Birichino, which has long been a staple of our SCM portfolio. Recently they were offered a small parcel of Peter Martin Ray Cabernet and jumped at the chance. Birichino now also makes a Chardonnay from this heralded site. After a somewhat awe-inspiring tour of the vineyard we stood and tasted the most recent releases amidst the beautiful vines rustling in the breeze.

2019 Birichino “Peter Martin Ray Vineyard” Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$54.95)

Coming from 1982-planted vines of Chassagne-Montrachet lineage, this wine has incredible phenolic density and presence on the palate. Golden orchard fruit, quince, baked pear, piquant acidity, and mineral tinges. Subtle nutty oak frames the wine and adds a spicy nuance without distracting. A savory, moreish acidity lingers long. It’s a wine you will go back to time and time again and find more nuances unfolding.



2017 Birichino “Peter Martin Ray Vineyard” Santa Cruz Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon (\$74.95)

The 2017 vintage produced profound wines in this neighborhood, wines of power and longevity. Aromas of violet pastilles and blackcurrant cordial lead the way with a panoply of blue and purple berry fruits. Savory nuances are woven throughout—unsmoked cigar, cedar chest, dusty earth. Fine but noble tannin, beautifully integrated subtle oak, and spirited acidity that gives a wonderful sense of energy and vitality. Writing in *Vinous*, critic Josh Reynolds said of the wine: “Seamless, focused, lithe and distinctly old school in character, in the best way, finishing impressively long and spicy.”

94 VN, 93 WE



Vineyard manager, Frédéric Ballario, at Peter Martin Ray.

Next stop was back over on the San Francisco Bay side of the mountains in the famed “Chaine d’Or,” or “Golden Chain,” as early vintners dubbed the ridge of peaks that run along the eastern edge of the Santa Cruz Mountains from Los Gatos in the south to Woodside in the north. We were privileged enough to be able to walk the historic Peter Martin Ray vineyard high above Saratoga.

To finish up the day, I figured, what tour of the SCM would be complete without seeing the crown jewel, Ridge Monte Bello? Senior vice president of vineyard operations for Ridge Vineyards, David Gates, graciously gave a couple hours of his time to show us a few parcels of the “first growth” site, including some brand-new blocks being planted at the very top of the hill. We were also invited to delve into the underground cellar at the old winery, dug into the limestone



bedrock with hand-stacked barrels floor to ceiling. It was quite surreal. Associate winemaker Shun Ishikubo appeared with a freshly drawn tank sample of the newly assembled blend for 2019 Monte Bello set for bottling in the coming months (it's stunning), and we even got to taste some of the individual barrel components that will become 2020 Monte Bello (also beautiful and seemingly free from any noticeable smoke issues from the devastating fires that plagued much of the region last summer). Kaj and I could hardly wipe the grins off our faces as next we sat down to taste all the current release wines, with a few library bottles thrown in for good measure. I was in awe of David's intimate knowledge of the vines and wines. His 32 years with Ridge mean he's likely forgotten more about growing grapes here than most will ever know, and yet I was struck by his continued drive to improve and innovate. He was highly knowledgeable about so many other



Barrel tasting 2020 Monte Bello at Ridge Vineyards with David Gates.

vineyards, growers, and winemakers across the region—it's quite obvious that neither David, nor Ridge Vineyards in general, take their position at the literal and qualitative peak of the SCM for granted. They're still very much looking at their peers and new generations of vigneronns to keep their finger on the pulse and their wines at the forefront. From what I can see (and taste), the future of this place is set to be just as impressive as its past.



Underground cellar at Ridge Monte Bello.

We tasted too many wines to list, but here are a few highlights we have available:

2019 Ridge Vineyards "Estate" Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$49.95) Speaking of constant fine tuning and not resting on their laurels, one of the most dramatically different wines in Ridge's portfolio today versus a decade ago is the estate Chard. Grown on Monte Bello vineyard, this wine has become progressively more restrained and focused, with a deliberate dialing back of ripeness and new oak usage. It's still a powerful, flavorful wine, but the crystalline core of acidity and minimal oak impact really allows the quality and vitality of the fruit to shine through. **94 JS**

(Continued on back page)



Don't Even Mention That Movie

By Ryan Woodhouse

There's a grape (and you all know its name) that many people love to hate and hate to love. It's not cool, it's not obscure, nor is it mysterious. It's found at the core of some of the finest and most collectable wines on the planet, and yet they don't bear its name. Along with Riesling, this grape has been "coming back" or "the next big thing" for as long as I can remember...but is probably neither.

However, I'd like to list a few of the finest varietal examples of this grape here and ask you to set aside all preconceptions and judge the wines for how they express themselves in the glass. In recent years, I'm told, more and more acres of this dark horse grape are being planted across California, and top producers are fighting to get their hands on quality sources of it. Great examples of this variety are generally more accessible than their Cabernet Sauvignon counterparts, yet can stand up just as well to extended aging in the cellar.

I am of course speaking of the much-maligned grape variety, Merlot.

2016 Whitehall Lane Napa Valley Merlot (\$21.95) Whitehall Lane is perfectly located just off Highway 128 in Rutherford. This family-owned-and-operated property quietly and consistently puts out stellar quality wines, and Merlot is one of their strong suits. Beautiful plummy fruit, red currant, cacao nib, dusty earth, and subtle tobacco notes. Incredible value. **91 WE**

2017 L'Ecole No 41 Columbia Valley Merlot (\$21.95) One of my favorite producers in Washington, L'Ecole puts out consistently excellent wines inspired by traditional Bordeaux flavors. Powerful briary fruit, black and red berries, leather, spice. Medium to full-bodied, this drinks well above its modest price point. Sub this in for a \$50 Cab next time you have steak on the grill and see just how Merlot can deliver. **92 WE**

2016 Mayacamas Mount Veeder Merlot (\$59.95) Famed for their immortal Cabernet Sauvignon capable of going five decades in the cellar, Mayacamas also produces some of the finest Merlot on the planet (and it comes in at less than half the price of their Cab). This

wine conveys its mountain terroir just as convincingly as the Cabernet; savory soil notes, dried herbs, cedar, and cigar box. Robust red to black fruits swell with time in the glass: ripe red currant, blackberry, and dark cherry. Nice dusty spices and floral tones also emerge. The property's formidable structure is present, but the tannins here are softer and more approachable than its stable mate. Rack of lamb—yes please! **95 VN, 94 JS, 94 WE**

2018 Duckhorn Napa Valley Merlot (\$44.95) A stalwart of Napa Merlot, Duckhorn has long championed this varietal even over Cabernet Sauvignon. With some of the best plantings up and down the valley, this bottle is a consistent go-to for me and never disappoints. In fact, I often prefer the regular Napa Valley bottling over the more expensive Three Palms vineyard designate.

2016 Larkmead "Firebelle" Napa Valley Bordeaux Blend (\$94.95) Elsewhere \$150. While not technically a varietal Merlot, at 67%, clearly that grape is in the driver's seat here. Larkmead's estate is a highly parcelled planting where vines are intricately matched with the different seams of soil that traverse the property. This is a wine that can match any Cabernet in the valley for power, intensity, and structure. The rich, decadent, mouth-filling texture is bridled by some serious tannin and wonderfully exotic oak. Red to black fruit mingles with loamy earth notes and woody spices. Lush mid-palate texture with tons of layers. Nice grip in the finish—decant for an hour if drinking before 2026. **96 JS, 95 WE, 94 RP**

2018 Leonetti Walla Walla Valley Merlot (\$89.95) One of the most famed and critically acclaimed Merlot producers in the New World. Leonetti's monstrous and age-worthy Merlots are known across the globe, and for good reason. 100% Merlot in a full-throttle style with lashings of blackberry, cassis, dark chocolate, baking spice, and hot stone. Drink this now or over the next ten years for one of the most explosive expressions of the variety on the planet. **96 JS, 94 JD**





One last look at the Peter Martin Ray vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mountains before we head back to the shop.

Santa Cruz Mountains (Continued from page 12)

2018 Ridge Vineyards “Estate” Santa Cruz Mountains Cabernet Sauvignon (\$59.95) I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, this probably represents the best value bottle of Cabernet one can buy in California. Entirely grown at Monte Bello, farmed the same, and handled the same at harvest, the wine is set on its own path after a series of rigorous tastings where the 75–100 individual ferments that come off the property are assessed. The wines with more structure are given extended maceration and earmarked for Monte Bello. The more accessible, fruit-forward lots are selected for the estate Cabernet. This is quite literally baby Monte Bello for a fraction of the price. **94 JS**



2019 Ridge Vineyards “East Bench” Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (\$29.95)

Ridge’s East Bench Zin can often be overshadowed by the grandeur and spectacle of Geyserville and Lytton Springs, which typically get higher scores. However, I tasted this wine during Ridge’s online, virtual release party, and was quite smitten. After tasting it again at the winery, I’m convinced this vintage is every bit as impressive as the more famous, and expensive, flagship bottlings. Remarkably silky and elegant, the wine abounds in rich, ripe fruit. But the palate is so pure, vibrant, and polished. The ultimate burger wine and a bargain to boot. **94 JS**



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