

A fair wind is blowing in Santa Barbara County

By Robert S. Scott, Host of www.WinelineTV.com and www.WinelineRadio.com

Recently, I was invited to a sit down seminar and tasting of wines from Santa Barbara County, California. It turned out to be a revelation for me.

Jackson Family Wines sponsored the event and, naturally, we tasted wines from their wineries in this unique and interesting region. This is Pinot Noir and Chardonnay country. Now, I am a lover of both varietals when they come from Burgundy in France. I am somewhat put off by New World versions of these two classic wines. I find them to be overreaching with jammy fruit, oak and alcohol. Of course there are exceptions to this and everyone's tastes are different. But, that is my general interpretation of New World Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Well, knock me over with a feather... These varietals, when produced in Santa Barbara County are elegant, refined, polished and, to my mind, much more like the fine wines of Burgundy. So, I asked myself why. Why do these varietals from Southern California react to the climate, temperature range and soil conditions in such a way that they produce wines unlike those of Central and Northern California?

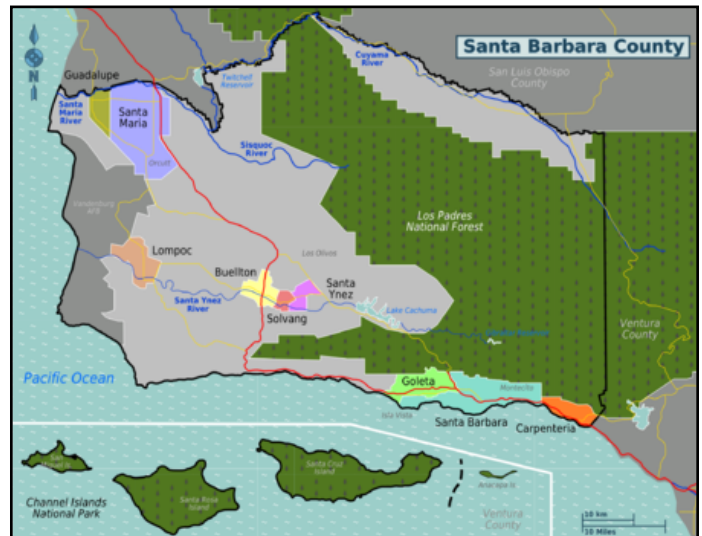
Santa Barbara County definitely has its highs and lows. They range from 6,803 feet at Big Pine Mountain down to the Pacific Ocean Sea Level. This is the result of a Tectonic plate collision some 15 - 25 million years ago. Boom! This shifted the north-south mountain ranges into an east-west orientation... no easy feat. Sedimentation from the crust of the Pacific Plate moved inward and produced an outstanding terroir perfect for the cultivation of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. It's got your calcareous soils of chalk and limestone, your sandy loam with gravel and clay and your sedimentary gravel. Does that sound a little like Burgundy?

The Jackson Family Wines vineyards occupy the three east-west running valleys that suck ribbons of cooled air from the Pacific Ocean. These "transverse ranges" are Santa Maria Valley AVA, Los Alamos Valley and Sta. Rita Hills AVA and, many of the vineyards are only about 5 to 20 miles away from the coast. To say there is a coastal influence is a major understatement. Just imagine putting a giant AC compressor a little ways out to sea then, cranking it on, blasting hyper-cooled air into these valleys. The average daily average temperature ranges between 70 to 74 degrees F. The grapes like this. They get to hangout on the vines for around 200 days a year. In Burgundy the hang time is about 160 days. Oregon 160 -170 days and the Russian River Valley in Sonoma gets 175 days of hang time. The extra 25 to 40 days combined with the cool temps allows the grapes to snooze without getting a sunburn. It's like spraying the vines with a 50+ SPF. The sugars have a chance to slowly increase their influence on the grapes imparting without developing a jammy sugar high. What an elegant idea, thanks to the powers that be.



Santa Barbara's wine producing regions one of the oldest in California, dating back to the Spanish missionaries of the late 1700s. The modern era came about 1964 when Uriel Nielson planted the first commercial vineyard in Santa Maria Valley. The Sta. Rita Hills AVA followed in 1971 and in 1975 Firestone became the first estate to make wine using its own locally grown grapes. In the 1980s, Santa Barbara woke up, stretched, scratched its head and began making wine news as Ken Brown Wines, Byron Wines, Au Bon Climat, Foxen, Sanford, Qupe and others emerged and came on the scene.

Then came the movie *Sideways* in 2004. That's all it took to blast Santa Barbara Pinot Noir into the limelight. Today, the region is awash in novel thinkers, somewhat rational long timers and free wheeling winemakers all attempting to bring their special influence to the winemaking process expanding the range and styles of not only Pinot Noir and Chardonnay but, also varietals such as Riesling, Chenin Blanc and more with Jackson Family Wines leading the charge.



Ever mindful of environmental impacts, Jackson Family Wines and vineyards in Santa Barbara County are *Certified California Sustainable Wine Growing* and *Sustainable in Practice* certified. This is no easy feat. The programs are rigorous and require third party oversight / approval. Adhering to these certifications ensures long term health of the ecosystems including Water & Energy Efficiency, Land Stewardship, Community Development with Transparency & Goal-setting. A noble endeavor, if I do say.

The Chardonnay and Pinot Noir of Santa Barbara County pair exceptionally well with the bounty of field and ocean, nuts and cheeses, a wide variety of sauces, spices and herbs and fresh from the garden fruit and veggies. In fact, it is hard to find a mis-matched pairing from these two varietals.

The Jackson family Wineries include **Brewer-Clifton** in the Sta. Rita Hills AVA. Their place in the region is impeccable and deep. They help define the AVA in its infancy and their winemaking philosophy is Zen-like in field and cellar. **Diatom** has dedicated itself to an expression of Chardonnay from the three coastal areas: the Santa Maria Valley, Sta. Rita Hills and Los Alamos Valley. Under the leadership of founder and winemaker Greg Brewer they deliver wines with both power and finesse. **Byron Vineyards & Winery** is anchored by the historic Nielson vineyard on the Santa Maria Bench, which was originally planted in 1964. Winemaker Jonathan Nagy says that "Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are unlikely varietals to be grown this far south but, those crazy East-West valleys, alluvial deposits add a truly magical element that generates world-class wine." **Cambria Estate Vineyards & Winery** was one of the earliest Chardonnay and Pinot Noir crus in California. This 1600 acre estate is located on the geological massif of the Santa Maria Bench. And, because the soils are complex, the old vine clones and selections produce meticulous wines under the guidance of winemaker Jill Russell. Winemaker Tiaan Lordan of **Hartford Court** says "There's something special about the Santa Barbara climate that reminds me a lot of home (Cape Town, South Africa)... I've never experienced a more direct line from climate to wine anywhere else in California." **Kendall-Jackson** may be based in Sonoma County but, it produces Jackson Estate Chardonnay from Santa Maria Valley and Santa Barbara. Wine Master Randy Ullom knew that "this region with all its offerings would rise to provide gracious, beautiful wines year after year." **Nielson Winery**, in the

Santa Maria Valley, lovingly produces Pinot Noir and Chardonnay bottlings that convey the distinctive characteristics and intimate taste of the valleys. Winemaker Ryan Pace says “there are few, if any places in the world that can match the tremendous diversity and opportunity found in Santa Barbara County.” **Siduri** produces single vineyard Pinot Noir from more than twenty vineyards, including a number in Santa Barbara County. Winemaker Adam Lee thinks “The Sta. Rita Hills is one of the most geographically unique areas in all of North America.” There is continuous influence from the Pacific Ocean winds that blow through the day leading to a cooling aspect that reduces berry size and concentrates the wines with natural acidity.



Left to right: Adam Lee / Siduri, Ryan Pace / Nielson, Jonathan Nagy / Byron, Greg Brewer / Brewer-Clifton / Diatom, Jill Russell / Cambria, Randy Ullom / Kendall-Jackson, Chris Jackson / Jackson Family Wineries



If you are interested in details, here's few for you. Santa Barbara County is comprised of 2,737 square miles. In comparison, Sonoma is 1,768 square miles. The highest point in Santa Barbara County is Big Pine Mountain at 6,803 ft. above sea level. Naturally, the lowest point is the Pacific Ocean. 450,000 people live in Santa Barbara County. SBC has over 200 wineries ranging in production size from 600 to 400,000 cases per year. SBC has six approved AVAs (American Viticultural Areas) cultivating 7,720 acres of Chardonnay, 5,571 acres of Pinot Noir and a smattering of Syrah (1,930 acres), Sauvignon Blanc (830 acres), Cabernet Sauvignon (738 acres) and Grenache (495 acres).

The historic dislocation of the land mass caused a deposit of marine soils into the regions landscape. These soils are a direct result of sediments left by the receding Pacific Ocean and the Santa Maria and Santa Ynez Rivers. You will find Chalk, limestone and diatomaceous earth. Sandy loam mixed with clay, gravel, chert and sedimentary river rock and sand... perfect conditions for grape growing.

The influence of the super cooled air coming in from the ocean drives the temperature down and extends the growing season up to 200 days before harvest. By comparison, the Cote D' Or in Burgundy has a growing season of 160 days, the Russian River Valley in Sonoma and the Willamette Valley in Oregon range from 160 - 175 days. This means that the hangtime for grapes in Santa Barbara County is greatly extended over other coastal wine growing regions., resulting in a level of balance between acidity and fruit that is hard to find elsewhere. And, I must say, those characteristics are exhibited in the glass.

So, I advise you to explore the potential of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from Santa Barbara County. Compare the quality and complexity with others originating in other regions of California, Oregon and even Burgundy. I think you will agree with me that the wines of Santa Barbara, as produced by the Jackson Family Wines and other fine wineries, are on par or even a step above examples from more well known regions, both new and old world. Indeed, there is a fair wind blowing in Santa Barbara County and, it is blowing in your direction.