

# Thriving wineries tucked into rugged scenery

By Carey Sweet

There are many established wineries in the Santa Cruz wine region, including well-known names like Bonny Doon, which is working toward producing some 100,000 cases a year each of its Vin Gris de Cigare and Le Cigare Volant.

But some of its most interesting destinations are small spots hidden out-of-sight in the Santa Cruz Mountains. This is a remarkable area, established in the 1870s when Paul Masson and Charles Lefranc planted the first vineyards there from cuttings transplanted from Burgundy.

Today, the community includes nearly 300 boutique grape growers and vintners producing Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and smaller lots of other varieties like Syrah, Merlot and Zinfandel. Uniting all the growers and makers is a strong sense of independence and respect for the hard work it can take to nourish elegant grapes in the rugged region.

For a taste, many visitors start on the Corralitos Wine Trail, at the southern, coastal end of the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation. Here, you can easily visit family-run wineries such as El Vaquero Winery, Storrs Winery & Vineyards and Windy Oaks Estate.

Given the rural locations, don't expect to swirl and spit simply standing at a bar — here, guests sprawl on sunny (and often windy) patios overlooking the vines, redwoods, conifers and oaks.

They often meet farm animals, venture into the forest for back-to-nature hikes and experience wines' earthy romance.

Here are some more wineries that go beyond the glass:

## RIDGE VINEYARDS

Serious wine connoisseurs covet Ridge's famed Monte Bello Cabernet Sauvignon. So do wine judges — in 1976, the wine won fifth place in France's Judgment of Paris blind tasting of California and French Cabernets. In 2006, the tasting was re-enacted with the same vintages, and the Monte Bello took first place.

These days, the wine is valuable enough that it is allocated to Ridge club members only, with a six-bottle maximum purchase (the 2018 Monte Bello rings in at \$235 per bottle). But you can still visit the estate from whence it comes, set at 2,300 feet in the northern Santa Cruz Mountains, and taste other high-profile wines like the Estate Chardonnay (\$55) and Perrone Merlot (\$75).

"Ridge is dedicated to the belief that great wines begin with the site," said John Olney, head winemaker and chief operating officer. "The Monte Bello vineyard benefits from the unique combination of cool climate, fractured limestone subsoils and low yielding vines, which creates deeply concentrated and complex wines."

He lets the grapes speak for themselves, he noted.

"We let the unique conditions of the vineyard determine the quality of the wine, and prefer to guide the natural process rather than steer it towards a particular style," he said. "That is fundamental to creating Monte Bello, a



PHOTOS BY LAURA MORTON



**Top: Visitors to Lester Estate Wines in Aptos enjoy an outdoor tasting experience. Right: David Delucchi, left, and Diane Delucchi taste Lester wines. Above: Visitors can sample three current release wines for \$15 at the rustic Tasting Barn.**

wine that consistently reflects the distinct character of the vineyard, not the whim of the winemaker."

There's rich history here. Back in 1885, northern Italian immigrant Osea Perrone purchased the first 180 acres of the estate, terraced the slopes and planted vineyards. By 1892, he had built a winery from native limestone and produced his first bonded vintage.

Over the next century, successive new owners and partners renovated and modernized, expanded operations and planted three new estate vineyards. They released the first signature Monte Bello Cabernet Sauvignon in 1962, and to this day, Ridge still showcases its single vineyard wines touting a "pre-industrial approach" that relies on their grapes' natural characteristics with minimal intervention or flavor standardization.

Visitors can sample the differences between vintages when they visit the winery. The Monte Bello Private Library Tasting pairs current release and library wines side by side, to explore how the wines evolve over time (\$75 per person). Or for a more general introduction, you can reserve the basic Estate Tasting for \$20; you'll still get the same polished yet personable attention. For \$30 more, you may add the 2011 Monte Bello to your Estate tasting flight.

It's worth driving the narrow,



steep road for the architecture, too. A rustic-chic redwood building is flanked by decks and views across Silicon Valley. Relax, enjoy and just beware when you walk in the gardens — as signs will remind you, this remote destination is rattlesnake country.

## LESTER ESTATE WINES

The property is also known as Deer Park Ranch because lots of wild deer populate the rugged, forested 210-acre property. Visitors can greet them on walkabouts, or through summer, by reserving a Safari Wine Adventure for private groups of up to eight (\$125 per person). You load up into a classic, mint green 1981 Land Rover Defender, exploring mountaintop vistas, rolling hills, meadows and redwood groves with stops to sample the "The Big 6" core group of estate wines.

For something slower paced, taste outdoors under towering redwoods or on rocking chairs on the patio next to the rustic Tasting Barn (just note that the Tasting Barn is only open on Saturdays). Here, you can sample three current release wines (\$15) including a variety of Estate grown Pinot Noir (\$29-\$55), Syrah (\$27-\$45) and Chardonnay (\$37).

Do keep in mind, too, that due to the limited production, wines are available exclusively via Lester's Wine Club, through the tasting room or online. Current

releases range from just 48 cases of 2020 Rosé of Syrah to 271 cases of 2017 Syrah.

As one of the newer operations in Aptos, the first vines were planted in the lower area in 1998, and the upper vineyard was established in 2001. Tucked in the southern end of the appellation in the Corralitos district, the estate's location about three miles from Monterey Bay brings a cool climate to encourage fresh wines with crisp acidity. The sandy soils here also benefit the often fog-bathed vineyards by retaining heat and draining well to produce highly aromatic wines.

Then, there are the winemakers. Property owner Dan Lester works with three different talents, each adding their creative stamp.

"The Santa Cruz Mountains terroir is not just the different soils and climates found in its many nooks and crannies, such as Corralitos, it's the character and soul of those of us choosing to stake our claim here," Lester said.

## BIG BASIN VINEYARDS

Named for its site next to Big Basin Redwoods State Park in Boulder Creek, the boutique winery was founded by French immigrants who grew wine grapes more than 100 years ago, working out of an 1890s house and winery structure. Those buildings burned down in the

## Details

**Corralitos Wine Trail:**  
[www.corralitoswinetrail.com](http://www.corralitoswinetrail.com)

**Ridge Vineyards:** 17100 Montebello Road, Cupertino, 408-868-1320, [www.ridgevine.com](http://www.ridgevine.com)

**Lester Estate Wines:** 1950 Pleasant Valley Road, Aptos, 831-728-3793, [www.deerparkranch.com](http://www.deerparkranch.com)

**Big Basin Vineyards:** 830 Memory Lane, Boulder Creek, (831) 621-8028, [www.bigbasinvineyards.com](http://www.bigbasinvineyards.com)

1970s, and new owner/winemaker Bradley Brown took over in 1998. He planted his California Certified Organic Farmers Estate Vineyard in 2000 on a steep hillside, and completed a new winery in 2003.

It's a cozy set up, beginning with 2 acres of Pinot Noir for the first harvest in 2016, and a single acre of Roussanne for the white wine's 2018 vintage. Now, there are 10 terraced acres of grapes planted, including Syrah, all nestled within 150 acres of redwood forest.

The winery also sources from other Santa Cruz Mountains vineyards, including Lester Estate Wines, Howard Family Vineyard, Ferrari Family Vineyard, Alfaro Family Vineyard and Betchart Vineyard.

"Our approach to wine making is based on the principle that you can't improve upon a great vineyard in a special site," Brown said. "Our goal is to be as transparent as possible with great fruit so that every nuance comes through. This requires attention to detail and purity in winemaking which for us means all indigenous small lot fermentations, gentle use of whole clusters, no additives, minimal sulfur use and bottling unfined and unfiltered."

Brown recently acquired new concrete eggs that he will use to ferment and age some of Big Basin's white wines. The process showcases natural grape nuances, since unlike oak barrels, the vessels don't impart their own flavors to the wine. Semi-porous concrete is also different from stainless steel tanks, since it allows a tiny bit of air in and out of the container for gentle aging.

"This is in line with our effort to strive for greater purity and expression of the great vineyard sites we are working with," he said.

The petite operation is open Fridays through Sundays, or you can sign up for a virtual tasting where you get five of their best wines in 3.4 oz bottles (perfect for two tasters), and enjoy a Zoom with a tasting room staff member (\$49). Later this summer, too, the winery will debut a new tasting room at Pacific Avenue and Front Street in downtown Santa Cruz.

Go for the estate visit, though, to enjoy tasting on the vineyard- and forest-flanked patio. Then, hike around the Big Basin Redwoods and Castle Rock state parks. On Fridays through October, you can also take in live music in the natural amphitheater (5:30 to 9:30 p.m.), including wines by the glass and bottle, plus food from vendors such as the Taco House food truck.