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California: The Undervalued and Overperforming Santa Cruz Mountains



By **MATTHEW LUCZY** ⌚ Apr 18, 2024



The Santa Cruz Mountains are more wilderness than wine region. There is no easily definable central hub or convenient main-drag highway that takes you through endless rows of manicured vineyards and storybook winery architecture. Vineyards are few and far between, commonly in the owner's backyard, and occupy just 0.3% of the land within the vast appellation. Most of the region consists of open-space preserves, land trusts and state parks, making for ever-present expansive vistas. More often than not, the only vines you see are those you are currently visiting, appearing only once you've navigated narrow mountain roads through dramatic topography and endless coniferous forest.

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Big Basin Vineyards near Boulder Creek

The mountains themselves result from the colliding Pacific and North American plates, the former buckling underneath the latter 30 million years ago, with the San Andreas Fault conveniently dividing the region down the center. The soil types are vast and varied but are generally very thin and extremely rocky, with Franciscan shale common throughout the rugged, central heart of the region. The AVA boundaries are drawn by elevation, 400 feet being the limit on the west side facing the Pacific and 800 feet on the east side, ensuring that vineyards are either at or above the fog line.

Roughly 90 minutes south of San Francisco, the region has a palpable, rugged timelessness running through it. While numerous wine fads have come and gone in previous decades, many have not taken root here due to the climatic conditions and isolated nature. For example, the infamous “Ripeness Wars” of the late 1990s and early 2000s seem to have largely passed this region by. A small group of historic producers and a handful of their proteges have explored and harnessed the trifecta of mountainous terrain, oceanic influence and endlessly varied geology to produce some of the most compelling wines in California.



Coast Grade Vineyard in Ben Lomond Mountain

The vast majority of notable producers in the region are featured in this report. As readers will find in my tasting notes, honest representations of the region are the norm among this cohort, not wines forced into a pre-determined style or mold, something that is welcome rare compared to other regions in California. The Santa Cruz Mountains feel like the “Levi’s 501” of California wine; no matter how many popular brands of designer denim come and go, the 501’s strength and influence is in its consistency and non-pursuit of the newest, shiniest, trendiest thing. The small scale of most wineries means that, more often than not, you meet with the individuals who produce the wines and tend to the vineyards themselves. This refreshing and welcome factor adds warmth to the rusticity one can find throughout the region.



Split Rail Vineyard above Corralitos

Visiting any wine region efficiently takes planning and forethought, but Santa Cruz Mountains necessitates adventure and eschews convenience; three appointments in a day is a packed itinerary, and you will spend an equal amount of time in a car as with the producers. The region's vastness makes it challenging to categorize, and its endless nuances are intimidating to grasp. Local winemakers use several subregions to delineate the sprawl, only one of which, Ben Lomond Mountain, has an official sub-AVA. Even a cursory overview of these areas gives a more informed idea of what to expect from the wines and greatly simplifies travel planning, should readers be enticed to explore.

Corralitos

Corralitos and nearby Aptos are hubs in the southernmost section of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Sitting entirely on the Pacific Plate and in the direct influence of Monterey Bay, most of these vineyard sites are at lower elevations from 400 feet to 1,000 feet, sitting right at or just below the fog line and just three to five miles from the ocean. As with much of the area, these have long been agricultural areas, supplying apples for Martinelli's and berries for Driscoll's. This area is home to redwoods, madrone and Douglas firs, with soil types including sandy loam, clay and streaks of limestone at higher elevations.



Alfaro's Ryan Spencer Vineyard in Corralitos

Predominantly planted to Burgundian varieties, Corralitos Pinot Noirs are typically red-fruited, fresh and lifted, and Chardonnays display zesty acidity, cut and precision. Notable vineyards include Trout Gulch, Mt. Pajaro, Alfaro, Lilo, Lester, Split Rail, Saveria and Toyon. The Summit region can be considered a higher-elevation extension of this area, rising to 2,750 feet in elevation on the Pacific Plate, with more broken-up and varied soils. It stretches from Corralitos to the central region around Highway 17.

Skyline

Named for Highway 35 or Skyline Boulevard, this is the spine of the Santa Cruz Mountains, featuring some of the highest vineyards in the region at up to 2,500 feet elevation. It was created when the Pacific and North American plates collided 30 million years ago, creating endless pockets, folds and dips that provide influence from both the Monterey and San Francisco Bays. The foliage changes from coniferous trees to oaks and manzanitas, and the soils include the region's signature Franciscan shale and sandstone.



Horseshoe Vineyard off Skyline Boulevard

As with Corralitos, this region is dominated by Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, although they could not be more different than their coastal counterparts; the elevation change and dramatic exposures result in less fog influence and less diurnal shifts but cooler temperatures overall, producing dense and burly wines of structure that require cellaring to soften. Notable vineyards include Ascona, Mindego Ridge, Deerheart, Gist Ranch, Thomas Fogarty, Horseshoe, Alpine and Skyline.

Saratoga & Woodside

The eastern side of the Santa Cruz Mountains is home to many famous pioneering names who went on to found icons such as Ridge and Mount Eden. Sitting entirely on the North American Plate, elevations here vary between 800 and 2,200 feet. This area's temperature moderation comes from the San Francisco Bay rather than the Pacific Ocean, and soils vary remarkably, including Franciscan shale, sandstone, clay and decomposed limestone. While Pinot Noir and Chardonnay do very well on this side of the region, the Bordeaux varieties here reach timeless and iconic heights. Notable vineyards include Monte Bello, Fellom Ranch, Mountain Winery, Mount Eden, Domaine Eden and Chaine d'Or.



The Entrance to Ridge's Monte Bello Estate

Ben Lomond Mountain

While the rest of the Santa Cruz Mountains consists of separate mountaintops, Ben Lomond Mountain is one long, continuous barrier to the Pacific. Thus, it protects other subregions, bearing the brunt of intense winds coming directly off the open ocean. The vineyards are planted mainly between 1,300 and 2,000 feet in elevation, well above the fog line, making for unmitigated access to sunlight. The soils here are granite, sandstone, limestone and Zayante sand, a unique combination that was influential in awarding it separate AVA status. Notable vineyards include Bald Mountain Vineyard, Coast Grade and Beauregard Ranch.



Bald Mountain Vineyard in Ben Lomond Mountain

NOTE: This is one of three reports on the wines from the Santa Cruz Mountains published in this issue, along with [California: Exploring Obsession at Rhys Vineyards](#) and [California: Four Decades of Mount Eden Vineyards](#).



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