

West of the West – Santa Cruz Mountains



PATRICK COMISKEY

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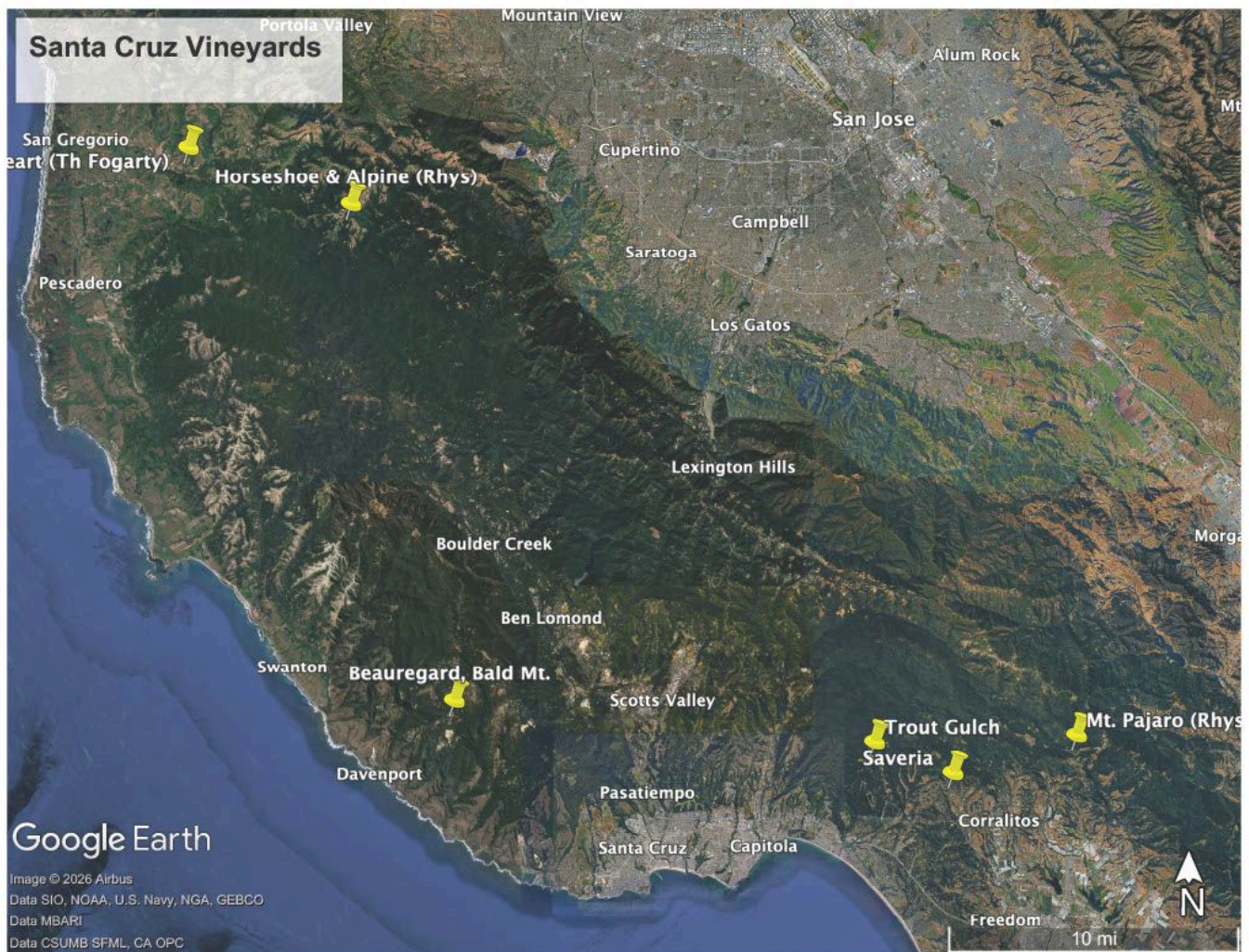
CALIFORNIA PINOT NOIR CHARDONNAY



Part 4 of an exploration of California’s westernmost vineyards. Above, the Split Rail vineyard in Corralitos (credit: John Benedetti). See also [California’s far-coast vineyards](#), [the SLO Coast](#) and [coastal Monterey](#).

Continuing our way up California’s west coast, by the time we’ve reached the Santa Cruz Mountains, a new muddle of fault lines has disrupted the landscape, creating a breathtaking, disorienting fairyland of coastland that happens to serve as an exceptional source for wine grapes.

To this point the coastline has been following more or less along the north-by-north-west axis defined by the San Andreas Fault. The fault runs obtrusively along the entire Santa Cruz appellation, dividing the Pacific and North American plates, forming a valley that, on its northern end, serves as the basin for an emerald-hued reservoir called San Andreas Lake. (The fault itself gets its name from this valley.) Here, though, the land mass bulges westward like a tree's bolus, from Santa Cruz to Half Moon Bay, some 40 miles (64 km) north. To its east are the tech denizens of Silicon Valley, Menlo Park, Mountain View, Palo Alto, Cupertino and the inner reaches of the San Francisco Bay.



A tour of westernmost vineyards along the Santa Cruz Mountains

Here, our slip-sliding continental plates have lost some of their freewheeling momentum. They've run into what's called a restraining bend, an impedance which bunches up the fabric of the Pacific Plate, resulting in more friction, more stored energy and more tectonic activity. San Francisco's last major earthquake, Loma Prieta, originated here in 1989, its epicentre an otherwise tranquil canyon

outside of Aptos called the Forest of Nicene Marks. Other faults, the San Gregorio and the Ben Lomond, contribute to the tumult, forming a pileup of mountain ridgelines.

Those wrinkles and folds mean that Santa Cruz Mountain vineyards are almost never contiguous to each other, or even close to it. Pockets of vines are tucked away, usually down some unmarked road, behind some forest-shrouded embankment. Part of the reason the region is less well known than, say, the Russian River Valley, is that these places are almost defiantly remote. You can spend hours driving through this [AVA](#) and not see a single grapevine.

Distance between sites partly explains how the region can make both world-class Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon – two varieties that normally do not thrive in the same place. To help me understand this I head to the Rhys winery one morning, to meet winemaker Jeff Brinkman.

Rhys was started by Kevin Harvey, also a founder of Benchmark Capital, a wildly successful Silicon Valley VC firm, and an early investor in such heavyweights as eBay, Twitter and Uber. Drawing from a long-time love of wine and years as a home winemaker, Harvey acquired land up and down the Santa Cruz appellation, planting vineyard sites along the coast. In doing so Rhys became one of the more comprehensive proprietors of Santa Cruz Mountain terroir, with vineyard expressions running from Mount Pajaro to Windy Ridge. Most of these may not be in the running for ‘westernmost’ in the region, but all or nearly all have an ocean view, or an atmospheric pathway to it. The team, guided by Brinkman since its inception, have also committed to reams of geological, soil and climate research for each of their vineyards.



Rhys Vineyards' Horseshoe vineyard

Brinkman, then, is particularly well suited to give geography lessons to curious journalists. Case in point: we're standing mere yards from the Skyline vineyard, one of Rhys's more expressive sites for Pinot Noir and one of the highest-elevation sites for Pinot in the state. Brinkman directs my attention to a vineyard the next ridge over, to the east. Between here and there is a deep rift called Stevens Canyon, and on the east ridge is [Monte Bello](#), one of the world's greatest sources for Cabernet Sauvignon, the flagship wine for the aptly named Ridge winery.

'We're here on the Pacific Plate', Brinkman says. 'They're on the North American Plate.' The chasm between us is the San Andreas Fault, and the differences aren't just geological, they are climatic. 'The weather pockets in these mountains can differ greatly over short distances', he explains. 'Over there, they're able to ripen Petit Verdot', he says. 'We couldn't do that if we tried.'

The elevation and steep inclines of this landscape slow the wind's momentum, creating maze-like channels for cool air and fog to snake inland, impeding the wind, making the resulting climate zones more regimented and, in their way, predictable. It also makes this region the ideal environment for one of California's most magnificent living things.

It is time to talk about redwoods. Tall, graceful, massive, these often ancient trees can rise to as high as 30 stories, in a dizzying parallax toward the heavens, anchored by trunks as thick as pachyderms, creating forest sanctuaries that feel at once autochthonous and ephemeral.

While you are still on this earth, and they are, you must make a point to turn off your phone, take a deep breath, and walk in a redwood grove. You will encounter gauzy shades of green in some primeval cast, like none you've ever seen or knew to exist. The air is calm, eerily tranquil, muffled by the trees' immense trunks and their spongiform bark, by fallen limbs and fallen leaves, the dampening carpet of detritus they've sloughed onto the forest floor, and by the wondrous life that grows in its understory – sword ferns, sorrel, yerba buena, skunk cabbage, trillium, all manner of fungi and mosses, glowing in the dappled radiance of indirect light.

But what am I saying? You'll be looking up also: at how the trees filter sunlight in grainy, diaphanous beams; at how the leaves in the upper reaches, struck by sunlight you can't see, seem to glow like hovering lanterns. You'll hear the screech of Stellar's Jays and the rhythmic tap of woodpeckers as they labour, birdsong from warblers, thrushes, chickadees; spotted owls case the forest's inner sanctum like secret agents, swooping in and out of the shadows. Twenty-two years ago I was married in a redwood grove, a secular ceremony hallowed by the forest, where the trunks served as buttresses, the canopy a vaulted ceiling. Whatever your beliefs, you feel the holy in these places.



One of my high-school friends teaches theology at a Jesuit college near Santa Cruz, and takes regular, contemplative hikes through the redwoods. About them he had this to say: ‘Being in a redwood grove is like being in a cathedral’, he wrote. ‘They are like kings. They outlast fire and time. Walking among them doesn’t quite get me into eternity, but it points the way there.’

The habitat of coast redwoods (*Sequoia sempervirens*) is a slender biome, dependent on the atmospheric conditions brought on by the Pacific’s cold waters – the colder the water, the better conditions for the fog’s respiratory cycle.

Sparse but spectacular groves of old growth thrive on the northern end of Big Sur, and you will certainly find them planted wherever people plant trees (local Costcos sell redwood saplings each spring) but for the most part their range is limited. However, conditions are ideal north of Santa Cruz, where they thrive in fog-shrouded canyons where, owing to their size, height and density, they literally create their own weather.



Redwood saplings on sale at Costco

‘They self-water’, says viticulturist Prudy Foxx, who’s worked in the region for decades. ‘They farm the fog, grab moisture in their needles and limbs, then it drops down to the root zone.’ In prime spots, up to 30% of a redwood’s annual water uptake is reconstituted fog.

Many here believe that placement near the redwoods is advantageous to grapevines. When John Benedetti of Sante Arcangeli winery purchased his vineyard, Split Rail, in Corralitos, its owners shared their conviction that the best sites for Pinot Noir were bordered by both redwood and madrone trees, the interzone where two habitats meet. ‘Redwoods collect the fog’, explains Benedetti, ‘but Madrones like dry heat. Where those two distinct trees thrive, Pinot does also. Pinot likes proximity to fog for its cooling influence, but not to be shrouded in it. Pinot likes some dry heat, but it also likes to get cooled down at night.’



John Benedetti of Sante Arcangeli winery (credit: Lucca Benedetti)

Redwood-adjacent, then, is the coastal biome for the westernmost vineyards of the Santa Cruz Mountains, and there is no question that the wines from here have coniferous aromas: resinous oils, conveyed by fog and wind, deliver a lingering, foresty savour that really couldn't happen anywhere else. But some believe a grove's proximity contributes terroir conditions also.

Ryan Alfaro makes wines for Alfaro Family (his family) as well as for his own label, Farm Cottage. He's lived in the southern reaches of the Santa Cruz Mountains all his life, tending his family's vineyards in Corralitos and those of his neighbours' nearby. That includes Trout Gulch, a dry farmed 65-acre (26-ha) planting from 1980 about four miles (6 km) from the ocean. Situated on a modest slope at about 650 ft (c 200 m) in elevation, its proximity to Monterey Bay keeps it very cool; in fact, Alfaro believes it may be the coolest vineyard conditions in California. Harvests in late October are common; harvests into November are not unheard of.

Unlike what happens in Monterey, where the heat of inland valleys creates a fierce draw for winds, the effect here is relatively mild. Mountain ridges keep the coastal winds at bay (if you'll allow the pun). That Trout Gulch is bordered by a stand of 80-ft (24-m) redwoods also helps, moderating the ambient temperature. 'Redwoods gather the fog', says Alfaro. 'They contribute to a heaviness of air that sits like a blanket, and keeps the temperatures down.' These incursions Alfaro describes as lighter, fluffier than the moisture-laden fog banks found elsewhere. He's not the only one to resort to an oxymoron: 'dry fog', he calls it.

In addition to Alfaro and his family, coastal aficionados like Jamie Kutch, Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Lee Roberts (of Arnot-Roberts), and John Raytek of Ceritas all draw fruit from here.

In truth Trout Gulch came to Raytek, and not the reverse. In 2016 he was working his twelfth Ceritas harvest at Punchdown Cellars in Santa Rosa, a custom-crush facility he shared with the Arnot-Roberts team. An Arnot-Roberts truck with Trout Gulch Chardonnay pulled into Punchdown, containing two extra bins. Attached was a handwritten note addressed to Raytek. 'I'm Richard', it read. 'I'm a fan of your wines, and would love to have you work with my fruit. Please see what you can do with these bins. The first ton's on me.'

‘That was Richard Alfaro introducing himself the way only a true farmer would, with the fruit itself’, said Raytek recently via email. The gesture made an impression, as did the fruit. ‘It was a luminous green’, he wrote, ‘and flawless, the outward promise of the Chardonnay we had been chasing.’ The resulting wine, he said, was pure and taut; ‘it cut across the palate with a precision that felt almost like the salinity of the site was etched into every sip.’



Prudy Foxx tasting grapes in the Saveria vineyard (credit: Erik Castro)

Prudy Foxx works with several vineyards along this southern end of the appellation, including Bates, Beauregard, Soquel and Loma Prieta. The westernmost vineyard she manages is Saveria, close by Trout Gulch, planted to Pinot Noir and Syrah in 2001. She thinks it’s a toss-up which vineyard is closer to the waves; in both places she feels the Pacific’s effect to be cool but relatively tranquil. Saveria does not, however, benefit from a redwood windbreak; the house on the property has magnificent views of the ocean from its second floor.



Matt Licklider and Prudy Foxx in the Saveria vineyard (credit: Lioco)

Matt Licklider, who works with Saveria fruit at Lioco, tells me, ‘The terroir is that rare confluence of proximate cold sea, fog and coniferous forest’. There is, he adds, a reflective quality to the soil as well, which helps with photosynthetic ripening. ‘While this would be a handicap in a warm, sunny zone like the Russian River Valley, it actually plays well down in a chronically cold, foggy zone like Aptos.’ Foxx agrees. ‘They don’t call it Pleasant Valley for nothing’, she says.



The Saveria vineyard (credit: Lioco)

Like Alfaro, Foxx also describes the aerosol effect of a proximate briny sea breathed in and out of the surrounding redwoods by the fog, her ‘airroir’. ‘It’s soft, more like a wave’, she says. ‘It comes in, it breaches gently and rolls back; I like to think of it as a facial for the grapes.’

Lickliger has no doubt the region’s flora leaves its mark on the fruit, and the wines. ‘In the same way one might recognise eucalyptus in Australian Shiraz, there is a foresty, sweet-and-sour berry quality to the wines down here’, he says. ‘They’re saline and leafy in a pleasant way; in a warmer climate, that would never happen.’

Travel north and west of Santa Cruz and you’ll come across bucolic locale called Bonny Doon, so-called for the song by Scotsman Robert Burns, ‘Ye banks and braes o’ Bonnie Doon’ (members of Burns’s family settled here). You may know the name from the Rhône-centric label [Randall Grahm](#) founded in the 1980s; Grahm established vineyards here which were summarily wiped out by disease within years of their planting. Uphill, however, you’ll find Ben Lomond, which lends its name to the appellation Ben Lomond Mountain, host to just

three vineyards: Bald Mountain, Coast Grade and Beauregard Ranch. All are within five miles of the shore; all have been owned and operated by the Beauregard family since 1945, making this a virtual monopole.

Cool-climate viticulture had been practised in the area well before the Beauregards arrived. A very prescient Frona Eunice Wait described it as a 'future Chablis district' in her book *Wines and Vines of California* (1889): 'The Ben Lomond Company makes a wine of this (Chablis) type which is unrivalled by any other product in the State', she wrote. 'It is the only wine in California which has the thin, delicate, flinty dryness of a true Chablis.' One year later Charles Bundschu, in a report to the state's Viticultural Commission, opined that the wines of Ben Lomond 'develop a most delicate flavor and highly distinctive aroma which may be attributable to the proximity of the ocean'.

Not much has changed here, according to Ryan Beauregard, the fourth generation in his family to work these vines. During the growing season, he says, fog is a thing you can see but not often feel. 'During the summer the mountain forms a barrier against the low-lying fog that inundates the shore and coastal valleys', he explains, 'so mostly we avoid contact. But it's there on the coast, bumping up against the mountain every day.' Above the fog line, the marine air tends to give way to abundant sunshine.

The sun's intensity at elevation is how Beauregard ripens Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet and Zinfandel side by side at Beauregard Ranch, a seemingly dubious feat, though obviously picking dates are dramatically different: the Pinot and Chardonnay come in around early September, the Cabernet, if he's lucky, six weeks later. As for the Zinfandel, both Ryan and his father remember years when they were checking its Brix (sugar levels) on Thanksgiving Day (late November).

Around Beauregard, a number of small vineyards vie for the distinction of being closest to the Pacific, including Ertl (1.76 miles), Fambini Wilder (1.87 miles), Toyon (about 3.7 miles) and Leboeuf (about 4 miles). Some of these are magical, while some are decidedly less so, barely viable (Ertl is less than a half-acre), inattentively farmed, decidedly uncommercial. Many were established by landowners without the benefit of much research or planning, the reason for planting, often as not, that they owned the land and wanted to do something with it. And yet every so often the sites express a character that far exceeds the

strategic rationale for their planting. Come harvest, these owners will have gone in search of someone to buy their grapes; in this way, the Santa Cruz Mountains retains its provincial signature.

If you have a home plot of grapes to tend, you'd do well to contact [Ken Swegles](#), whose Skyline Viticulture will tend your vines and help you find a home for your grapes. He also co-owns Madsen Vineyards, from which he draws from several of these more outré places for thrilling single-vineyard bottlings and blends.

Your other option, perhaps, is to knock on the door of established wineries with the means to consider purchasing fruit. One such winery is Thomas Fogarty, established in 1981. Its winemaker and general manager, Nathan Kandler, is more than amenable.

Kandler is one of the region's more durable talents, managing an established winery (and tourist destination and wedding venue) which people take for granted as a known quantity until they taste the wines and realise how pristine, precise and expressive of place they are.

Fogarty is situated on the northern end of Skyline Boulevard (US 39), the main drag of the Mountains if it has one. Its winery and many of its vineyard sites overlook the San Francisco Bay – that makes them east-facing, far from the outer coast, disqualifying them from consideration for this article.

It's just that Kandler, ever curious, has for years kept an open-door policy for the dabblers and the hobbyists, and that curiosity has paid off. It's how Kandler came to know Deerheart vineyard and its owner, Bob Larson, as well as Hacienda San Gregorio, owned by the excellently named Caesar Cervantes. Larson and Cervantes are neighbours, living across from each other on the La Honda Road to San Gregorio. Both sit in a warm spot less than five miles (8 km) from San Gregorio Beach – the sort of Goldilocks spot that Kandler likes to work with.



Chardonnay vines at Hacienda San Gregorio (credit: Nathan Kandler)

‘You’re looking for a transitional point’, he says. ‘There are these little banana belts where the fog doesn’t hang out all day, where you get some solar warmth, a lot of UV intensity.’ With Hacienda San Gregorio, Kandler makes a Chardonnay that’s saline and citrusy; ‘there’s a pleasant greenness to the wine’, he says, that nevertheless has a sunny warmth to its mid-palate flavours. Deerheart, devoted to Pinot, is wild and savoury. ‘It’s almost Syrah-like’, he says, ‘peppery, almost extroverted, wild, *sauvage*.’



Deerheart vineyard (credit: Nathan Kandler)

Heading north you exit the Mountains of the region at Woodside, home to the wealthy émigrés of San Francisco and Silicon Valley. Here, the climate is taken over by another of California’s magnificent coastal phenomena, the Golden Gate. This breach in the coastline is the entry point for the San Francisco Bay and home not only to iconic bridges and cities by the Bay, but for coastal weather conditions that extend many miles inland, to Carneros, Contra Costa, Stockton, Lodi, even the eastern slopes of the Sierras Foothills. The very idea of ‘coastal’ shifts and stretches as we move north, along with the fault lines, the wind patterns, the landscape. We’ll take these up in the next instalment.

The 39 wine reviews below are ordered alphabetically by producer (sur)name but you can change this.

Select sorting option

[Albatross Ridge Syrah 2021 Santa Cruz Mountains](#)

16.5/20

RED

From a non-coastal site.

Rich, a touch candied, it smells of grape plums and a hint of fig. Juicy but also a kind of pillowy texture. Good middleweight. Weighty finish. (PC)

Alcohol: 13.5% Drink: 2026 – 2030

Alfaro Family, Trout Gulch Vineyard Chardonnay 2023 Santa Cruz

17/20

Mountains

WHITE

This wine starts out in a reduced state, needing a day or two to emerge from the distance. When it does, it's a mineral marvel, with aromas of seashell and fine sand, a mineral tang that informs the flavours and especially the texture, with a kind of Chablis-like chalky edge. (PC)

Alcohol: 13% Drink: 2026 – 2036

Price: \$35 RRP

Alfaro Family, Trout Gulch Vineyard Pinot Noir 2024 Santa Cruz

17.5/20

Mountains

RED

Ryan Alfaro also makes this wine for his family and it feels somewhat different to his Farm Cottage brand Pinot from the same site, more brooding, slightly more oak-driven, with scents of dark cherry and redwood bark. Its tart-cherry and burnished-wood notes give the wine an 'old school' feel, with an amaro-like finish that refers back to the pines. (PC)

Alcohol: 13.5% Drink: 2026 – 2038

Price: \$50 RRP

Arnot-Roberts, Trout Gulch Vineyard Chardonnay 2023 Santa Cruz

19/20

Mountains

WHITE

After the 19th-century shoutout from Frona Eunice Wait, I was on the lookout for a Chablis-like Chardonnay from the region. This one's it. Initial scents of fruit, pineapple and apple are delivered dryly, like a kind of essence without the juice. Initial flavours are supple and lively, with beautiful energy and drive from

stirring acidity; for all its initial energy, it has a comfortable middle-palate weight that pauses the trajectory before finishing with energy and lift. (PC)

Alcohol: 13% Drink: 2026 – 2040

Price: \$60 RRP

Beauregard, Bald Mountain Métallique Chardonnay 2024 Ben Lomond Mountain 16.5/20

WHITE

Estate fruit. Aged in stainless-steel tanks.

Unoaked, its unadorned state allows in a resinous scent – pine tips with a dusty hint of lees. The flavours are tense, lively, mouth-watering, the lack of oak providing almost a benchmark for Chardonnay’s raw expression in the region. (PC)

Alcohol: 12.5% Drink: 2026 – 2030

Price: \$70 RRP

Beauregard, Bald Mountain Oeuf en Béton Chardonnay 2024 Ben Lomond Mountain 17/20

WHITE

From Beauregard’s monopole at 1,000 ft (305 m), about 3 miles (4.8 km) from the ocean. Chardonnay grown in pure sand and marine sandstone. Aged in concrete egg.

This starts off a touch reduced, with a leesy note and a touch leafy, dusty and saline. Its flavours expand dramatically over a few days – juicy apple flavours framed by that dusty savour which concrete can give white wines. The purity is marvellous; one dimension, well expressed. (PC)

Alcohol: 12.5% Drink: 2026 – 2030

Price: \$70 RRP

Beauregard, Bald Mountain Chardonnay 2023 Ben Lomond Mountain 16.5/20

WHITE

From the same source as the Oeuf en Béton.

This Chardonnay sees some fairly demonstrative oak treatment, with a scent of

cinnamon and caramel. The oak continues on the palate, rich and round ... it tastes ripe despite the label declaration of 12.5% abv. Cellar. (PC)

Alcohol: 12.5% Drink: 2030 – 2036

Price: \$70 RRP

Beauregard, Coast Grade Vineyard Pinot Noir 2023 Ben Lomond Mountain

18/20

RED

This wine is youthful and precocious. Bright aromas of cranberry and tea leaves, redwood frond and smoke. Its flavours are pretty and lithe. Red-fruited but offset by a piney savour, the finish cleanly delivered by a fruit-skin grip. Very pleasing. (PC)

Drink: 2026 – 2036

Price: \$70 RRP

Beauregard Zinfandel 2021 Ben Lomond Mountain

17.5/20

RED

There's plenty of punch in this cool-climate Zin from a vineyard site less than 5 miles (8 km) from the ocean on Ben Lomond Mountain. The scent is briary and crisp, with red-fruited flavours falling between cherry and plum. The texture is lively, high-toned with a brambly high note and a grabby, lifted tannic structure that needs food to take advantage of its grip. (PC)

Alcohol: 15.4% Drink: 2026 – 2030

Price: \$50 RRP

Beauregard Cabernet Sauvignon 2021 Ben Lomond Mountain

17/20

RED

An interesting Cabernet that seems to reflect the power of a long hang time and the coolness of place. Ben Lomond is a mere 5 miles (8 km) from the ocean, which has allowed these grapes to hang and the flavours reflect unexpected power. Dark scents of cassis and black plum give way to a spicy and grippy red. Fully ripe, crackling with powerful tannins. (PC)

Alcohol: 15.2% Drink: 2026 – 2040

Price: \$80 RRP

Ceritas, Trout Gulch Vineyard Chardonnay 2024 Santa Cruz Mountains 19.5/20

WHITE

From Trout Gulch, uphill from Aptos, a cold site on the southern end of the appellation. Three and a half miles (5.6 km) from the coast.

This wine has an edge from the drop. Scents of lemon-lime expressed with an almost aerosol delivery, not so much powerful but shimmering, ethereal. Not so the palate. The attack all high-toned citrus and juicy green-apple nerve, the flavours dusted with sea salt. The texture is transporting, like a shock to the system, edgy and propulsive, so full of tension and energy my fellow taster, David Rosoff, proclaimed, 'It feels like there are a dozen bottles crammed into this glass'. The finish brings all that movement to a dizzying stop, on point, with a salty, mineral tang that brings it focus and definition. Astonishing. (PC)

Alcohol: 12% Drink: 2026 – 2040

Ceritas, Trout Gulch Vineyard Pinot Noir 2024 Santa Cruz Mountains 17.5/20

RED

Quiet when first poured, this is pure and crystalline in its palate expression – precise, slightly green. With air, a lively red fruit emerges, smoky red cherry and a hint of smoke that suggests smoked duck. Tight and granular on the finish, proclaiming its youth. Cellar. (PC)

Alcohol: 12% Drink: 2030 – 2036

Farm Cottage, Trout Gulch Vineyard Pinot Noir 2024 Santa Cruz Mountains 17/20

RED

Ryan Alfaro's brand, drawn from the vineyard he manages near Aptos. 4 miles (6.4 km) from the ocean.

Spicy and lively when first poured, smelling of oak and warm, crushed wild cherries. It's fresh and lifted, fruit leads but the forest is lurking, with a tension and mildly floral bitterness that accents the coolness of the site. (PC)

Alcohol: 13.2% Drink: 2026 – 2036

Price: \$55 RRP

Thomas Fogarty, Hacienda San Gregorio Chardonnay 2023 Santa Cruz Mountains 17.5/20

WHITE

A small vineyard off La Honda Road, about 4.5 miles (7.2 km) from the ocean. There is a cool, citrusy aromatic top note here that feels exotic and unique. Toasted lees also, with a nutty, racy tension. With air, the citrus note becomes delineated, dry and perfumed like yuzu and key lime. For all that, the flavours are round, finishing on point. (PC)

Drink: 2026 – 2038

Price: \$75 RRP

Thomas Fogarty, Deerheart Vineyard Pinot Noir 2021 Santa Cruz Mountains 17.5/20

RED

From a home vineyard off La Honda Road on the way to San Gregorio, on the appellation's northern end. Owned by Bob Larson. Five miles (8 km) from the ocean.

The extra year of bottle age on this wine has settled its forest aromas into a softer perfume. It's got a hint of pepper and smoke, *mole* chocolate and oak. The flavours are darkly sweet. A suave texture with the succulence for lamb. (PC)

Alcohol: 14.1% Drink: 2026 – 2036

Price: \$75 RRP

Thomas Fogarty, Deerheart Vineyard Pinot Noir 2022 Santa Cruz Mountains 17/20

RED

Here, too, is a green-leafy note, somewhere between the scent of the forest and the scent of *nori*, and the ocean. Flavours start out dense and then relax with air – dusty black cherry and softly herbaceous. (PC)

Alcohol: 13.9% Drink: 2026 – 2036

Price: \$75 RRP

Thomas Fogarty, Deerheart Vineyard Pinot Noir 2023 Santa Cruz Mountains

17.5/20

RED

The 2023 is more fruit-forward than the 2022, still bearing a pine-needle savour. The flavours are lush and relatively generous, with a demonstrable poise between green-leaf savour and red fruit. (PC)

Alcohol: 13.8% Drink: 2026 – 2036

Price: \$75 RRP

Kutch, Trout Gulch Vineyard Chardonnay 2023 Santa Cruz Mountains

17/20

WHITE

Certified organic.

Quiet and attenuated at first, there's a saline dustiness at first pass. With air, some catmint and pine fronds take shape. The flavours are bright and lemony, with a jolt of the energy we expect from this cool site. (PC)

Alcohol: 13% Drink: 2026 – 2036

Price: \$59 RRP

Kutch, Mindego Ridge Vineyard Pinot Noir 2024 Santa Cruz Mountains

17/20

RED

From a vineyard in the northern third of the Santa Cruz Mountains, 8 miles (12.9 km) from the Pacific.

This has a mildly feral quality in its aroma – lavender and animal in equal measure. The flavours are more fruit-centric, with a fresh purple-flower savour and firm tannins to guide the finish. (PC)

Alcohol: 13% Drink: 2026 – 2038

Price: \$69 RRP

Kutch, Mindego Ridge Vineyard, Ridge Top Pinot Noir 2024 Santa Cruz Mountains

18/20

RED

A barrel selection of the Santa Cruz vineyard that usually reflects the shallow soils on the ridgetop of this vineyard, set at about 900 ft of elevation.

Unlike the other Mindego Ridge bottling, this is thoroughly uplifted, leafy and precise in its aromas of cedar frond and red cherry – fresh and elusive. The flavours are marked by tension and energy, the red-cherry flavours having a fine-grained elegance, the texture lean and propulsive. Has the stuff to cellar, or serve with duck confit. (PC)

Alcohol: 12.9% Drink: 2026 – 2040

Price: \$69 RRP

Lioco, Saveria Vineyard Pinot Noir 2023 Santa Cruz Mountains

18/20

RED

The Saveria Vineyard is less than 4 miles (6.4 km) from the ocean.

This is utterly immediate. The aromas are in your face, the whole-cluster spice, the redwood scent and foresty savour hardly stands in the way of the assertive fruit notes – juicy cherries and cherry skins spiced by the sea and the forest. It's got the sort of energy that will help it age, with an acid/tannin grip that suggests a long life. (PC)

Alcohol: 12.9% Drink: 2026 – 2036

Price: \$70 RRP

Lioco, Caleta Syrah 2022 Santa Cruz Mountains

18/20

RED

From Saveria vineyard. What winemaker Drew Huffine describes as a warm vintage at a cool site. This was harvested on 20 October. 75% whole clusters.

This wine's initial opacity seems like a blueprint for cool-climate concentration. The flavours take some days to appear but, when they do, they're thrilling and savoury – olive, black cherry, plum, liquorice and carob, all tersely expressed. The flavours feel like a weighted blanket for its first day open; only on day three does the prettiness eke through, a gorgeous dark core of berry fruit comes to ground and inhabit the wine. (PC)

Alcohol: 12.9% Drink: 2026 – 2040

Price: \$53 RRP

Madson, Toyon Vineyard Pinot Noir 2023 Santa Cruz Mountains

17.5/20

RED

Low-slung vineyard north of the university, just three acres (1.2 ha), 3 miles (4.8 km) from the ocean. Madson draws from several small coastal vineyards like this one; a few the winery bottles as a vineyard designate, like this one. Regenerative viticulture.

It smells of torn leaves, crushed cherries. Very brooding forest, woodsmoke. The foresty, resinous note on the finish feels textbook. (PC)

Alcohol: 13.4% Drink: 2026 – 2036

Price: \$72 RRP

Madson Pinot Noir 2024 Santa Cruz Mountains

18/20

RED

From multiple coastal vineyard sites.

This is exuberantly foresty, with a scent of crushed pine needles, leaf litter, pepper and smoke. The flavours continue in this savoury vein, piney and pillowy, with a mineral salinity informing the texture and a slightly bitter, amaro-like finish. Tense, compelling, ageable. (PC)

Alcohol: 13.3% Drink: 2026 – 2038

Price: \$99 RRP

Madson, Marine Terrace Syrah 2024 Santa Cruz Mountains

17.5/20

RED

Lean and herbaceous, this smells of violets and crushed berries. High-toned dark-plum fruit and floral character in equal measure. Its herbal notes carry over to the palate, where the texture is positively the definition of ‘crunchy’ – present, forward and lithe. It is perhaps a touch backward but it is young also, and should mellow and lengthen with age. (PC)

Alcohol: 13% Drink: 2026 – 2038

Price: \$55 RRP

Rhys, Mt Pajaro Vineyard Chardonnay 2022 Santa Cruz Mountains

17.5/20

WHITE

Five miles (8 km) from the coast, west-facing parcel on marine sediments, shale and sandstone, at an elevation of 700–800 ft (210–240 m). Certified sustainable. Closest to the ocean among the Rhys estate vineyards, this gives off a ripe impression until it hits the palate. Scents of golden pineapple and caramel have a pine back-note, which grows more pronounced the second and third day after opening. It's generous at first, only to tighten up quickly with grippy, bosky acidity. (PC)

Drink: 2026 – 2036

Price: \$89 RRP

Rhys, Horseshoe Vineyard Chardonnay 2022 Santa Cruz Mountains 17.5/20

WHITE

Ten miles (16 km) from the coast, a west-facing parcel on Monterey shale and diatomaceous earth, at 1,510 ft (460 m) of elevation. Certified sustainable. This shows off its elegance from the start – scents of toasted lees and vanilla, nutty and attractive. The palate is dramatically lean, golden apple and lemon oil. The texture at once dense and creamy, with a saline finish. (PC)

Drink: 2026 – 2036

Price: \$99 RRP

Rhys, Alpine Vineyard Chardonnay 2022 Santa Cruz Mountains 18/20

WHITE

Half a mile from the Horseshoe vineyard, 10 miles (16 km) from the coast. West-facing, very steep parcel, at about 1,300 ft (400 m), planted on shallow shale. A generous wine, this smells of honeycomb and Pink Lady apples, with a pleasing, assertive lees note and that ever-present resinous tang. You expect richness, but the flavours are reined in with a modest tension. A touch reticent but with a languid, generous length. (PC)

Drink: 2026 – 2038

Price: \$99 RRP

Rhys, Mt Pajaro Vineyard Chenin Blanc 2023 Santa Cruz Mountains 16.5/20

WHITE

Certified organic.

Classic elements of raw wool, golden apple, smoky lees and honey deliver in this spot-on Chenin from Rhys's coolest vineyard. It's on the rich side, especially in the attack, with a grippy phenolic bite to its finish. Needs some time to meld. (PC)

Drink: 2026 – 2030

Rhys, Alpine Vineyard Pinot Noir 2022 Santa Cruz Mountains

17/20

RED

Alpine is half a mile from Horseshoe, 10 miles (16 km) from the coast. West-facing, very steep parcel planted to multiple clones, at about 1,300 ft (400 m) of elevation, planted on shallow shale.

Starting out with a perfumey savour, this smells of violets and dried flower petals. The flavours continue in a floral mode – blackberry and black cherry with a leafy overlay, and a finish that suggests a salty minerality. (PC)

Drink: 2026 – 2038

Price: \$99 RRP

Rhys, Mt Pajaro Vineyard Pinot Noir 2022 Santa Cruz Mountains

17.5/20

RED

Starting off tarry and smoky, it's very savoury at first pass. The flavours open with air – bright red fruit by day two, with a loose, generous middle palate, sleek and fine tannins. Pine notes on the finish remind us of where we are, for a dark and slightly bitter finish. A fascinating wine. (PC)

Drink: 2026 – 2038

Price: \$89 RRP

Rhys, Horseshoe Vineyard Pinot Noir 2022 Santa Cruz Mountains

18/20

RED

Showing a pronounced scent of pine tips and marine air when first poured, it leads with a lovely savour. After a day, the fruit emerges – red cherry and a bit of pomegranate, with a fresh, brisk texture. Generous and retaining both savoury and fruit elements. Dark and pure, a long finish. (PC)

Alcohol: 13.9% Drink: 2026 – 2038

Price: \$99 RRP

[Sante Arcangeli, Split Rail Vineyard Chardonnay 2024 Santa Cruz Mountains](#)

16.5/20

WHITE

A rich Chardonnay, this smells of smoke and caramel when first poured, giving way to a pineapple richness. Generous and long, for roast chicken. (PC)

Alcohol: 13.5% Drink: 2026 – 2036

Price: \$45 RRP

[Sante Arcangeli, Split Rail Vineyard Pinot Noir 2024 Santa Cruz Mountains](#)

16/20

RED

Quite rich and broad-shouldered in the glass, this leads with juicy cherry and pine scents, a whiff of forest floor. The flavours are exceptionally rich and quite forward, warm cherries in a bowl, with a modest grip. (PC)

Alcohol: 13.6% Drink: 2026 – 2036

Price: \$59 RRP

[Sante Arcangeli, Coast Grade Vineyard Pinot Noir 2024 Santa Cruz Mountains](#)

17/20

RED

From Beauregard's coastal property in the Ben Lomond Mountain sub-AVA. It's as if you can taste the coastal proximity in its texture and lean flavours. It leads with scents of ripe cherry and pine tips – leafy and bright. The flavours are focused and on point, a woodland savour accompanying the dark-cherry flavors, and foresty tannins to give it grip. (PC)

Alcohol: 13.7% Drink: 2026 – 2038

Price: \$59 RRP

[Sante Arcangeli, Saveria Vineyard Pinot Noir 2024 Santa Cruz Mountains](#)

17.5/20

RED

From an exceedingly cool Corralitos site less than 5 miles (8 km) from the ocean. Certified organic.

You can taste both the coastal salinity and the foresty savour of pine and redwood in this compelling Pinot. It smells like a forest – leafy, green, mildly herbal. The flavours are generous and delicate at once, a red-cherry compote in an assertively savoury frame. Firm and tensile, for lamb. (PC)

Alcohol: 14.6% Drink: 2026 – 2038

Price: \$55 RRP

[Samuel Louis Smith, Redwood Grade Vineyard Pinot Noir 2024 Santa Cruz Mountains](#) 17.5/20

RED

From a non-coastal vineyard.

Smoky and bright, with a leafy green accent, it smells of forest understory and alpine notes, pine and redwood, mint. The flavours are simple and joyous, vinous and youthful with a peppery bite, lifted and delicious. David Rosoff compared it to an Alto Adige wine. (PC)

Alcohol: 12% Drink: 2026 – 2038

[Samuel Louis Smith, Sandstone Terrace Syrah 2024 Santa Cruz Mountains](#) 17/20

RED

Fruit from Gail vineyard, a coastal site near Corralitos and 7 miles (11.3 km) from the ocean, and a mountain site, Nelson vineyard, near Summit.

Fresh and bright, with a whole-cluster note that contributes to an otherwise lively, peppery cool-climate-Syrah style. It's got flavours of carob and liquorice, crunchy texture and seductively silky tannins. It takes a bit to move from an initial backward state. (PC)

Alcohol: 13.3% Drink: 2026 – 2038

Price: \$35 RRP

[Trail Marker Wine Co Pinot Noir 2022 Santa Cruz Mountains](#) 17.5/20

RED

As the first Pinot of the tasting, it had a nice arresting quality. Its whole-cluster elements were beguiling, scents of pine tips, bergamot tea and spiced, crushed cherry gave way to a wine of impressive concentration and saturation, the mid palate long, the finish long and perfumed. It will cellar nicely. (PC)

Alcohol: 13.2% Drink: 2026 – 2036

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