

West of the West – Santa Cruz Mountains



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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.’

Licklider 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.

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

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