

GOOD VITISTM

SPECIAL EDITION . , CALIFORNIA GRAPES



Spring/Summer 2024

Special Edition: California Grapes

This spring, one of my best friends and I spent 10 days in California. The trip was almost entirely about tasting great wine, but we also spent a few days hiking. We visited wineries in Napa Valley and Sonoma County as well as the Santa Lucia Highlands. In those ten days we drove more than 1,200 miles. The itinerary was full of high quality producers, and helped me check one winery off my bucket list: Diamond Creek. We spent time with old friends and made some new ones.

As you're about to read, the trip was a success. It also solidified my belief that *terroir* is more than nature's influence on wine. You'll read about that if you muscle through this entire report (or skip to it).

Two important notes to make. The first is that there are no scores for wines covered in this report. This is because my focus was on experiencing for myself and capturing for readers the essence of each winery I felt while visiting. This takes more attention and thought

than one might expect (at least for me). I do, however, provide honest opinions, recommendations, and suggested aging data points. Thankfully, there's only one wine covered which I don't recommend spending money on, and uncoincidentally it comes from the fire-plagued 2020 vintage.

The second note is on the buddy comedy/adventure images included in this report. My trip companion and I go back to high school, and lived together in college. We've spent time together in Spain, England, France, Israel, Jordan, the Republic of Georgia, as well as all over the USA, including driving across it twice. We know how to have fun together, and on that note the images are inspired by our relationship.

-Aaron Menenberg, Good Vitis Editor-in-Chief



Hey, you guys ready to let the grapes out?

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The Santa

Lucia Highlands

“The Santa Lucia [Mountains] stood up against the sky to the west and kept the valley from the open sea, and they were dark and brooding—unfriendly and dangerous. I always found in myself a dread of west and a love of east. Where I ever got such an idea I cannot say, unless it could be that the morning came over the peaks of the Gabilans and the night drifted back from the ridges of the Santa Lucias. It may be that the birth and death of the day had some part in my feeling about the two ranges of mountains.” - John Steinbeck



This is not the description winemakers in the Santa Lucia Highlands, or the SLH, would be looking for from native son John Steinbeck: Unfriendly and dangerous. My recent experience visiting the SLH inspired sensations quite different from these. If I had to pull anything from Steinbeck's experience, it would be that the SLH's wines are dark beasts in the wine bliss depth sense, that perhaps the sun arriving at the vineyards at the start of the day as it comes over the Gabilan Mountains help to awaken them for the serious work they put in that the sun, eventually setting over them, helps to nurture. One thing is for sure: The wines of the SLH are rich and profoundly of a very specific place.

I have become well acquainted with a few special wines from the SLH American Viticultural Area (AVA) since starting Good Vitis. For almost as long as I've enjoyed these wines, I have tried to organize a visit. It's not the most convenient wine region to attend given its distance from major airports and the absence, more or less, of standard wine region amenities like hotels and restaurants. While a relatively many American wine lovers can speak to the Napa Valley or Sonoma County from personal experience, few can do so of the SLH.

Through occasional remote winemaker interviews

and my many tastings of Clarice Wine Company and Beau Marchais pinot noirs and recent tasting of ROAR pinots and chardonnay (all made from some of the most famed SLH vineyards), I began to get the sense that applying the goal of Good Vitis, to ever expand my own and my readers' wine knowledge, to the SLH necessitated a visit. As the pilgrimage proved, all the interviews and samples and meditations are simply not enough to enable the understanding and fair convenance of the sense of place and people that birth these wines.

Like any wine region, geography matters. I find this to be especially true of the SLH having now experienced it first-hand. All regions have topography, but few are as stark or stunning as the SLH. Most regions have weather eccentricities, but few are as dynamic as the SLH. And most regions have unique combinations of topography and weather, but few are as complicated as the SLH. It's this combination of topography and weather along with the region's relative remoteness that sets the stage for a group of dedicated winemakers and grape growers to offer something special.

The Topography

The SLH is part of the Salinas Valley, which is known

as the salad bowl of the world and is the setting for several Steinbeck stories. For many sections of the drive along Highway 101 that runs north-south through it, lettuce crops cover the valley floor. Eventually, when we got up onto the hillsides and looked down on the lettuce fields, it appeared as if the soil had been needlepointed with leafy greens.

Entering the Valley from the north on the 101, looking up into the mostly bare green hills above the valley floor, a land-before-time sensation entered my mind where it has set up a permanent association with the words "Santa Lucia Highlands."

Between the lettuce valley floor and the emerald-y-shamrock-y upholstered mountains, the whole valley gives off a sense of magical lushness untouched by humans. Granted, we'd arrived during a pause from what had been an very wet period, and that surely had contributed to the Jurassic era vibes. But even still, and despite the agricultural workers in the fields and the pavement on which we drove, I don't think a Spinosaurus drinking from the Salinas River would have surprised me much had it appeared on the other side of an upcoming bend.

Per Steinbeck's description, on the eastern side of the valley is the Gabilan Range and on the western



Previous page: Miner's Lettuce growing on the Pisoni estate.

side the Santa Lucia Mountains, the latter being the site of the SLH appellation. The SLH constitutes a 18-mile long portion of the Santa Lucia Mountains that starts on top of a bench on the western side of River Road, which parallels Highway 101 and follows the Salinas River, and heads up onto the slopes.

There are vineyards nearby that are not part of the SLH AVA. They include Arroyo Secco, Carmel Valley, Chelone, Hames Valley, Monterey, San Antonio Valley, San Bernabe, and San Lucas. Some of these are visible from the SLH, and all are part of the larger Monterey growing region, which cumulatively has over 43,000 acres of vines. The SLH is a small portion contributing 5,750 planted acres.

The Weather

There is significant temperature change from south to north in the SLH, as well as from the lower bench, which sits at around 40 feet above sea level, to the upper reaches of the AVA that push a few hundred feet north of 2,000 feet above sea level. We saw this undulation in the variable bud break development we observed from north to south and from low to high elevation as we worked our through the valley.

With temperature, a popular descriptor among the wine folk that we experienced ourselves is “a degree a mile, from hotter in the south to cooler in the north.” With 18 miles of AVA and an intra-AVA elevation change of as much as 2000 feet, there is a massive range of growing season conditions on vineyard-by-vineyard and block-by-block bases.

The most noticeable climatic aspect of the SLH for me, however, is wind, which enters at the northern end of the Valley as it comes off the Pacific Ocean, and rips southward beyond the edge of the SLH. The wind is notable not just because of its velocity and its routineness (nearly everyone used the same time, noon, in describing when it arrived every single day like clockwork), but also because of its cool temperature. The wind picks up

That said, temperatures in the SLH are not notably hot, and by American wine standards the SLH is considered a cool(ish) climate growing region. It picks over the Monterey Bay, which is one of North America’s deepest underwater canyons rivaling the Grand Canyon in size. This makes the water quite cold, and the wind in turn picks up that coolness before setting off down the Salinas Valley. Average speeds of 15 miles per hour are routine, as are gusts exceeding 25 mph.

In the vineyards, these winds can save young buds during cold spells and help dry vines out before mildew sets in during particularly wet periods. However, if strong gusts are plentiful when buds are young and vulnerable, they can do damage.

Wind can also deliver hot or cold air. If wind moderates temperature, as it often does in the SLH, it slows sugar ripening, giving grapes more time to develop the compounds that turn into aromas and flavors in wines. It also gives the stems, seeds, and skins time to develop complexity so long as there are sufficient temperatures to coax that kind of maturation. And when sufficient ripening does occur, the wines can show up with especially big personalities.

The SLH doesn't experience much rain, which means that while for many an SLH producer the principle standard is dry farming, drip irrigation tubing is hung through most vineyards in case a season is particularly dry; it wasn't uncommon to hear that the irrigation hadn't been turned on in several years, but is occasionally used. Add this to the temperature variance and strong winds, and it becomes a little more clear why SLH wines have their unique climatic character.

The Remoteness

The Salinas Valley has always been a center for agriculture, which is land-intensive and doesn't require much of a population. The largest city is Salinas, which is home to 160,000 mostly local laborers, business owners, and their families. It's not exactly the hub you'd expect for a California wine region, and it isn't one. The closest thing to a hub is the adjacent cities of Carmel and Carmel-By-The-Sea. Located on the coast north of the Salinas Valley, they're about an hour from the top end of the SLH and offer the full range of accommodations, food, and attractions. Most wine-seeking tourists are likely to be more comfortable there than in Salinas, for better or worse.

The SLH's remoteness contributes to that land-before-time feeling I got when visiting. Because population density isn't really a thing in the SLH AVA, and there isn't a lot of infrastructure in or around it, the local wine tourism isn't much to write home about. There are a few wineries with tasting rooms in the SLH, but some don't offer tastings at all while others put their tasting rooms in Carmel or Carmel-By-The-Sea. Visiting the SLH takes homework, planning, and time, but is worth it for

those seeking new wine adventures.

The unique dynamics of the SLH allow wineries to be as insular as they want. It means they can spend less time and resources on visitors and more time and resources on vineyards and winemaking (as well as requiring more marketing to sell their wares). This doesn't guarantee better wine, but it does make it more likely that the wines are based on origin. Our itinerary was a list of wineries that not only focus on reflecting the place, but also recognize the challenge it takes to succeed and have accordingly adopted mindsets that are enabling them to do so. They included: Morgan, McIntyer, Caraccioli, Pisoni, Franscioni/ROAR, Odonata, and Joyce.

Readers who want to seek out SLH wines are encouraged to include those covered in this report on their shopping list. Prospective SLH trips benefit from consulting the SLH Wine Artisans, which is the trade association for the AVA and a good information resource. They can be found at santaluciahighlands.com. They helped organize our visit, and I am grateful to them for their assistance.

Now, let's get on with the wine...

Pisoni Vineyards



I don't know where to start with our Pisoni visit, I guess other than to say it was amazing. Pisoni is one of *the* most important names in SLH history. We were met there by Mark Pisoni, son of patriarch Gary Pisoni. Mark and his brother Jeff represent the third generation of family farmer on this 235 acre farm.

Although only 35 acres are planted to grape vines, the entire property is a highly cared-for thriving parcel of the planet. It starts a few miles up from the lower bench of the SLH AVA, and sprawls out over various "fingers" of the Santa Lucia Mountains that descend down from the top of the range like lava flows, creating valleys and mesas. There's real beauty in the untouched serenity of much of the SLH.

Mark met us in his car at the entrance to the property, and we followed him up to a area that I can't really explain other than to walk you through it. There's a multi-level gathering area set up under a pergola with tables and bars made of wood; a couple of different types of permanent grills; and a larger serving bar made of stone with a sink and other amenities. Off to one side is a deck overlooking a large pond. To the right of the deck is large waterfall that feeds the pond. You access a stone walking path from the deck that winds its



Previous page: The best picture I could get of “the area.”

way to the top of the waterfall. The waterfall’s brink emerges from a cavern the family has created inside the hill upon which all of this is built. Inside the cavern is a large dining area, and off one side of the cavern a long cave has been created.

That’s the best I can do, which is a shame because the totality of the site is far more than its parts as I’ve described them. It’s an area, along with the entire property, that was created for the enjoyment of the family and the 40 or so employees that help the Pisonis farm the land. There is a strong sense of admiration for the land and obligation to ensure its health that comes through when Mark talks about how they approach being good stewards of it.

The same pride shows up in Mark’s description of the Pisoni’s employees, who work not just the wine grapes, but several other agricultural products as well. The family provides housing for the staff, many of which have been there for decades. As a sign of respect and appreciation for them, the vineyard blocks are named after team members, “guys that [Mark] grew up with, guys working their butts off.”

At this point we had left the lair after starting off

with a wonderful rosé of pinot noir bottled under the Pisoni's Lucy brand and were walking towards the vineyards. We stopped at several vantage points along the way where Mark had stashed bottles of wine. While there are a lot of vines, most of the property is left to its own devices. "We keep (a lot) of space open for animals and hiking," Mark explained, who added that they bring his sons' boy scouts to the property with some regularity for camping and other adventures.

There are some areas being "worked" for purposes of encouraging natural biodiversity and health. One area is dedicated to curating a selection local plants to create a habitat for the area's insects and critters. There's another area where they beekeep. Nearby the bees is a farm of various fruit trees.

One major viticultural pursuit is preventing erosion in and around the vineyards, which is a very real threat considering the property is essentially a series of mountainside tiered mesas carved up by valleys. They compost on site and add it to the vineyard soil to help feed cover crops. The idea is to "add organic matter, increase everything" to ensure that erosion isn't a regular issue.

The Pisoni vineyards are divided up into small



Previous page: Mark leading us around the vineyards.

blocks, many of which are physically separated from each other. This makes the estate “super hard to farm,” Mark explained, but the upside is that it “helps create a bunch of variety” in terms of grape characteristics that make the wines more interesting.

The wines are sold mostly under two labels: The approachable Lucy and cellar bate Lucia by Pisoni. We tried the Lucy 2023 rosé of pinot noir and 2021 gamay, both of which were quite good and showed impressive texture at the lower price point. Lucy wines are made from estate and non-estate fruit, while Lucia by Pisoni are all estate vines.

Current Lucia releases include the 2022 chardonnay and pinot noir and 2021 syrah, the latter two from the Soberanes Vineyard, which is vineyard partnership with the Francioni family that both use as estate fruit. It’s a jewel in the crown of SLH grand cru sites, most of which involve these two families.

The chardonnay gets full malolactic treatment, “but not much [lees] stirring,” which shows through in a bit of reduction. It’s entirely native yeast, which Mark says “gives it length and more complexity.” I wrote

down a note about the copious amounts of texture it offers, and I fully endorse this wine as amongst the very most compelling example of SLH chardonnay I've had. The pinot noir delivers great texture as well, based in part on some whole cluster inclusion as well as the very rocky soils of Soberanes that allow the roots to grow deep in search of water and provide good drainage. The 2022 offers lots of red, black, and blue fruit to go with fungal forest floor and very pretty violets. There is a lot going on in this wine, but much of it remains undelineated at this young stage. I'd love to try it in half a decade.

The syrah, however, dominates my memory of Lucia wines. It's meaty, savory, and spicy, and very dense. "It's [just] one cluster per shoot" on the vines, Mark said, which helps explain the density and chewy texture. I love this style of meaty syrah, something with a wild or feral character, and it was my first true wine love. I originally discovered it in the Rocks Garden district that's associated with Washington but located in Oregon. The Northern Rhone, where this style originates, has emerged as one of my favorite geographies, and every once-in-a-while I find it in California (the first time was a 2007 Arns Melanson Vineyard syrah from, surprisingly, Napa).



Lucia syrah is for true lovers of the varietal, but even more so the SLH is a domestic sweet spot for this kind of syrah profile. preferences. Last year I picked the Rosella's Vineyard syrah out of a ROAR lineup as my favorite of their wines. The 2010 Morgan Double L syrah we tried earlier in the day was pretty damn good, and this Lucia Soberanes syrah knocked my socks off. As I try to narrow my future purchasing down to wines that I'm always going to be excited to open, I've made a list of specific bottles I want to focus on and several SLH syrahs are on it.

I've respected the legend of Pisoni from historical and reputational perspectives, but it was never grounded in any reality I'd experienced. After visiting and tasting, I get it now. As humans they're good people. As farmers they're experienced and talented. As winemakers they know their vineyards and their fruit and how to convert them into great wine. The standout density of Lucia wines and the above-category-average textures of Lucy wines are evidence of a place and a family and a team that are seemingly impossible to separate. Pisoni is pure SLH in the most communal and nature-connected sense, which is another way of saying *terroir*. Pisoni is SLH *terroir*.

Summing The SLH Up



Previous page: A Pisoni vineyard block.

The SLH is a challenging region to categorize, package, wrap, affix with a bow and ribbon, and send off for the Instagram influencer unboxing post. The SLH is basically one big hillside farmed by a combination of founding multigenerational families and young experimental start ups. If that sounds simple, it is not; it is a mighty diverse hillside happy to be made in the numerous styles that reflect the big personalities defining what it means to be an SLH wine.

While the SLH is not simple, it is not particularly complicated either: It is a single hillside making mostly pinot noir and chardonnay. This is no knock. Buried within the AVA - and within blocks of single vineyards - are a multitude of microclimates. Burgundy is a bunch of distinct vineyard blocks and makes mostly pinot noir and chardonnay, too. The more accurate and appropriate term for the SLH (and Burgundy) is “complex.”

Like Burgundy, the best way to understand the SLH is to methodically taste location by location and producer by producer, working your way up and down the mountainside as you move from one end of the AVA to other. Where a vine is located within

the AVA says a lot about how it's going to be different from vines in other locations in the same AVA, and of course who makes a wine will determine its final expression. Learning all of that takes logistics, time, and dedication, but if you are paying attention, your return on investment can be high.

Whether you visit the SLH or source its wine remotely, the wineries covered in this report represent a fantastic survey of the SLH. I'd add Clarice Wine Company and Rombauer's SLH pinot noir to the list as well as the latter's forthcoming Gary's Vineyard pinot noir. A nice selection across these wineries would provide the region more than a fair shake.

And if you want to give the SLH the fairest shake, include several syrahs as there may be no more rewarding American wine region for syrah lovers, and that's with keeping Washington State in mind.



Terroir

Note: Everyone I mention in this section is in my life because of our mutual love for wine and all that it encapsulates. As I wrote in the 2024 Riesling Special Edition:

I admire wine's ability to bring people together. Not through inebriation, but rather by the way it stops you mid-thought, refocuses your mind on the present moment, and inspires you to look across the table and connect with the other person over the shared experience. Once that happens, your time together is likely to be more meaningful and memorable. A bond is formed.



No sympathy for the devil; keep that in mind. Buy the wine, take the ride...and if the tannin occasionally gets a little heavier than what you had in mind, well...maybe chalk it up to forced consciousness expansion: Tune in, freak out, get beaten.



Previous page: Myself with Stu Smith (Smith-Madrone) and my friend, Jesse. I'm holding a birth year 1983 Smith-Madrone Cabernet Sauvignon.

I believe in the concept of *terroir*, which is a French term for how the particular climate, soil, and terrain of a region affect the structure, aroma, and flavor of wine. I say “believe” but science has thus far been unable to prove its reality. Yet, the wine profession by-and-large has fully bought in. *Terroir*-specific winemaking, which is something touted by every winery in this *California Grapes Special Edition* and well beyond, pursues a process that attempts to avoid altering and/or accentuate the *terroir*'s particular characteristics in each wine.

Terroir is the main driver behind the practice of legally defining specific areas of wine grape growing. In the US we call these regions American Viticultural Areas, or AVAs, and they require an application to and approval by the federal government. In my experience, most of the time these regions are sufficiently different from others in terms of *terroir* characteristics that their unique distinction makes sense.

As winemaking has proliferated around the world, I'd argue that the average quality of wine is better

than it's ever been in my drinking lifetime, even if there has also been a homogenization of some styles (which many would attribute to Robert Parker and the wider wine media). This burden of plenty creates a challenge for which us wine lovers are very fortunate: How do we choose among the numerous high quality wines to purchase?

Increasingly, the customer's guide to answering that question is 'what's their story?', meaning, 'I'd like to understand not just the *terroir*, but also the particulars of winemaker's role in harnessing it.' Often, a winery's ethos is also considered. Providing information to answer these questions is the main purpose of *Good Vitis*.

Over the years I've come to realize that there is more to wine than vineyards and crush pads and tanks and cellars. It may seem obvious, but those sacred places and things, left to themselves, don't complete the personality on a wine - it is how people animate them that ultimately determines how people experience the wine.

Good wine can come from great grapes and average winemakers. Great wine only comes from great winemakers, even if they only have good grapes. We can't help but manipulate *terroir* at least



a little simply by doing the bare minimum in the winemaking process. And, we should hope for masterful manipulation, regardless of what entails, because that is how we end up with the best wine.

So, the recipe for great wine is great *terroir* and great human intervention and manipulation (to whatever extent the situation determines). Yet when most in the industry talk of *terroir*-driven wine as the gold standard, they are often purposefully implying that human intervention and manipulation reduces the ultimate impressiveness of the wine. The issue with this presentation is that while *terroir* is presented as the determining factor of a wine, equally if not more determinant is the ethos of the people who manage those natural influences. A more complete vision of *terroir*, then, has to include the human element.

The greatest pleasure and privilege of writing *Good Vitis* is I have an excuse to spend time with the people who grow grapes and make and promote wine. They educate me, they inspire me, and some of them have stuck in my life and become good friends. It is these experiences that have led me to the conclusion that *terroir* is human.

When I think back on our visit to Smith-Madrone on

this trip, I don't think first about the incredible 1988 Smith-Madrone Cabernet Sauvignon that we had the privilege of consuming. My first memory is descending into the winery's cellar with Stu Smith on a mission to find a few good old bottles to pull. Our mutual excitement combined with the room that opened up at the bottom of the stairs to reveal the autobiography of the Smith brothers' lives' work was a heart-touching and heartwarming moment.

I've known Stu for eight years, spending time with him in Washington, DC, where I used to live, and in Napa both at his winery and his home. We've shared many a bottle together over a big range of conversation. We've spent a few hours driving around his property several times on his ATV, and shared meals at several locations around the estate. I think we've probably spent several factors more time talking about forest management than vineyard management, and we've dedicated far more time talking about local and national politics and the wine industry than Stu's winemaking approach.

I like Stu more than I like his wines, and I like his wines a lot. I like his wine most when I drink it with him. But regardless of whether I'm pulling the cork with or without him, I'm experiencing an intimate



Previous page: Sneak peaking the 2022 Rombauer Santa Lucia Highlands pinot noir with Rombauer consulting winemaker Adam Lee and David Zinni, National Sales Manager for Miramar Estate.

expression of who he and his brother are as people. While I'd be curious what another Napa cab winemaker would do with a Smith-Madrone's Cook's Flat Vineyard harvest, even if they meticulously followed the Smith brothers' recipe, the experience of drinking that wine would be different for me. The Brothers Smith planted that vineyard decades ago; they are its parent and as such it and its bounty behave certain ways unique to their rearing.

If you find this vision of *terroir* overly romantic or, perhaps like the science surrounding the concept of *terroir*, unbelievable because it's unproven, let me point you to the example of making a beloved grandmother's recipe. It's not exactly a one-to-one comparison because, unlike the Cook's Flat Vineyard one, ingredients can vary. However, like any good relative of a grandparent, you know that even with the best of ingredients you'll always be lacking that one irreplaceable one: Grandma's love.

This doesn't mean the new wine would not or could not be as good. Rather, it means that it will be

THE COUNCIL
SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS

Pinot Noir

VINTAGE 2019

Rosella's Vineyard 34%
Garys' Vineyard 34%
Pisoni Vineyard 32%

THE COUNCIL

The Council was created in July of 2005 in the caves at Pisoni vineyard. The resulting wine within this bottle represents the collective efforts of James Varner, Jerry Yang, Kyle Ditzler, Paul Brown, Bob Varner, Kevin Sawyer, Gary Pisoni and Gary Francioni. The Pisoni clone Pinot Noir from separate lots of Rosella's, Garys' and Pisoni Vineyards were blended in proportions determined by The Council to allow each vineyard to express its distinct personality.



124 cases produced

ALCOHOL 14.2% BY VOLUME

Previous two pages: A bottle of The Council we enjoyed on the trip.

different. And that's exactly my point: The human element is every bit a part of a wine's DNA as the natural ones. *Terroir* is inherently and vibrantly human, and the exclusion of the human element obscures the existence and importance of a hugely determinant factor of wine.

A fantastic case study for this is the Santa Lucia Highlands (SLH), which has been profiled in this *Good Vitis* issue. As I discussed there, the SLH has a handful of what many would describe as the AVA's grand cru vineyards. Most of them exist in this world because of one, or both, of two families: the Pisonis and the Francionis.

For or a variety of reasons, a relative many wineries get to make wines from this small set of vineyards. Pick any vintage and line up several wineries' Gary's Vineyard or Rosella's Vineyard pinot noirs and you'll get an equal number of divergent wines. In this scenario, because these are growers who prize both quality and customer service, many grape buyers get to set their pick dates, and that means there will be differences in chemistry between the sets of raw materials. This is just one of numerous human

elements involved in the winemaking process.

The person who introduced me to the SLH was Adam Lee, co-founder of Siduri Winery who, after selling it to Jackson Family Wines, started a winery called Clarice Wine Company that makes three different SLH pinot noirs each vintage. He's extremely close with the family of SLH producers and growers, and intimately involved in the trade association group that represents the AVA. He also consults for a number of wineries, some of whom purchase SLH fruit.

The Clarice pinot noirs are extremely good wines. Each year's release includes single vineyard designates from Gary's and Rosella's Vineyards and an SLH AVA blend. In each of the vintages I've tried, I've preferred the Gary's to the Rosella's four out of five times. The one year when that wasn't true was the same year that I found the same preference between those two vineyard designate expressions made by the Franscioni's ROAR winery. Yet the Clarice and ROAR wines from the same vintages and vineyards are very different wines. I'd wager that many sommeliers presented with the 2021 Clarice and ROAR Gary's and Rosella's pinots would have a hard time pairing them appropriately based on vineyard, let alone call their vineyard or even AVA



Previous page: One of Morét Brealynn's rows of pinot noir at Lakeview Vineyard.

among a wider selection of even just California pinots from the same vintage.

You could argue that I'm right for different reasons. I could see many argue that this result would occur because the SLH is not a widely studied AVA among sommeliers, and that would be true if I had not limited my hypothetical to a comparison of two vineyards produced by two wineries. Reading this, Gary Francioni and Adam Lee might point out that their respective blocks produce different chemistry and that their irrigation regimes were different and that their pick dates were different (I know all of these things to be true). But, I'd wager that they'd agree that these differences only exist because of the human element.

To appropriate a James Blunt quote from his *Top Gear* appearance, winemakers "are like arseholes, everyone has one." There's a small vineyard in Sonoma County called Lakeview. A number of wineries source from it, but only Morét Brealynn is using it to make a vineyard designate wine. The inaugural release in 2021 came ripping out of the gates, but in 2022 Morét produced something truly

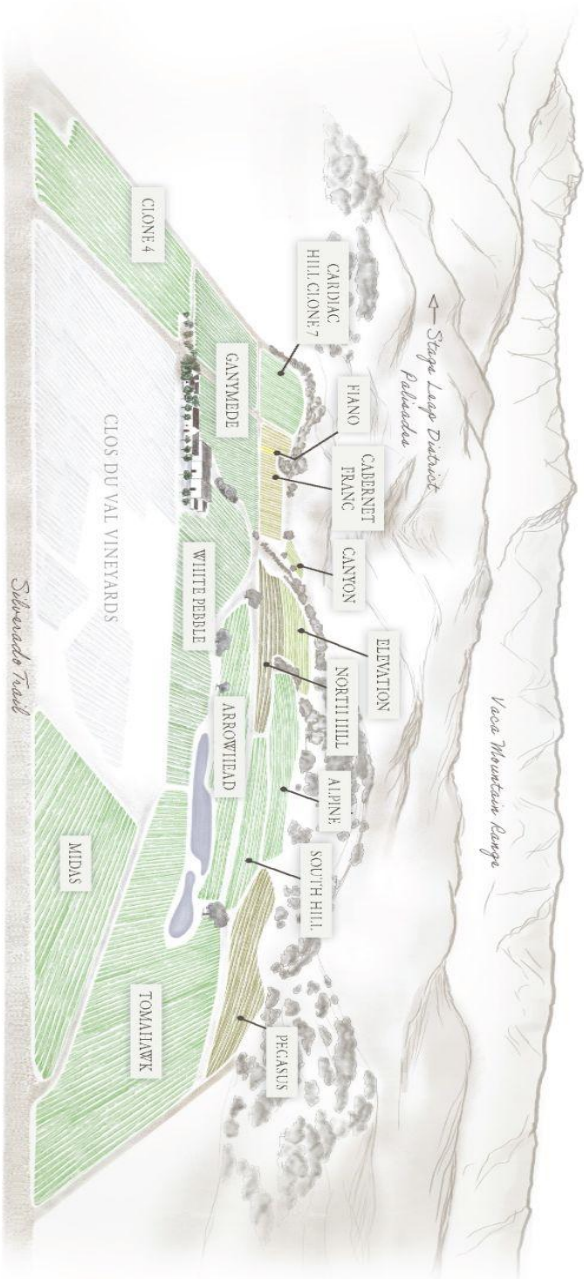
special, one of the best American pinots I've ever had.

Unlike the Gary's and Rosella's, it has no comparison because, as I said, Morét is the only one doing a vineyard designate. And that, in its own way, is a statement about human *terroir*. While rows and blocks within a vineyard can differ, with a vineyard as small as Lakeview, it still takes the attention and dedication of the people working it to turn it into a wine worthy of its own bottling. If I'm Jeff Mangahas at Williams-Selyem, and I'm looking for a new vineyard, and I'm tasting Morét's Lakeview, I'm inquiring about getting my own rows.

Another winemaker whose talents I've come to greatly respect is Elizabeth Vianna, head winemaker at Chimney Rock Winery since 2005. Located in the Stag's Leap AVA and farming 28 blocks on 119 acres of estate vineyards, Chimney Rock is one of Napa's cabernet producers that best demonstrate the veracity of my concept of *terroir*; there are many Stag's Leaps cabs out there, but Chimney Rock distinguishes itself in a blind line up of its peers. This is because different growing circumstances do not equal different wines without a highly skilled human touch, and that is exactly what winemaker Elizabeth and her team bring to the winery.

Chimney Rock

STAGS LEAP DISTRICT
NAPA VALLEY



CABERNET SAUVIGNON
VINEYARDS: Clone 4, Mids, Canyeme, White Pebble, Tomahawk, South Hill Alpine, Cardiac Hill Clone 7



MERLOT
VINEYARDS: North Hill, Pegasus



PETIT VERDOT
VINEYARDS: Elevation, Canyon



FIANO
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc (A Single Row)



CABERNET FRANC
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc

Over the last year I've had the pleasure of tasting wines from across Chimney Rock's vineyards, some of them with Elizabeth. Each one embraces the natural power and acidity of Stags Leap while achieving refinement and elegance rarely seen in American wine. Most Napa winemakers would be lucky to occasionally achieve the Chimney Rock profile that Elizabeth and her team have made routine more than a few times in their careers, although the current release 2021 vintage seems to be extra special.

Watching contestants of Netflix show Barbeque Showdown react when they arrive at the "barbeque compound" in episode 1 of each season reminds me of how Elizabeth talks about Chimney Rock's vineyards: There are so many great things to play with in the pursuit of making the best product possible. The vineyard map on the previous page, courtesy of Chimney Rock, will give you a visual of one version of a winemaker's paradise playground.

Elizabeth geeks out in the pursuit of figuring out how to maximize the potential of each vineyard, of each block, each varietal, and each clone, every vintage. Equally, she geeks out talking about and tasting the differences and finding out which single vineyard wines people prefer.



In the fall of 2023, Chimney Rock sent me a preview of some of its 2021 releases pulled from the southern end of the property. On this trip, Elizabeth and Megghan Driscoll, VP of Communications at parent company Terlato Wines, brought a selection of 2021s from the northern part of the property to dinner.

Even though it wasn't present at dinner, I had to tell Elizabeth that one of my absolute favorite white wines in the world is Chimney Rock's Elevage Blanc, which is a blend of sauvignon blanc and sauvignon gris. I've had them with as much as twelve years of age, and am convinced the wine is both one of America's most under-the-radar white wines as well as one of its very best. As part of the 2021 vintage release, it continues that streak.

Elizabeth was keen to find out how I thought the northern end Ganymede Vineyard cabernet sauvignon compared to the southern end Tomahawk cabernet sauvignon. Representing two of the winery's flagship single vineyard cabernets, Elizabeth said that most people have a preference they hang on to. While both are outstanding, determine a preference was easy for me: It's the Tomahawk, I told her. The first sip of the 2021 brought deafening silence to my world, and I don't remember the last time I was so sad to finish a

bottle.

I have also never had an American Bordeaux-style blend that reminded me so much of old school Bordeaux as the 2021 Elevage rouge, which in this vintage is comprised of 55% merlot, 29% cabernet sauvignon, 14% petit verdot, and 3% malbec. It's a particular blend that, when made as it has been, can only be downgraded from a perfect critique because of its youth. I'd rather judge a wine at its peak, and like the Tomahawk I imagine both could have a run-in with perfection.

What I love so much about the Elevage Blanc, Rouge, and Tomahawk is that they give you the best of Stags Leap while reminding you so clearly of the old world style of Bordeaux that no longer exists, really, even in Bordeaux. They are a fusion of Stags Leap and early 1980s Bordeaux in the best way possible, and that makes them stand out so clearly from other Stags Leaps wines.

Certainly a bit of nature plays a role, but Elizabeth's nearly 20 years of experience with this plot of land has helped her refine and hone in on how to get the most from the vines. I've had numerous winemakers tell me how long they think it takes to really learn a vineyard, and it's always a double-digit number. This

makes it all the more important to recognize the irreplaceable and very perceptible role that humans play in *terroir*-driven wine. Chimney Rock is proof.

As I said at the head of this article, I admire wine's ability to bring people together. What I did not say then is that a major reason that I believe wine does this is because it is made by humans as an interpretation of something we can all see, smell, touch, and taste. It's not all that different to me than painting: Grapes, instead of paint, is the raw material and a winery, instead of a canvas, is the place where it is created. Some artists prize certain paints because of their ingredients, as do winemakers with vineyard sourcing.

Art is in the eye of the beholder just as wine is in the palate of the drinker. Yet, we don't place the origin of the paint at the center of the discussion like we do *terroir*. And in doing that, we miss an incredibly important part of wine appreciation.



It was an awakening. That 83' Smith-Madrone reminded me that I was alive, that I was a man full of energy, love, and passion. It was like being young again.



