

A cool wine district

Text & photo | Claes Lofgren

Beautiful beaches, exclusive hotels, wines with character. Santa Barbara is a famous and trendy wine region, but the climate is one of the coolest in California. Wine photographer Claes Lofgren tells us in text and pictures.

Things are going well now. Santa Barbara has been named Wine Destination of the Year by Wine Enthusiast and several other wine publications. When Northern California wines have reached the pain threshold in terms of price, more and more people are starting to discover the wines from the Central Coast. And cool it is! The east-to-west position of the mountain ranges lets in cold winds from the ocean that cool down the grapes at night, provide morning fog that also dampens ripening and then lovely warmth during the day. Sideways it's called, the wind from the Pacific Ocean that runs through the valleys, unique to the South Central Coast to which the Santa Barbara wine district belongs. It is no coincidence that pinot noir and chardonnay thrive here as well as in their native Burgundy. Long-time readers may recognize Sideways as the title of an Oscar-winning film that hit theaters 20 years ago, and in a short time changed the California wine world. Santa Barbara came into focus, Pinot sales skyrocketed and Merlot struggled. It seems like a long time ago, but when we visit the area, the movie is ever present.

The Central Coast covers about 40 miles of California coastline and has more than 40,000 acres of vineyards which account for about 15% of the state's wine production but we're going to concentrate on the South Central Coast and mainly Santa Barbara County. During the Spanish era, Jesuit monks began planting grapes and wine was made at the San Jose Winery, which today lies forgotten on a small street outside downtown Santa Barbara. Immigrants from Europe brought seedlings and a small wine industry began to sprout. When Prohibition came in 1918, everything came to a halt and it was not until the 1960s that the Santa Barbara Winery was started. They first made wine from purchased grapes from outside the area and grape growers from Northern California soon began to take an interest in the Santa Maria Valley to plant more noble grapes there.

It was 1971 when Richard Sanford and Michael Benedict planted their famous Sanford & Benedict vineyard in Sta. Rita Hills and the potential of the area began to be realized. Then it went from strength to strength. Tire manufacturer Firestone planted grapes in the Santa Ynez Valley in 1972 and started the first winery since Prohibition, the Miller family planted Bien Nacido in the Santa Maria Valley in 1973, and the rest is history. The Santa Maria Valley became the second American Viticultural Area AVA in 1981 with Bien Nacido and the neighboring vineyards as

the main asset. Pinot Noir, Syrah and Chardonnay dominate here. Santa Ynez Valley became AVA in 1983 and here grows a scattered collection of grapes.

Syrah seems to thrive particularly well. Many Santa Barbara wines are simply labeled Santa Ynez Valley if the grapes come from different parts of the valley. It is also a collective name for the four smaller wine regions that lie within its borders. Most famous is Sta. Rita Hills, which is the coolest and, as mentioned, mainly planted with pinot noir and chardonnay. Ballard Canyon is known for Rhône varieties such as syrah, grenache and viognier. Los Olivos is known for cabernet sauvignon and Italian varieties. Happy Canyon is the warmest part and here sauvignon blanc and cabernet sauvignon dominate. Famous areas within the Santa Ynez Valley are also the Foxen Canyon Wine Trail where high profile producers such as Zaca Mesa, Fess Parker and Rancho Sisquoc are located.

The newest AVA is Alisos Canyon which is of lesser significance, although there are some high profile producers who take their grapes from here. Writing about Santa Barbara's wine history is a bit like describing a soap opera on television. Who dated whom? Why did they break up? But how good it turned out! A few names keep popping up and are deeply engraved in the area's wine history. Richard Sanford was the first, it is said that he drove through the Santa Ynez valley with a thermometer in his hand and saw how it got one degree F warmer for every US mile he drove into the valley. The conclusion was that he plant in the coolest place in Sta. Rita Hills. His wines became so sought after that more and more people were attracted to the hitherto unknown area. Unfortunately, he was not as successful a businessman, but was forced to sell everything he created and is today best known as an ambassador for Santa Barbara wines.

Jim Clendenen and Adam Tolmach are two names forever associated with Santa Barbara's modern wine history. As youngsters, they met at Zaca Mesa, both having a fondness for Burgundy after traveling around a bit. Bob Lindquist also worked at Zaca Mesa which was the beginning of their winemaking careers. In 1982, Jim and Adam decided to start Au Bon Climat together, with almost no money. With a lot of hard work and drive, they soon caught the eye of the wine world. Their wines won awards and Robert Parker named Au Bon Climat among the best in the world and Winery of the Year. That kind of thing takes off in the US and sales really took off. Their friend Bob Lindquist started Qupé at around the same time, but he was completely focused on Rhône wines and went for Syrah instead, which was uncharted territory in California. He tells how he became the first in Santa Barbara to make Syrah wines, but the grapes came from Paso Robles further north.

The owner of Bien Nacido, Bob Miller, approached the young winemakers and invited them to become customers of the famous winery. Lindquist was afraid it would be too cool for syrah in the Santa Maria Valley, but they grafted over a number of plants that matured very well. A few years later, Au Bon Climat and Bob Lindquist moved in together at Bien Nacido. Adam Tolmach and Jim Clendenen parted ways after nine years together, and Tolmach returned to his grandfather's farm outside the town of Ojai, which he had already planted with syrah and

sauvignon blanc. Ojai Vineyard became a great success thanks to the elegant style of the wines.

In 1996, a young ambitious man who had worked as a chef for a number of years was hired and discovered the world of wine. Sashi Moorman got in touch with Adam and started as his assistant. Walking alongside him provided amazing insight and, as most of the grapes were sourced from the best vineyards in Santa Barbara, he gained invaluable contacts. These led to a job as winemaker at Stolpman a few years later and a big boost to his career. While at Stolpman, he started making his own wine in 2003 under the Piedrassi label and got to know Rajat Parr.

Parr was a sommelier with an extensive track record as a buyer for some of America's top restaurants. This was the beginning of a partnership that continues to this day. Domaine de La Côte is one of Santa Barbara's true cult wines and hard to come by. After ten years at Stolpman, he left and today is more than busy with his various projects that include Evening Land in Oregon, Sandhi Wines on purchased grapes and Parr Selection. They make their wine in the town of Lompoc, a tiny hamlet that has now grown to include some of California's best wineries, clustered in what is known as The Wine Ghetto.

Small production facilities in tin sheds reminiscent of Shure Gard. Domaine de la Côtes vineyards are stunningly beautiful in the coolest part of the Sta. Rita Hills and the soil consists of fossil remains formed over millions of years.

Of course, as in all TV soaps, there is also a bad guy. This is where Charles Banks steps into the action. Rich as a troll, he has made his fortune as a financial advisor to sports stars. Now he's started investing big in wine companies. His first scalp was the cult Screaming Eagle wine, which he co-owned until 2009. He also invested in Mayacamas, Qupé and Sandhi among others. The whole castle in the air came crashing down when it emerged that he had cheated his clients out of their investments and embezzled their money. He was sentenced to four years in prison and had to sell all his assets.

Sashi Moorman and Rajj Parr managed to get out of the crisis with the help of investors, but Bob Lindquist fared worse, losing his life's work, Qupé. But he came back and still makes great wines under the Lindquist Family name. Qupé lives on with a new owner, the giant company Vintage Wines, which also owns Laetitia, which I will come back to.

This is part of the history of Santa Barbara. But now let's move forward to today's situation and to the winter of 2021-22 when I spend a lot of time in Santa Barbara County. The pandemic had loosened its grip somewhat so traveling is once again possible. The first visit set the tone for the entire stay in Santa Barbara wine country. Adam Tolmach at Ojai turned out to be a very cozy uncle who warmly welcomed me as he stood among his coworkers and tasted the various wines of the year directly from the barrels. After the years at Au Bon Climat, Adam and his wife Helen set out to make Californian wines in a European way. Long before there was talk of natural wines, the philosophy was to make as little as possible, not adding anything or taking anything away from the wine. Very little sulphur is used.

At a time when many American wines felt like fruit bombs with high alcohol and lots of oak, Ojai's wines were elegant and balanced. After losing several vineyards in Ojai due to Pierce's disease, when he refused to use pesticides, he mainly buys his grapes from top suppliers like Bien Nacido and he always pays per hectare instead of per ton. This way he can manage that part of the vineyard as he sees fit.

He decides when to harvest the grapes, nowadays much earlier than before, because he wants the freshness. Since 2017, grapes have been growing again in Ojai as he has planted hybrids that are resistant to Pierces. After a few years, he can see the result as hopeful and the wines he has made from the grapes are clearly approved. Total production is quite small, around 60-70,000 bottles per year, and we are happy that a number of them come to Sweden regularly. As a young man, he worked in vineyards in Burgundy, which shaped him. Not least the French relationship with food and wine, their lust for life. This was of course in contrast to the American, somewhat puritanical way where young people had to slave 18 hours a day for poor pay just so that investors would get a little richer.

After their years at Au Bon Climat, Adam and Jim went their separate ways in 1991, but they parted as friends, well aware of what a great job they had done together and for Santa Barbara. Jim Clendenen very tragically passed away in May 2021 at the age of 68, far too young. He is described by all who met him as a big, noisy and friendly person who embraced life and lived for wine. He loved France and Burgundy but didn't shy away from making wine from all sorts of grapes. His two children Knox and Isabel inherited the bulk of the business but two of his loyal employees, Jim Adelman and Enrique Rodriguez each got a share and are today the ones who mainly keep Au Bon Climat going.

A small discreet sign shows the entrance to the winery and I am greeted by Jim Adelman who is the winemaker and General Manager. He shows me around and we taste a large number of wines from barrels. Then we come to the famous lunch. The winery is located in a corner of Bien Nacido and they do not receive visitors except by special invitation, so Jim Clendenden introduced the tradition of gathering all employees and visitors for lunch at a long table where homemade food was served and a large number of wine bottles were uncorked.

I got to meet his daughter Isabel Clendenen and two other legends, the Swedish-born Bob Lindquist and the owner of the Hitching Post restaurant Frank Ostini who also makes his wine here. The lunch was a lively affair with fantastic food and bottles of wine wandering along the table. It is clear that this has become a famous institution.

However, discerning visitors have the opportunity to taste and buy the wines at a very nice tasting room in downtown Santa Barbara, where many different producers have made a cluster of rooms in the Funk Zone as it is called.

Andrew Murray is a Rhône lover who has had great success with his wines. As a young man, he traveled extensively in France with his food-loving parents and became obsessed with the country's wines. One Condrieu wine in particular opened his eyes to the viognier grape. His parents sold their restaurants and bought a farm in the Santa Ynez Valley. Andrew, who had just finished high school, planted a few hectares of what was then, outside France, a very rare and dying

grape. The mood at home turned a little frosty when it turned out that it was Syrah he had planted, as was eventually revealed.

Today, Andrew considers it a stroke of luck as he is considered one of the top Syrah specialists in the US, with 90% of production dedicated to the grape. And yes, he did manage to plant Viognier in the end, but he admits they were naïve. They had no idea how much work and expense goes into making a successful wine. Andrew went to US Davis and learned as much about both vineyard work and winemaking as possible. Then he worked a few rounds in Australia. He co-founded The Viognier Guild which then became The Rhône Rangers. His wines got a lot of attention but the finances didn't work out. There were rifts in the family and his parents decided to sell their farm. Suddenly he was left with neither vineyards nor winery, but was offered the chance to take over an old brewery by the Firestone family.

This was the start of his own business where he still works with a number of wineries that he has been with for decades. Andrew took over another winery a little further down Foxen Canyon Road, where today it is well attended in the lovely outdoor tasting room where all the wines are available to taste and buy.

Melville Vineyard is located in Sta. Rita Hills between Lompoc and Buelton. Ron Melville worked at the Los Angeles Stock Exchange and became more and more interested in wine, which resulted in the purchase of vineyards in Sonoma in the late 1980s. One day he tasted a 1992 Au Bon Climat Sanford & Benedict pinot noir and was blown away. As a great lover of Burgundy wines, he could hardly believe it was a wine from Santa Barbara. He traveled around looking for suitable vineyards and found land next door to Babcock, one of the best names in the area. They didn't mind him getting started, and Ron Melville was the perfect person to design the winery to his liking. Land prices in 1996 hadn't started to rise yet so the purchase was much cheaper than the investment in Sonoma. Sons Brad and Chad joined the company and the idea was to sell pinot noir, syrah and chardonnay grapes to other producers. Enter instead a young, hungry Greg Brewer, who had just started Brewer Clifton with Steve Clifton. But when he was offered the chance to create a brand new wine from scratch, he couldn't resist the challenge. His talent was recognized and the wines became a success. He stayed on as winemaker until 2015 and is now one of the hottest and most sought after winemakers in the area. Chad Melville took over as winemaker from Greg Brewer and today they are firmly established as one of the top wineries in the market. They receive many visitors at the winery but also have a tasting room in Santa Barbara city. They do not buy any grapes but are completely self-sufficient, use no pesticides, harvest by hand at night and trample the grapes. Everything should be as natural as possible.

When I meet Greg Brewer, we meet at his home down in Montesito outside Santa Barbara. He is tired, having just returned from a ceremony in Miami. Wine Enthusiast named him 2020 "Winemaker of the Year" but due to the pandemic, it was only now that he could receive the tributes in person. After thirty years in the service of wine, it is undeniably great to receive such an award. Both Greg and his wife Sonja Magdevski produce their wines in Lompoc, Sonja under the name Casa Dumetz. In the small charming town of Los Olivos, Brewer-Clifton's tasting

room is very tastefully located. He works under three names, Brewer-Clifton with pinot noir, Diatom with chardonnay and Ex Post Facto where he takes on syrah. The sale of the company to the Jackson Family in 2017 gave him more freedom, he says. It gave him the finances to buy vineyards and increase production slightly. He is fully dedicated to Sta. Rita Hills and does not want to go outside that area. He says he loves Sweden and Japan, the Asian influence is evident in their house which gives a zen like feeling. He is called a perfectionist and it is evident even in his wines.

Another name to keep an eye on in Santa Barbara is Matt Dee, winemaker at Jonata and its sister winery The Hilt Estate since its inception in 2004. The billionaire Stan Kroenke, who also owns Screaming Eagle, is behind the project and a few months ago opened a tasting room adjacent to the winery in Sta Rita Hills. But if you like it, it costs, a tasting round costs at least 50 dollars. The Paring is the name of a line of wines that are priced a little more affordably and are available to order.

Tara Gomez works on a much smaller scale but as America's first winemaker with roots in the Native American population, she has been recognized. The Chumash are the name of the people who originally lived in this part of California, from San Luis Obispo all the way down to Malibu, north of Los Angeles. Today they have their reservation outside Santa Ynes and you pass it on the way to the Solvang and Lompoc wine region. A giant modern casino and hotel complex is evidence of income opportunities for the indigenous people and twelve years ago they scraped together money and bought a 550 hectare property from Fess Parker where 100 hectares were planted with 19 different grape varieties. Then they turned to Tara Gomez, who graduated from Fresno State in 1998 and had worked at a number of wineries in California and Europe.

She was tasked with starting Kitá Wines for the tribe. The idea of the land purchase was really to expand the reservation's living space, the vineyard kind of came with the deal. But it is well managed and they sell grapes to 60 different producers around the Central Coast. While working on Kitá, Tara had her own wine project with her wife Mireia Taribo that they call Camins 2 Dreams. In fact, just as I am in the area, the news comes that Kitá is closing down, they will only sell grapes in the future.

Sine Qua Non is perhaps California's foremost cult wine. Manfred and Elaine Krankel started in 1994 on a small scale and were immediately praised by Robert Parker. Their wines are highly personalized, red wines made from Rhône grapes such as Syrah and Grenache. They bought the grapes from the famous Santa Barbara vineyards but vinified everything in a shed outside Ventura. Today they have a modern winery and have planted their own vineyards around the property. Maximum production is 3500 cases and the waiting time to get on their list to buy is 9 years.