

Santa Cruz Mountains Subregional Flavor Profiles

In an attempt to better understand the vast and diverse appellation that is the Santa Cruz Mountains, a group of viticulture and wine experts conducted a series of wine tastings in September and October of 2008 with the online web portal Appellation America. The results clearly define five different subregions with distinctive characteristics that make their way into the wines produced from grapes grown in each. The subregions are: Skyline, Saratoga/Los Gatos, Summit, Los Ranchos (Highway 17 corridor) and Corralitos/Pleasant Valley. A blind tasting of 55 Pinot Noirs on October 22, 2008 clearly identified that wines produced from grapes grown in these areas really do bear the unique signature born of the special soils, weather and vegetation present in each of these distinctive domains.

This year's Pinot Paradise, March 28-29, 2009 will showcase these subregions and the wines that bear testament to the terroir inherent in them.

An Overview of the Santa Cruz Mountains Appellation

Tasting the wines of the Santa Cruz Mountains is a voyage of discovery through this large and diverse appellation. It is the microclimates and the differences they impart that make our wines so diverse and interesting!

The Santa Cruz Mountains:

- Covers a huge area (almost 480,000 acres) from Woodside in the north to Watsonville in the south, with only about 1500 acres planted to winegrapes.
- Is located between two major bodies of water that produce fog events and affect the growing climate, with Monterey Bay/the Pacific Ocean on the west and San Francisco Bay on the east.
- Elevations range from almost coastal (starting at 400 feet) climbing to mountains as high as 2600 feet, with ridges and valleys throughout.
- The San Andreas Faultline dissects the region along the highest ridgetops, with the Pacific Plate on the coastal side, and the North American Plate inland. Soil on the Pacific Plate, an ancient seabed, is primarily sedimentary sandstone, mudstone, clay and shale created by marine deposits; and loam. Soil on the North American Plate is metamorphic, granitic. In some areas, especially vineyards near the faultline, soils from both can be found.
- The Pinot Noir vineyards extend along the ridgetops along Skyline and south above Summit Road, as well as on the western, coastal side of the mountain range facing Monterey Bay and further south into Corralitos/Pleasant Valley. All of these areas are in the cool Region I that is ideal for growing Pinot Noir.
- Pinot Noir thrives in the gentle coastal breezes that bathe our vineyards in the afternoons and massage the vines without overstressing them. Gentle, moist breezes preserve the integrity of the fruit, allowing for softer skins and softer tannins that release more easily in the wine.

In general, Santa Cruz Mountains wines are characterized by an earthy, mineral quality, especially the Pinot Noirs; and with a complexity and balanced acidity that pairs well with food and helps them to age well.

We can also identify several major subregions defined by the microclimates that lend very distinct flavor profiles to the grapes grown in each, which you can discern in the wine they produce. Despite clonal differences and differences in winemaking styles, the underlying subregional characteristics in the vineyards are quite pronounced. These subregions have been identified as a way of better understanding and enjoying Santa Cruz Mountains wines. There is only one sub-appellation in the Santa Cruz Mountains, and that is Ben Lomond.

Subregional flavor profiles:

From the north end of the appellation around Woodside to the southern end near Corralitos:

Skyline (Thomas Fogarty, Woodside, La Honda, etc.): This is the northern end of the appellation in the Woodside area. It includes vineyards along the ridge at about 2100', as well as vineyards downslope closer to San Francisco Bay. These vineyards can experience dramatic temperature variations, with an almost daily evening maritime fog event during the summer that brings chilly coastal air to cool off the warm afternoons.

Flavor Profile: Pinot Noirs are characterized by pronounced acidity and bright, lively fruit; red berries, cranberry, guava, cocoa, allspice, orange peel.

Saratoga/Los Gatos (Mt. Eden, Savannah Chappelle, Cinnabar, Black Ridge, Pichon, etc.): These Pinot vineyards are primarily on the hilltops above Saratoga and near Lexington Reservoir in Los Gatos (where they are cooled by the mists coming off the reservoir). Sandwiched between the ocean to the west and San Francisco Bay to the east, these vineyards on the eastern side of the mountains along the peninsula also enjoy a long, cool growing season from their proximity to these bodies of water. Temperatures are generally moderate, with low daytime highs and few heat spikes, so growing days are long and even. Sun exposure is primarily eastward or southern, which promotes slow, measured ripening, and the vineyards are generally more protected than on the western summit overlooking the coast. This variation on our climate, as well as the mountain soils produce grapes with intense, vibrant, lasting flavors.

Flavor Profile: Pinot Noirs display distinct acidity, dense raspberry and dark cherry fruit, along with a fresh outdoors qualities of balsam, sage, wet stone, distinctive 'mountain spice'.

Summit Road (Muns Vineyard, Burrell School, Silver Mountain, Loma Prieta, Miller Hill, Quenneville, etc.): This area is south of Hwy. 17 above Soquel, runs along Summit Road, and has the highest elevation Pinot vineyards in the region, as high as 2600'. Many of the vineyards here have all day sun, and are surrounded by scrub oak, pines and high chaparral. During the growing season they are cooled by the soft breezes that blow up the mountains from the coastal fog that blankets Monterey Bay. It is important for the Pinot vineyards to be irrigated and for canopy management practices to shade and protect the fruit in the sunshine. The Pinots produced here can be big but balanced, with bold tannins for aging.

Flavor Profile: Pinot Noirs are generally very bold, full-bodied and rich, characterized by distinctive cherry, raspberry and pomegranate fruit, and can be more floral, smokey, with dark chocolate hints.

Los Ranchos (Vine Hill, Ahlgren, Clos Tita, Branciforte, etc.): This area (generally along the Hwy. 17 corridor) cascades towards the coast from the Summit area and encompasses Rancho San Augustine on the west (Scotts Valley) and Rancho Shoquel Augmentation on the east (from Santa Clara County to Soquel). Originally planted extensively to vines in the 1800s much of this area was designated as "Vine Hill" in 1867. These mountaintop vineyards range in elevation from 800 to 1300 feet with southern exposure, and are cooled by their proximity to Monterey Bay. Growing season temperatures range from a daily high of 80 to a night time low of 55 degrees. The topsoils are well draining and range from one inch to three feet of sand, sandy loam, loam, and clay loam on top of weathered or lithic bedrock. The vineyards are surrounded by lower elevation chaparral which includes madrones, manzanita, oaks, chamise and yerba santa.

Flavor Profile: These Pinot Noirs are big, complex and multi-layered with aromas and flavors of olallieberries, cranberries, chocolatey caramel, spicy coriander. Tannins are firm, acid balanced, minerality is evident. They are unctuous and generally fruit forward.

Corralitos/Pleasant Valley (Martin Alfaro, Pleasant Valley Vineyards, Windy Oaks, Bargetto's Regan Vineyard): This is the southernmost end of the region, close to Watsonville. These vineyards are typically at lower elevations (about 400 to 800 feet) along the coast. In the summer it is not unusual for early morning fog to blanket these vineyards. It burns off late in the morning, followed by warm afternoons and evenings, and cool nighttimes. This dramatic daily temperature variation during fruit development creates intense, concentrated flavors; and slows ripening, creating complex, nuanced flavors. Soils are sedimentary (sandy, clay, silt, loam).

Flavor Profile: Pinot Noirs from this region tend to be brilliant in color, elegant, with hibiscus, bay, nectarine on the nose; root beer, blueberry on the palate. The acidity is pronounced but inviting; with well integrated minerality.

For more information on Pinot Paradise: SCMWA, 831-685-8463, www.scmwa.com

For more information on Appellation America Pinot Noir evaluation: <http://wine.appellationamerica.com/wine-review/645/Renaissance-Grape.html>

For more information on the Santa Cruz Mountains Winegrowing Region and Vineyards: VASCM, www.vascm.org