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California's Secret Central Coast

By Steve Heimoff



Even many wine-savvy tourists, speeding their way to San Francisco or Los Angeles, past burgeoning, sand-circled sea towns like Pismo Beach and Oceana, don't know how close they are to some of the best terroir in the state. Arroyo Grande and Edna valleys are just minutes off the busy 101 Freeway connecting Northern and Southern California, south of San Luis Obispo.

Picturesque Orcutt Road winds from the college town of San Luis Obispo southeast through the barren, windswept Edna Valley. Here you'll find Orcutt Road Cellars, a family-owned winery whose brands are Baileyana and Tangent. They also own the Firepeak and Paragon vineyards. Further down the road and on neighboring lanes are Domaine Alfred, Wolff, Tolosa, Kynsi and other wineries whose products are putting this cool-climate appellation on the quality map.

But Edna Valley is likely to remain cattle and sheep country, and not turn into a vineyard monoculture, like Napa Valley. The reason? There's not enough water under the ground, and it doesn't rain very much. This is an arid part of California's Central Coast.

TOP-SCORING CURRENT RELEASES

96 Laetitia 2004 La Colline Pinot Noir (Arroyo Grande Valley); \$60. Extremely complex, and while it shows powerful red cherry, cola, rhubarb and tea flavors, it maintains the essential elegance that Pinot requires. The acidity is wonderful. Very, very dry. So balanced, so layered, so drinkable. —S.H.

96 Talley 2003 Rosemary's Vineyard Chardonnay (Arroyo Grande Valley); \$44. The fruit is massive, succulent in pineapple custard, Key lime pie and roasted coconut, and the oak is also powerful in new, charred character. Then there's the brilliant acidity that makes it

Continue southeast along Orcutt Road and, almost without knowing it, you leave the Edna Valley and enter the Arroyo Grande Valley appellation. Although it's nearly twice the size of Edna Valley, Arroyo Grande has only a handful of wineries. These twin American Viticultural Areas are San Luis Obispo County's cool-climate winegrowing regions. (Its third AVA, Paso Robles, is hot.) The Arroyo Grande appellation extends far enough inland to include a few wineries, such as Rancho Arroyo Grande, but at that point, the ocean's influence is practically nil.

The key to understanding these two valleys is to appreciate the role of cool-climate viticulture. In an era of increasing heft and extraction across all varieties, especially reds, a place as chilly as coastal San Luis Obispo cannot physiologically induce grapes to ripen like they do in, say, Napa Valley. It's too cool in coastal SLO for Cabernet Sauvignon or Zinfandel, but three world-class, cool-climate grapes—Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Syrah—excel in the Edna and Arroyo Grande. The key is acidity. The grapes are picked at lower sugar levels, hence higher acidity, and thus are more elegant. That doesn't mean they lack flavor. Just as with Guigal's Syrahs from Côte-Rôtie—another cool climate—they can be enormously rich and complex. As consumers turn away from bigger, heavier wines to more balanced ones (and the talk in California is that's what's happening), the Edna Valley and Arroyo Grande Valley are on the verge of superstardom.

"We have such a long growing season and it's so cool, we don't get those heat spikes, which enables us to get nice ripe fruit and keep acidity," explains John Niven, of Orcutt Road Cellars. He's talking about Edna Valley, but the same description applies to the Arroyo Grande. "There's something distinct about this little area," agrees Brian Talley of Talley Vineyards. "The wines have this elegance, this acid profile that makes them really enjoyable."

A glance at the map shows how both valleys hug the curve of San Luis Obispo Bay, allowing chilly Pacific fogs and breezes to penetrate the vineyards. Another entryway for ocean breezes is Morro Bay, slightly to the north. This is one of the coolest coastal regions in California, if not the coolest.

all work. —S.H.

95 Alban 2003 Seymour's Syrah (Edna Valley); \$NA. Tremendous depth and complexity, with red and black stone fruits, berries, spices and herbs. Layers of anise, chocolate, oak. Tannins are rich, thick, soft and negotiable now. Huge wine. —S.H.

95 Wedell 2002 Hillside Vineyard Chardonnay (Edna Valley); \$45. Richly creamy, the flavors suggest dried peaches and mangoes and a buttery, vanilla-rich pineapple crème brûlée, with a complex spicebox finish. —S.H.

94 Kynsi 2003 Kalanna Syrah (Edna Valley); \$44. Massive, dense, oaky young Syrah, rich and impressive in ripe fruit. The cherries, raspberries and sweet milk chocolate are delicious, and complexed with darker, animal notes that, with the tannins, give the wine weight and gravity. —S.H.

93 Baileyana 2004 Firepeak Vineyard El Gordo Chardonnay (Edna Valley); \$30. Takes the firm, flinty steeliness and tangy acidity of Edna Valley fruit to new heights, with powerful yet nuanced Key lime, kiwi and tart green apple flavors and a rich, creamy, not-too-oaky mouthfeel. —S.H.

92 Domaine Alfred 2004 Chamisal Vineyards Califa Chardonnay (Edna Valley); \$38. The winery's reserve Chard has a richly satisfying buttercream texture that frames ripe flavors of limes, peaches and pineapples, ending in a spicy, honeyed finish. Crisp acidity makes the wine bright and clean. —S.H.

92 Wolff 2004 Estate Grown Petite Sirah (Edna Valley); \$19. Bone dry and tannicly acidic. However, there's a deeply attractive, ripe juiciness that's a joy to savor, the essence of black currants and chocolate-coated cherries. —S.H.

92 Tolosa 2003 Edna Ranch "1772" Syrah (Edna Valley); \$46. A young Syrah, dry and a bit numb in tannins. Cherry pie filling and raspberry purée flavors, with dustings of cinnamon sugar, vanilla and cocoa. —S.H.

92 Malvolio 2003 Laetitia Vineyard Clone 777 Pinot Noir (Arroyo Grande Valley); \$48. Silky elegance marks this wine, with subtle flavorings of cola, red cherries, tobacco and cinnamon spice. —S.H.

Daniel Rinke, the cellar master at Domaine Alfred, says that when his boss, winery owner Terry Speizer, first planted the Chamisal Vineyard, in 1972, "He put in Cabernet Sauvignon, which is a very poor choice in Edna Valley." Brian Talley's dad did the same thing, back in 1981. "It only took two vintages before the Cab got the axe!" Talley grins. Today, there's little Cabernet, or any other heat-loving variety, in either valley.

Chardonnay

Edna Valley Chardonnays are so distinctive in style they're California's equivalent of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc; there's nothing quite like them. The basic profile is high acidity and a purity of green fruit, such as kiwis, limes and green apples, with a firm, wet-stone minerality. Even unoaked, the wines are delicious, but most winemakers put on some new oak. Wedell, Baileyana, Carpe Diem, Wolff, Perbacco, Tolosa, Domaine Alfred and Talley (which produces an Oliver's Vineyard Chardonnay from Edna Valley) are outstanding local producers. Wineries from beyond the area that do a good job with Edna Valley Chard include Ortman Family, Stephen Ross and York Mountain.

Arroyo Grande Valley's Chardonnays are less instantly identifiable than Edna Valley's. That may be because the only two major producers are Laetitia and Talley, and their terroirs are different from each other. (A few California wineries from outside the valleys have made Arroyo Grande Chardonnay, including Tantara and Au Bon Climat.) Laetitia is closer to the ocean than any other winery in the county. From the parking lot, you can see the Pacific and smell its salt-tanged air. Talley is a bit further inland, and that extra bit of warmth may be why their Chardonnays are fuller and richer than Laetitia's.

Pinot Noir

Many Pinotphiles overlook Arroyo Grande Valley and Edna Valley in favor of other, better-known Pinot appellations to the north and south. Granted, production in the valleys is relatively low, and the wineries, with a few exceptions, are small, family-owned businesses, without the deep pockets needed to market their wines on a grand scale. But consumers should know about these wines. In an age when California Pinot Noirs seem to be getting bigger and more extracted, SLO Pinots remain a stronghold of elegance and finesse.

As with Chardonnay, there are differences between Edna Valley Pinot Noir and those from Arroyo Grande Valley. Edna Valley Pinot Noirs are generally silky and refined, with cherry flavors and the same tangy minerality that braces the Chardonnays. They're succulent, but can sometimes be missing that extra depth needed for greatness. Arroyo Grande Pinot Noirs, by contrast—and again, there are really only two examples to judge by, Laetitia and Talley—are deeper, darker wines, more complex and, potentially, more ageworthy. Laetitia's block bottlings, La Colline and Les Galets, are its best, with Reserve and regular bottlings close behind in terms of quality. (Malvolio also makes an excellent Arroyo Grande Pinot, farmed from several of the six blocks of Laetitia's vineyard.)

The man who developed Laetitia's Pinot Noir program was Christian Roguenant, who had come over from France in 1986 to be the winemaker when the property was still owned by Deutz. As it slowly became clear that the sparkling wine boom in America might not occur as anticipated, Roguenant experimented with making still Pinot Noir, and he remembers the time in 1988 when the late Andre Tchelistcheff visited and tasted the wine. "He said it was the best Pinot Noir he'd ever had in the U.S.," Roguenant recalls.

Roguenant, who, in 1999, was lured by the Nivens to Baileyana after 13 years at Maison Deutz/Laetitia, probably "gets" the two valleys better than anyone else. He says Arroyo Grande Pinot Noir benefits from the valley being a few degrees cooler than Edna Valley. Also, Talley's and Laetitia's vineyards are on slopes, for the most part, while the majority of Edna Valley Pinot Noir grows on flatlands, where the soils are heavier and not as well drained. That may be why they're lighter in body. Ed Filice, the former winemaker at Tolosa, captures this quality nicely when he says, "Edna Valley Pinot Noir is a red wine trying to be a white." But when an Edna Valley Pinot does come from slopes, such as Wedell's Hillside Vineyard bottling and some of Domaine Alfred's, it's every bit as big as anything from Arroyo Grande.

For all its size, though, an Arroyo Grande Pinot never falls victim to what Laetitia's associate winemaker, Justin Mund, calls "the Syrah-ization of Pinot Noir." Talley, too, disapproves of this new style. "I don't want a huge, high-alcohol, low-acid, tutti-frutti Pinot Noir," he says. Neither does Hickey, at Laetitia. "Mind, some of them are killer, but there's a lack of acidity, of bone," he says, adding that, even if he wanted to produce such a Pinot Noir, "our vineyard will not allow us to."

Syrah

In all of coastal San Luis Obispo County, maybe in all of California, there's one vintner whose name is practically synonymous with great Rhône wines: John Alban.

Alban planted his vineyard, on Orcutt Road in the heart of Edna Valley, in 1990, putting in the region's first Syrah, Roussanne and Viognier and, the following year, Grenache. It was an unusual and, some thought, a foolish thing to do. "The era I started the winery in, nobody gave a rat's ass about any of these [Rhône] varieties!" Alban laughs. "It's a cool climate, and when I got here, everyone thought that meant Chardonnay and Pinot Noir." Alban wanted to go in a different direction. He had fallen in love with Rhône varieties while attending grad school at Fresno State and, later, U.C. Davis, and discovered something interesting. "Everybody always talked about how hot the Rhône is. Well, I got 40 years of climate data, did the number crunching, and lo and behold, the Northern Rhône turns out to be a Region 1 climate [on the U.C. Davis scale]." In other words, cool.

Just why Alban's wines are so good is a bit of a mystery, as great wines usually are. Edna Valley's climate certainly helps, and so does the fact that the vineyard is almost entirely on a hill, with sparse soils. Alban divides the vineyard into blocks named for various family members. Highest of all is Seymour's, after his dad. It's so rocky and steep that Alban didn't even dare plant it until 1998, because he couldn't figure out how.

Seymour's Syrah is a consistently great wine, but the 2005, which I tasted from barrel, is the greatest California Syrah I've ever had. "I think it's Seymour's soil type and exposition," Alban says, explaining why the wine is so rich. "Lots of chalk and chert, combined with the very steep hillside, and the constant wind, all make for a very dwarfed, devigorated vine, with a lot less fruit and a much smaller cluster." Yields in Seymour's rarely exceed 2 tons per acre.

Alban isn't the only one achieving success with Syrah in the two valleys. In Arroyo Grande, Laetitia has been doing very interesting things with the variety. In Edna Valley, Domaine Alfred, Tolosa and Cerro Caliente all craft compelling Syrahs. Last year, the Rhône-oriented vintner Bob Lindquist (Qupé) planted 80 acres adjacent to Alban's place with Syrah, Grenache, Albarino, Tempranillo, Marsanne and, he cracks, "a tiny amount of Pinot Noir for fun." Then there's tiny Kynsi Winery, on Corbett Canyon Road, in the southern Edna Valley. I didn't much care for their Syrahs from the late 1990s, but with the 2002 vintage, they really started turning things around. After tasting Kynsi's 2003 Kalanna Syrah this past spring, I bee-lined for the winery and met up with young Anna Othman, who, with her sister, Kala, and parents, Don and Gwen, comprise the Kynsi clan.

"My sister and I made that wine," Anna informed me with evident pride. "We even drove the forklift." ("Kalanna" is a contraction of their names.) The grapes were grown in a small nearby vineyard, and the winemaking was pretty elemental; Anna Othman calls it "Burgundian."

The dramatic improvement in Kynsi's Syrahs over a four- or five-year period, Gwen Othman told me, has been directly related to a series of deliberate changes the family made: changing the grape sourcing from hot Paso Robles to the cool Edna Valley; working with Brian Talley's viticultural team to improve canopy management; and technological innovations, including buying a new destemmer. Don Othman, a former NASA engineer, even invented a gas pressure device, called the Bulldog Pup, that keeps the new wine from being exposed to oxygen when it's transferred between vessels.

"We're always looking for improvements," Gwen Othman says. "We just ordered a Europress," a new line of tank presses popular with smaller wineries.

Kynsi's Kalanna Syrah is practically a food group in itself, and the wine's earthy richness reflects something of Anna Othman. "I can't imagine any other career path that would fit my personality," she says. "I like constant change. I love working outdoors, I love watching things grow."

With that kind of individuality and enthusiasm so common in these valleys, the area will not be overlooked much longer.