

California's best lesser-known vineyards

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Imagine which California sites would end up as eBay superstars if vineyards had their own trading cards.

IMAGES



Oh, the names that might fly: Bien Nacido to Hirsch. Stagecoach to Garys' to Hyde. I might trade you my Durell for a rare mint-condition Stolpman, but I'll never give up my To Kalon.

What separates these vineyards is not only their amazing potential but also their owners' willingness to work with a range of winemakers. It is one thing to build an estate property and make memorable wine under one label, quite another to entrust your fruit to multiple hands and hope they make you proud. In turn, vineyard owners enjoy the fame of their name on the bottle when accolades arrive. Inviting talent to work your fruit is at the heart of discovering terroir.

In that way, vineyards serve as talent scouts of a sort. Follow the lesser-known vineyards discovered by notable winemakers and you'll find the next big names. The converse is crucial too: Great vineyard sites are magnets for outstanding new talent, and their owners often good judges of ability in the cellar.

I set out to find five new vineyard sites that you should know if you recognize the names above. In the case of a couple, like Alder Springs, it might already be familiar - though not familiar enough. Each is at a different stage in its life; the oldest, Heintz, was planted in the early 1980s; the youngest, Shake Ridge, less than a decade ago. But all are drawing top winemaking talent. California's best winemakers know about them. Now you will too.

Shake Ridge

As a pioneering vineyard manager and consultant, Ann Kraemer built a no-nonsense reputation helping wineries such as Swanson and Shafer keep their efforts focused. But when it came to her family's own parcel in Amador County, she went a bit wild, planting Rhone varieties (Syrah, Grenache, Viognier), Sierra foothills stalwarts (Zinfandel, Barbera) and more.

"I would never have let anybody plant this many different things," she says.

If Shake Ridge is relatively new, both the site and Kraemer's family have old California ties. The vineyard, a few miles east of Sutter Creek, hosted grapevines in the 1800s. Kraemer's family dates back even further: Jose Antonio Yorba came in 1769 on the Portola Expedition. After her great-grandmother Angelina Yorba married into the Kraemer family, they began using the Yorba brand for oranges grown in their groves.

Kraemer tried to buy a vineyard for 20 years, evaluating some 40 sites in the Sierra foothills. Finally her father offered to put up some of his agricultural land down south in trade. In 2001, they settled on a spot. But her other seven siblings wanted in. Most still lend a hand; her father still comes up from his home near San Diego to drive the tractor.

With elevations between 1,500 and 1,800 feet, the sloping site in the western foothills has good air drainage and moderate temperatures. Its head-trained Zinfandel shows a subtler signature than many - lots of juicy red fruit. Rhone varietals display exuberant, but still reined-in, flavors.

The site benefits from Kraemer's years of working for demanding Napa Valley clients - meticulous farming and vine selections (the Zin vines hail from Ridge Vineyards and Monte Rosso) and mostly organic soil amendments. She brings, in the words of Kraemer's friend and client Annie Favia, "anal-retentive Napa Valley viticulture to the foothills where it hasn't been before."

She also draws high-profile vintners to Shake Ridge - like Favia, a top viticulturist herself, and her winemaker husband, Andy Erickson (Screaming Eagle, Arietta). There's also Helen Keplinger; the Courier label from RN74 chef Jason Berthold and the Kraemer family's own wines under the (what else) Yorba label, made by Ancien winemaker Ken Bernards.

If Amador vineyards have shifted to the back burner, Kraemer's efforts provide an excellent new spotlight. But the work on her family's site has barely begun. "It's still humbling me every day," she says.

Location: Amador County, east of Sutter Creek

Size: 34 vineyard acres on 185 acres

Soils: Well-drained loam, with base rock of quartz, soapstone, shale and granite

First planted: 2003

Claim to fame: Mostly Rhone varieties and Zinfandel

Signature wine: 2006 Favia Wines Quarzo Amador Syrah (\$65): Made with one-third whole clusters, it's meaty and full of subtle power, with blue plum and smoky dry earth notes. Opulent brown spices cap the intense layers of flavor. The name refers to the quartz found in the Shake Ridge soils. Also: 2007 Vino d'Angelo Zinfandel (\$26); 2006 Yorba Barbera (\$26).

Labels include: Favia, Fortitude (Etude), Keplinger, Vino d'Angelo, Courier, Newsome Harlow, Yorba

Alder Springs Vineyard

This is the vineyard a wine cooler built.

California Cooler, specifically, co-founded by one Stuart Bewley in his hometown of Lodi. Bewley sold the brand to Brown-Forman in 1985. He bristled at working for a big corporation. Just 32 at the time, he had enough cash to get out. "I decided I was going to get into just completely the opposite end of the wine business," he says.

So he circled the globe, trying to suss out what made a great wine - and a great vineyard. No surprise in his conclusion: a marginal, cool climate; high altitudes; and complex soils.

That led to a lengthy hunt before he found himself in Laytonville in 1991. Once you've finally pinpointed the location of Bewley's sprawling, remote ranch - about three hours up Highway 101 into Mendocino's more remote corners - it seems thoroughly improbable he ever would have found it. "We were an hour's drive from the nearest vineyard when we started Alder Springs," Bewley says.

Just 7 miles from the Mendocino shoreline, at elevations climbing up to 2,700 feet, Alder Springs could be yet another steep site in the coastal mountains. Not quite. A 4,000-foot ridge to the west blocks the most severe weather. Afternoon cooling and dramatic temperature swings create a blend of coastal and inland characteristics.

Meticulously conceived farming is Alder Springs' hallmark; that, combined with its size, hastens a comparison: You might regard it, fortuitously, as a Bien Nacido of the North. There are 20 blocks with a dizzying array of grape clones - Syrah alone has at least eight - plus more than 15 rootstocks, all meticulously trimmed to notably low yields, under 2 tons per acre.

To tend the sprawling, steep site, Bewley has a full-time crew of 15, all of whom live on the ranch. (Bewley and his family live in Belvedere; he splits his time.) He estimates each vine is touched 13 times each season. As a result, winemakers have a virtual menu of grapes and parcels to choose from. Jeff Ames' RADIUS label, for instance, makes three vastly different Alder Springs Syrahs.

The attention to detail has drawn many fans. Bewley's client list is a roster of top Northern California Syrah and Pinot makers, including Les Behrens of Behrens & Hitchcock (now Erna Schein); Pax Mahle; and Copain's Wells Guthrie. It's no surprise that Bewley must OK each wine that uses the Alder Springs name.

A long way, obviously, from the wine cooler days. But then, Bewley's ambitions are sizable. Alder Springs is a laboratory where he can keep puzzling through endless combinations of grape, site and soil. "Our goal," he says, "is to make the greatest wine in the state."

Location: Northern Mendocino County, outside Laytonville

Size: 140 vineyard acres on 6,000 acres

Soils: Low-vigor and little clay, with decomposing sandstone and fractured rock below

First planted: 1993

Claim to fame: Syrah, also Pinot Noir

Signature wine: 2007 Arnot-Roberts Alder Springs Vineyard Mendocino County Syrah (\$60). On the more stoic side of Syrah, though at 13.7 percent alcohol it's riding more on aromatic intensity than power thanks in part to 100 percent whole-cluster fermentation. Also: 2006 Patz & Hall Alder Springs Pinot Noir (\$60) and 2006 RADIUS Alder Springs-West Block Mendocino Syrah (\$45).

Labels include: Copain, Patz & Hall, RADIUS, Arnot-Roberts, Roessler, Relic, Vie

Cimarossa Vineyard

Cimarossa - "red peak" - is one of those quintessential patches in the Napa mountains, a place for Cabernet to shine. Perched at 2,100 feet around a cinder cone outside Angwin, it has that raw, volcanic Howell Mountain power. Yet its fruit retains a certain bright finesse, perhaps because of the deeper soils that rein in the hillside intensity.

This particular patch of Howell Mountain, dominated by scrub and narrow roads, might be familiar if you know the O'Shaughnessy label, whose vineyards occupy the other portion of this peak.

Cimarossa owner Dino Dina owns the rest. Vineyards form a neat ring around the cap, which is topped with dense woods and the former hunting lodge Dina bought in 1997. Nearby are Dunn and Outpost; Larry Turley's vines are on the next ridge over. Next door is a large open space now deeded to the Land Trust of Napa County, giving Cimarossa some relative solitude from wine types.

Dina's path here began in Genoa, Italy, where he went to medical school. Stints in academia and pharmaceuticals followed, before he was named president of Berkeley biotech firm Dynavax in 1997. That same year, he finally secured this parcel, a cherished find after 10 years of spurned offers for vineyard land. He got Napa's well-established Piña Vineyard Management to manage the site.

Heavy cover crops sprout between rows to prevent erosion. In the east-facing parcel that Dina calls Riva de Levante ("eastern side"), terraces closely trace the hill's contours. Soils shift every several yards from more degraded volcanic earth to a stark rocky composition. It's a more tidy take on Howell Mountain's often rugged vineyards.

The mix of soils helps give Cimarossa its signature - a cinnamon spice tends to come through, an apparent mark of the site. The usual Howell Mountain tannins are in great supply. But some of the deeper soils yield a fruitier profile, "so you can actually drink the wines instead of chewing them," Dina says.

This distinction is what seems to keep winemakers coming back. After several years of having Sean Capioux (O'Shaughnessy's winemaker) produce wines for him, Dina has hired Napa star Mia Klein (Selene, Dalla Valle) to produce about 800 cases under the Cimarossa label. Between its own wines and the Cabernet mavens who have discovered its fruit, Cimarossa is becoming a serious contender in the ranks of mountain Cabernet.

Location: Howell Mountain, Napa Valley

Size: 15 vineyard acres on 59 acres

Soils: Volcanic, from porous lava cap to white ash and red loam

First planted: 1998

Claim to fame: Cabernet Sauvignon

Signature wine: Cimarossa: 2006 Tor Kenward Cimarossa Vineyard Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon (\$75). Winemaker Jeff Ames brings out the signature cinnamon scent, with violet overtones and darker fruit filling the palate. Ample, fine tannins. Also: 2005 Cimarossa Riva di Ponente Cabernet Sauvignon (\$54).

Labels include: Tor Kenward, Sbragia Family Wines, Bremer, Cliff Lede, Cimarossa

Rodgers Creek Vineyard

This site at the very eastern end of the Petaluma wind gap may lack romance in its birth story, but no matter. The fruit speaks for itself.

In 2000, Silverado Winegrowers, a low-key but influential vineyard company that now controls about 10,000 acres along the California coast, took a lease on this hilltop site among the undulating hills north of Highway 37, intending to make it a crown jewel in its portfolio.

There is ample Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in the ground, used by such clients as Patz & Hall. But the three blocks of Syrah, just under 11 acres, demonstrate the best of what that grape can do near the hilly, windy Lakeville area between the towns of Sonoma and Petaluma.

Stand atop the southwest-facing swale that hosts much of the Syrah. Gaze out at a view that not only shows the full scope of southern Sonoma and Marin but, on a clear day, also reveals San Francisco's skyline.

Here a perfect mix of factors seems evident. Constant wind and fog come from the east, some humidity and temperate weather from the bay (though the bay's influence is up for debate). The steep, terraced block gets ample afternoon sun with a bit of a wind break from trees above and below. It is, says winemaker David Ramey, "kind of an ideally situated site in a cool climate."

This convergence keeps the fruit cool enough to endure a long season, up to two weeks later than in nearby Sonoma Valley below. Constant moisture makes botrytis a perennial worry. "We're picking these guys on the edge of November here," says vineyard manager Pete Opatz. "We've pretty much burned up the season."

Rodgers Creek is part of a much-appreciated, if still not entirely understood, neighborhood. The well-known Durell vineyard sits a couple of miles northeast. Steve Macrostie's Wildcat vineyard is to the south. Sonoma Stage and Sonoma-Cutrer's Les Pierres are nearby. All are primarily known for Pinot and Chardonnay. This is the far eastern edge of the Sonoma Coast appellation, pushing its definitional limits.

Yet Rodgers Creek's fruit signature can't be pegged as either Carneros or Sonoma Valley. There is a dualism here: big, powerful Syrah fruit with ample ripeness, but all the spicy, meaty aromas of a cooler site. While the other grapes have promise - Pinot was the original intent of Rodgers Creek - it's again proof that some of the best Syrah sites lurk in Pinot territory.

Location: In the Sonoma County hills between Petaluma and Sonoma

Size: 83.5 vineyard acres on 297 acres

Soils: Well-drained and complex, lots of volcanic tufa or ash

First planted: Around 2001

Claim to fame: Syrah

Signature wine: 2006 Ramey Wine Cellars Rodgers Creek Vineyard Sonoma Coast Syrah (\$60). Full throttle (at 15 percent alcohol) but also lifted and peppery, with hints of tar and a big, glossy profile. David Ramey considers it more an advanced-placement Syrah, but it's an amazing specimen. Also: 2007 Skylark Rodgers Creek Vineyard Sonoma Coast Syrah (\$36).

Labels include: Ramey, Skylark, Punchdown, Landmark, Patz & Hall, Sojourn

Charles Heintz Vineyards

The Heintz family has been in western Sonoma for nearly a century, and like many apple growers in the late 1970s saw that the future lay in vines, not trees. But when they started thinking about Chardonnay, it seemed sparkling wine lay ahead.

"The mind-set 25, 30 years ago was that it was too cool to grow a grape for still wine out here," says owner Charlie Heintz. "After 25 years, we know different."

As do his many customers, a virtual litany of top Sonoma Chardonnay makers. When these folks want top Chardonnay, they turn to Heintz. (Heintz also has plenty of Pinot Noir and a touch of well-tended Syrah.)

Littorai's Ted Lemon probably deserves credit for scouting out the property in 1994, a half mile east of Occidental, about two ridges in from the ocean at the intersection of the overlapping Sonoma Coast, Russian River Valley and Green Valley appellations. Others soon followed, like Andy Smith, who would end up at DuMol. Attention from top-notch winemakers allowed Heintz to give up such large-volume clients as Kendall-Jackson and to focus his attention on top-quality fruit.

Despite the expected coastal influence, there's enough warmth to provide what Heintz calls a "sweet spot" for slow ripening, with cycles of fog and sun through the October harvest endgame. Up to 30 days can elapse between Lemon's early picking date and Williams Selyem's Bob Cabral pushing the late-harvest envelope.

"To me that's a testament to this site," Heintz says. "We have the opportunity to let this fruit hang and custom grow it, if you will, to those winemakers' styles and not have it fall apart or overripen."

Location: Sonoma County, east of Occidental, near the coast

Size: 55 vineyard acres on 100 acres

Soils: Goldridge sandy loam atop clay

First planted: 1982

Claim to fame: Chardonnay

Signature wine: 2007 Lioco Heintz Vineyards Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$45). If the 2006 was a polarizing wine, the 2007 is classic, with lemon confit, saline tones and ripe tree fruit flavors.

Labels include: Littorai, Williams Selyem, DeLoach, DuMol, Lioco, Salinia, Heintz

8 vineyards to watch

Brosseau: One of two independently owned vineyards in Monterey's remote Chalone appellation. Though it has been growing fruit since 1980, the rising quality of the wines lately should put it on your radar.

Clajeux: This site in the Chalk Hill appellation is demonstrating a rugged potential for Cabernet that should again draw red wine lovers' attention to the western slopes of the Mayacamas range.

Dr. Crane: Located behind St. Helena High School, this site, now controlled by Andy Beckstoffer, may not have the cachet of To Kalon, but it's the source for an increasing number of cult Cabs.

Duarte: Not new by any stretch, but as new winemakers turn to Contra Costa County vineyards, this parcel of old-vine Zinfandel - mostly known for the bottling by Turley - is likely to get more attention.

Griffin's Lair: On the eastern edge of the Sonoma Coast appellation, not far from Rodgers Creek, Joan and Jim Griffin's vineyard is establishing a reputation with excellent Syrahs from winemakers like Karen Culler that mix ample ripening with cooler climate characteristics.

Manchester Ridge: This aerie of a vineyard in southern Mendocino, east of Point Arena and nestled in the Mendocino Ridge appellation, aims to produce dramatic Pinot Noir and Chardonnay with on-the-edge viticulture.

Parmelee-Hill: The next-door sister of the famed Durell vineyard. Run by Durell owner Steve Hill and son Ned, it borders Carneros but is gaining a reputation for nuanced Rhone varietals.

Presidio: Doug Braun's biodynamically farmed site sits near the town of Lompoc, just outside the boundary for the Sta. Rita Hills appellation. The fruit goes to only a few other wineries, but those examples - like a finessed Pinot Noir from sommelier Raj Parr - show a potential for subtlety (and lower alcohols) similar to the best Sta. Rita fruit when it's picked at more modest ripeness.

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