

Hidden treasure

It is home to one of America's most famed producers, yet the Santa Cruz Mountains remain relatively isolated and unknown. More's the pity, says Jon Bonné as he uncovers the appellation's other star names

THE SANTA CRUZ Mountains are California's great undiscovered country – although, at just an hour's drive from San Francisco, they are not exactly remote. Their soils have long been a prize to ambitious vintners and, at times, they have grown some of America's best wines. Yet they remain a backwater.

Perhaps that's because, as wine historian Charles Sullivan notes, this puzzling region that strides Silicon Valley and stretches south to the Monterey Bay town of Watsonville, has been a haven for those who want to escape wine's mainstream. There is no easy access; the closest thing to a main road is the tortuous Skyline Boulevard, teetering atop the mountain summit. Its winemakers are keen to avoid the whims of fashion – even at the cost of fame.

'The history of the Santa Cruz Mountains,' as Sullivan kindly puts it, 'is simply replete with outstanding producers, most of them idealists.'

Arguably its most outstanding producer – certainly the best known – is Ridge Vineyards. With

such a stellar name in its midst, it seems odd that the region hasn't found wider fame. Ridge chief Paul Draper has a reason. 'Up here, you're not looking for social connections and glossy magazine articles about your garden,' he told me a couple of years ago. 'You're here because you want to do your own thing.'

Ridge has long been the dean of the mountains – not least because of its famous Monte Bello vineyard, but also because Draper is Californian wine's anti-hero. Despite an occasional nod to modernity, like a recent decision to use irrigation at Monte Bello, Draper steadfastly resists trends, using heritage cuttings rather than new clones, and opting for American oak over French.

Despite having Ridge as a beacon, however, Santa Cruz has struggled to make wine as good as its terroir. Great vineyards are often hobbled by uneven farming or hacked cellar work. Its relative inaccessibility hasn't helped either: a mere 607ha of vineyards, connected by a scant patchwork of roads, are

scattered across a mostly rocky swath that has the capacity to encompass half as many vineyards again as are found in the whole of Bordeaux.

Yet the mountains keep attracting newcomers – none more ambitious than Rhys Vineyards' Kevin Harvey. Inspired by a planting in his Woodside backyard, Harvey began using his fortune from another career as a software entrepreneur to scout compelling local soils, and farm them meticulously.

As shown by the detailed soil map on the wall of his cellar outside Los Gatos – a massive vault dubbed 'the rebel cave' – Harvey is fully exploring his thesis that shallow, rocky soils make the best wines. That belief is getting a rigorous workout: the Monterey shale in Rhys' Horseshoe vineyard differs in geologic time by nearly 10 million years from the Purisima marine soils at his Alpine site, less than 1km away.

While the climate can be chilly – on the margins for Cabernet, certainly – Harvey insists the thin soils, not climate, define the mountains' greatness.

'We're at the edge of fertility, not the edge of ripeness,' he says. 'In Burgundy, the deeper the soil, the more early-drinking the wine. California will one day realise the same thing.'

Quality over quantity

Rhys Vineyards' economics may start to verge on nonprofit – one ton per 0.4ha is a generous yield some years – but its radiantly transparent Pinot Noir and Chardonnay rank among California's best. Its Horseshoe Pinot Noir always has the same sanguine, sage-like aromas, a signature that winemaker Jeff

Brinkman describes as 'the nerdy girl with glasses'.

Fashion conscious they are not. Take the lonely spot 610m above the town of Saratoga, a ridgetop pasture of vines and ramrod wooden posts. Vintner Martin Ray, whose mid-century wines were as legendary as they were uneven, planted vineyards here in 1942, not far from where Paul Masson set up The Mountain Winery in 1896, determined to make California's finest sparkling wines.

Today, I'm amid the more unruly parcel owned by Peter Martin Ray, Ray's adopted stepson – an orchard-like patchwork of vines planted in a mix of clay with shale and limestone, lashed to the tops of posts in a seemingly archaic style of 'basket pruning' that, vineyard manager Rick Anzalone points out, he was taught decades ago in the vineyards of the old Los Gatos novitiate.

Soon enough, Peter Martin Ray, now pushing 80, appears with a tractor and a plough, its coiled steel tines clearly predating the Cold War. 'Trying to pull some of these guys into even the mid 20th century is like pulling teeth,' says Anzalone.

On the other side of a dirt path lie the trellised rows of Mount Eden Vineyards, the other half of Ray's property, which was split off amid a long battle with investors and is now owned by Jeffrey and Ellie Patterson. Mount Eden produces some of California's most enduring Pinot and Chardonnay, but there has been a long hiatus since the Peter Martin Ray vineyard label appeared on a shelf.

Duncan Arnot Meyers, who with winemaking partner Nathan Lee Roberts uncovers little-known >

Below: Ridge Vineyards is the best-known estate in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Its CEO and winemaker Paul Draper describes the region as suited to people 'who want to do their own thing'

'Up in these hills, you're not looking for social connections and glossy magazine articles about your garden' Paul Draper

'The region has juggled Burgundian and Bordelais inspirations for more than a century'

vineyards for their Arnot-Roberts label, has come to examine the pruning. 'On paper, this may be a little too warm,' Meyers says of the Ray vineyard, 'but the roots are far down and you've got the virus, and that's self limiting.'

He's referring to a proliferation of ailments, like leaf roll, that limit a vine's yield – anathema to California's tidy scientists but a godsend to those who prefer older plant material.

An unusual pairing

But too warm? The lone orange flag that marks where Pinot vines switch to Cabernet Sauvignon is a reminder that these two disparate grapes happily coexist in the Santa Cruz Mountains – a legacy that dates back at least to Martin Ray. The region has juggled Burgundian and Bordelais inspirations for more than a century.

Quite literally. Masson sent to France for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay cuttings. Emmett Rixford planted varieties at his La Questa winery in 1883 in the same proportions as Château Margaux. Those vines filtered through California before returning in plantings at Ridge's Monte Bello (itself first planted in 1886). Today they provide some of the longest lineage in California Cabernet.

This 19th-century discovery of the so-called Chaine d'Or of vineyards along the mountain ridge was no fluke: the area is awash in dramatic geology, whether Monte Bello's limestone remnant at 820m or the complex sandstone and shale found nearby – all due to the tectonic plates grinding along the San Andreas Fault, which strides the region. The resulting jumble of soils, along with the solitude, drew not only Ray but mid-century pioneers such as David Bruce, the Pinot-minded dermatologist who arrived in 1961, and the scientists at nearby Stanford University who originally founded Ridge.



Above: Mount Eden Vineyards owner Jeffrey Patterson. Above right: Ridge Vineyards CEO/winemaker, Paul Draper

Below: Rhys Vineyards' owner Kevin Harvey (left) and winemaker Jeff Brinkman produce some of California's best Pinot Noir

In the 1970s, the mountains enticed another generation: winemakers like Ken Burnap of Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard; Kathryn Kennedy, whose tiny vineyard became a Cabernet grail; and Bob and Jim Varner, twins who in the late 1970s planted a perfect jewel of a vineyard that produces some of California's most tension-filled Chardonnay.

There is also new hope in the south of the appellation, near the tiny hamlets of Corralitos and Aptos. Thirty years ago, this area east of the city of Santa Cruz enjoyed a boomlet with Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. But early ambitions petered out.

Rediscovering greatness

And yet, with one peek at long-overlooked vineyards such as Woodruff or Legan, it's clear this area should always have been a facility for greatness. Slopes are planted at 150m to 300m elevation, while a mix of fog and moderate bay weather, and the sandy and clay loam soils, provide both structure and refinement in the wines. It's no surprise that Rhys' Harvey just bought a parcel near Corralitos.

Now a handful of vintners – many from outside the area, like Meyers and his Sonoma counterparts Pax Mahle and Kenny Likitprakong – have revived interest. They join local producers, such as Alfaro Family and Windy Oaks, which are making ever more ambitious wines.

Key to the revival is viticulturist Prudie Foxx, who has become a vine whisperer of sorts for Santa Cruz – discovering neglected plantings, improving the farming and matching them to the right winemaker. 'Part of my strategy is to train people how to take care of their own vineyards,' she says. 'Those old vines in that area just have that potential and ability.'

Which might be how idealism pays off. As farming and winemaking rise to match the great raw materials, the Santa Cruz Mountains region again stands to get recognition. Assuming, of course, its residents want the world to notice. **D**

Jon Bonné is the wine editor of the San Francisco Chronicle



Photographs: Chad Ziemendorf(2)



Bonné's six favourites

Rhys, Alpine Vineyard Pinot Noir, Santa Cruz Mountains 2009 19.5pts/20 (98pts/100)
 £110 **Hand Picked Burgundy**
 Steep slopes just eight miles (13km) from the ocean and a mix of heritage clones make Alpine Vineyard a stellar Pinot Noir laboratory. Gorgeous and mysterious, full of sweet blossoms, sea foam and dark plum fruit. Extraordinary refinement. **Drink** 2013–2024 **Alcohol** 13.1%

Arnot-Roberts, Peter Martin Ray Pinot Noir, Santa Cruz Mountains 2011 18.5 (95)
 N/A UK www.arnotroberts.com
 A fantastic revival of this long-esteemed vineyard – an essential part of California's Pinot Noir legacy. gorgeously perfumed, focused and pure, with a blend of sea bean, iris, mineral and energetic, chewy bayberry flavours. **Drink** 2012–2020 **Alc** 12.2%

Ridge, Cabernet Sauvignon Estate, Santa Cruz Mountains 2008 18 (93)
 £32–£33 **Christopher Piper, Slurp**
 The second wine from Ridge's home parcel is racy and tight, showing its aromatic powers at their very best – dusky red fruit, deep earth, burnt sage and roasted tobacco characteristics. The strong minerality is almost a little too intense on the palate when drunk this young. **Drink** 2012–2020 **Alc** 13.5%

Wind Gap, Woodruff Vineyard Pinot Noir, Santa Cruz Mountains 2010 18 (93)
 £32 **The Vinyard Cellars**
 Pax Mahle found a quintessential Santa Cruz expression with his 2010 vintage. Saline mineral and taut red fruit, with carob, pomegranate, musk and dried mushroom. A surprising amount of tannin, so give it a year. **Drink** 2013–2018 **Alc** 12.7%

Neely, Spring Ridge Vineyard Hidden Block Pinot Noir, Santa Cruz Mountains 2008 17.5 (91)
 £36.50 **Flint Wines**
 This is the Pinot label for the Varner brothers, who have found a dense expression from their site outside Portola Valley. Bigger in style, with a dense structure. Sassafras and iodine lift the ripe, roasted cherry fruit. Indulgent. **Drink** 2012–2018 **Alc** 14.6%

Alfaro Family, Lester Family Vineyards at Deer Park Pinot Noir, Santa Cruz Mountains 2010 17 (90)
 N/A UK www.alfarowine.com
 The cool 2010 vintage gave a stellar yield from the Lester vineyard in Aptos. Iodine, juniper and heady red-fruit accents. Tension filled and radiant, even if the winemaking is a touch too overt. **Drink** 2012–2019 **Alc** 13.7%

For UK stockist details, see p92 of the main issue

HIDDEN BLOCK 2008 PINOT NOIR

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