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Your next great bottle of wine might come from this under-the-radar California region

By David Rosoff

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- **The Santa Cruz Mountain range has long been a region for growing Burgundy grape varieties but fell off the radar in recent decades.**
- **Now, a new generation of winemakers is leading a revolution that's helping to redefine California wine.**

The Santa Cruz Mountain range — as far as its wines go — is shrouded in relative obscurity despite its rich history and undeniable potential. But there are signs that the region might finally be emerging from behind the shadows of its California redwoods, bay laurels and Douglas firs.

In a late-'70s TV commercial, celebrity Orson Welles famously assured viewers that Paul Masson would “[sell no wine before its time](#).” That winery launched in 1905 on a hilltop in the Santa Cruz Mountains AVA (American Viticultural Area), thousands of feet above what is now Silicon Valley.

Masson had emigrated from the wine mecca of Burgundy, bringing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vine cuttings from some of its most venerated vineyards. They flourished and today are two of the three most planted grapes in the region. The third is Cabernet Sauvignon, which typically doesn't thrive where grapes from Burgundy do. But the two linchpins of the area — [Ridge Vineyards](#) and [Mount Eden Vineyards](#) — have made world-renowned versions here for more than 50 years.

Their work established the model for California wines that could rival their more lauded European counterparts, but the region largely dropped off the radar in the past several decades.

Now, a small but mighty wave of ambitious newcomers is reviving the legacy of their forebears, bringing fresh perspective to their work in both the vineyard and cellar and reshaping the story of what California wine can be.

While climate change has altered some other renowned regions, the viticultural unicorn that is the Santa Cruz Mountains has maintained its ability to yield exceptional wines, and these young producers are harnessing that potential to produce them with minimal intervention, greater elegance and lower alcohol content.

“We are in the midst of a resurgence of energy,” says viticulturist Ken Swegles, who works closely with dozens of winemakers, farming some 50 vineyards across the sprawling area. “These rugged coastal mountains have a new crop of winemakers who are inspired to translate these soils into art.

“It’s only a matter of time until the Santa Cruz Mountains will be regarded as one of planet Earth’s best regions for growing wine grapes.”

A ‘sense of vibrancy’

Historically, many of the wineries here were content selling to mailing list customers, and those who trekked up from the valley to sip and stock up. These new producers have grander aspirations and are getting themselves and their wines out into the marketplace. Their consistently high-quality wines are gaining notice, revitalizing the Santa Cruz Mountains’ reputation among sommeliers and at wine shops across the U.S.

When Cole Thomas, a vegetable farmer turned winemaker, set out to launch his own label, [Madson Wines](#), he considered other locales with easier-to-farm vineyards, better infrastructure and more opportunity to scale his production. But he took the risk here, knowing this was where he would work with the finest raw material. “The environment here is incredibly special,” Thomas says. “The cool coastal climate and vibrant forest life provide the perfect foundation for me to make wines that are fresh and expressive.”



Among the new wave of winemakers producing some of the best Burgundy varieties in California is Cole Thomas of Madson Wines. Thomas tastes his Pinot Noir in his Santa Cruz barrel room. (Tomas Ovalle / For The Times)

At just 30 years old, he is turning out some of California's most dynamic examples of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Syrah.

Wines from these new producers are beginning to show up on some of the top wine lists in Los Angeles and around the country. Jonathan Marsh, wine director of Bestia restaurant in Los Angeles, says the most recent Chardonnay and Pinot Noir "exhibit something akin to the complexities of Burgundy. They're almost ethereally elegant and full of energy." And Cabernet Sauvignon is "free from sweeter fruits ... lithe and slightly lower in alcohol content, yet still powerful and certainly more food friendly."

Sommelier and restaurateur Caroline Styne, who owns A.O.C. and Caldo Verde in Los Angeles with chef Suzanne Goin, recognizes the progress of Santa Cruz's next-generation wines. "They always have a particular sense of vibrancy and elegance. They're not overblown or too showy. There is a subtlety to these wines that is unlike other regions."



Grapes from the Branciforte Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains, where Cole Thomas farms the vines for his Madson Wines label. The region has been known for its Chardonnay and Pinot Noir since the early 20th century. (Tomas Ovalle / For The Times)

Unicorn geology

The mountains boast geological characteristics that enhance the AVA's capacity for producing exceptional grapes. The most prominent of its features is the San Andreas fault, which snakes its way along the eastern fringe of the range.

Jeff Brinkman, winemaker at [Rhys Vineyards](#), explains how the shifting plates of that formidable fissure have benefited the vines: "The tectonic activity has exposed the marine sedimentary geology that makes up the leading edge of the Pacific plate. The upwelling of the mountains has shifted the plate 90 degrees such that the normally horizontal strata are arranged vertically, allowing access to what would normally be inaccessible."

About 90 wine growers and wineries make up the AVA, says Keikilani McKay, executive director for Wines of the Santa Cruz Mountains. (In comparison, Paso Robles has 450.) These are spread over 100 miles and 480,000 acres. Most are over 20 miles apart. Plantings are so sparse that the "Oxford Companion to Wine" gives the region only brief mention, calling it "a light dusting of freckles on a long, lopsided bony body."

For some, the seclusion fits squarely with the maverick spirit that drew them to these mountains. The same remoteness has contributed to the region's hushed profile.

Jeffrey Patterson has, since 1981, been the proprietor of Mount Eden, where he lives and works at the end of a two-mile chaparral flanked private road, 2,000 feet above the valley floor.

"There is a kind of a cultural ethos in the Santa Cruz Mountains, not shared by everybody, that is a certain disdain for commercialism ... like marketing their wines is the last thing that they want to do."

Ryan Alfaro grew up in his family's winery and when his father gave him one ton of Pinot Noir fruit to work with, the results were so impressive that the two agreed he should launch his own label. Thus Farm Cottage was born.

McKay says it may also have induced a period of complacency through the '90s and early aughts, where "many wineries in the Santa Cruz Mountains were content with producing 'good' wines. ... Many had dedication and love of wine but perhaps lacked impetus or resources to take the wines to the next level."

'Organic and beyond'

When that next level has been realized, the results have been spectacular. In addition to Ridge and Mount Eden, foundational figures include David Bruce, Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon and Thomas Fogarty. Jeff Emery has been quietly producing beautiful wines for over 40 years at Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard. But too frequently these have been exceptions.

Viticulturist Swegles says the latest upstart winemakers "have fully embraced organic and beyond farming practices and are vinifying vivacious wines which preserve natural freshness and lower alcohol."

Among them is Ryan Alfaro. His father, former restaurateur Richard Alfaro, purchased a 75-acre apple farm in the southwest end of the appellation in 1997 and set about converting it to vineyards. For decades he has produced the [Alfaro Family Vineyards](#) wines, which have been among the most reliable in the region.

Ryan had grown up in the winery and said he yearned to find his own winemaking voice. In 2019, Richard gave him one ton of Pinot Noir fruit to work with. This allowed Ryan to test methods that diverged somewhat from those used on the family wines.

“I really thought the vineyards in Santa Cruz were conducive to stem inclusion” (using the entire grape cluster), Ryan says. “Especially with grapes from the Trout Gulch vineyard. The way I do whole cluster adds a third dimension outside of the bright fruit and beautiful acid that Santa Cruz is known for. It is more of a textural component.”

The results were so impressive that the two agreed he should launch his own label out of the family winery. Thus the [Farm Cottage](#) label was born, and in its first few vintages, Ryan has produced some of California’s most exciting examples of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Syrah.

Barrier to entry

For those who did not benefit from a running start, the barrier to entry is extreme. There are far more practical places to make a go of it than the Santa Cruz Mountains. This Silicon Valley-adjacent land is staggeringly expensive, precluding purchase for a money pit like grape growing.

New, non-land-owning producers must source fruit from farmers whose crops are small and their prices large. If you are fortunate to get your hands on fruit, the region has a paucity of affordable industrial rentals where upstart producers can bootstrap it while they work a day job as an assistant winemaker elsewhere. Most wineries here are so small that they don’t have an assistant winemaker.

Yet Thomas managed to launch his brand in 2018 by working on it overnight after finishing his day duties assisting mentor Emery at Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard.

“I couldn’t pay for fruit so I did work trade, where I would farm these small plots not for money but for access to making the fruit into wine.” When he moved to another facility he paid “rent” by farming a vineyard and making wine for the owner.



Cole Thomas walks in the Branciforte Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains where he farms the vines for his label Madson Wines. “The environment here is incredibly special,” Thomas says. (Tomas Ovalle/For The Times)

He now has a reliable workspace in downtown Santa Cruz and a regular pipeline of ultra-high-quality fruit for Madson. He crafts exceptional Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Syrah and a handful of other grapes including a fantastic version of Burgundy’s “other” white grape, Aligoté.

Among those who have garnered notice outside of the immediate area are James Jelks of [Florez Wines](#) and Megan Bell of [Margins Wine](#). Sharing an old apple processing facility for their separate brands, they are two of the region’s most colorful and progressive figures. It’s what makes them ideal stablemates, blazing idiosyncratic trails and championing low-input, natural-leaning winemaking and responsible farming practices.

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