

On a clear day, the ocean can be seen peeking through the corridor across from Bassi Ranch Vineyard.

# GETTING TO KNOW SLO Wine Country

## THE MARINE EDGE OF CALIFORNIA'S CENTRAL COAST

by Michelle Ball / photos by Jeremy Ball

Planted in 2005 by Louisa and Bob Lindquist, the certified biodynamic Sawyer Lindquist Vineyard is planted primarily with Spanish and Rhône varieties. The couple sold the ranch to Brook Williams, who embraced their biodynamic farming tradition. She works with multiple producers throughout the region rather than making her own wines. "I enjoy seeing the many expressions of wine from the many different winemakers sourcing fruit from here," says Williams.

San Luis Obispo County covers an expansive terrain that boasts a spectrum of climatic extremes. While sunny Paso Robles in the north is well-recognized for its Bordeaux- and Rhône-style wines, the lesser-known regions south of San Luis Obispo—referred to as SLO Wine Country—encompass some of the coldest microclimates for winegrowing in California. The vineyards of SLO Wine Country stretch along a thin area of coastline, from Cambria in the north to Arroyo Grande in the south.

"Our vineyards are just five miles on average from the Pacific Ocean," says Mike Sinor, owner and winemaker of Sinor-LaVallee Wine Company. "So the prevailing marine conditions are very pronounced, giving the fruit a lot of time to develop rich, full flavors while maintaining structure, complexity and balance."

This stretch of land that includes the Arroyo Grande Valley and Edna Valley AVAs consists of only 5,000 planted acres, with roughly 35 wineries. Since much of SLO Wine Country is classified as Region I, a designation for the world's coolest winegrowing areas, cool-climate varieties shine. Chardonnay and Pinot Noir tend to receive the most attention, but many of the aromatic whites I tasted, such as Albariño and Riesling, were also standouts.

## THE OUTLIERS

Our tour began at Sinor's Bassi Ranch, a 30-acre hillside vineyard located just over a mile from the Pacific Ocean. Sinor produces three Pinot Noirs from his organically farmed vineyard (with "biodynamic inputs," he notes). The tan, classic label is his "everyday Pinot Noir" (SRP \$30), while the White Label and Black Label (both SRP \$45) are expressions from the new site. "We're trying to see what works best from here," explains Sinor. "It's really about us playing with a Rubik's cube of life in terms of inventing different flavors."

Sinor is one of many vintners spearheading the petition for the SLO Coast AVA, which would encompass the coastal stretch of land from San Simeon to Pismo Beach (overlapping the Edna Valley AVA). One property within this proposed appellation is Cutruzzola Vineyards in Cambria. The seven-acre vineyard, owned by Lisa and Bill Cutruzzola, is planted with Pinot Noir and Riesling. The Cutruzzolas enlisted the help of Stephen Dooley, acclaimed winemaker and owner of Stephen Ross Wine Cellars, to make their wines. The 2014 Riesling (SRP \$30) was mouthwatering, with all the petrol and zing you could want from the varietal. "We think Riesling is now where Pinot Noir was 20 or 30 years ago—people are starting to realize the potential," says Lisa Cutruzzola.

## EDNA VALLEY AVA

### 2800 VINEYARD ACRES

The Edna Valley AVA was established in 1982, and Edna Valley Vineyard, started by Jack Niven of Niven Family Wine Estates and Dick Graff of Chalone Vineyard, served as an early incubator for many winemakers in the area, including Dooley (1987) and Claiborne (Clay) Thompson (1983). Thompson launched Claiborne & Churchill with a focus on Alsatian varietals: Riesling and Gewürztraminer. In 1989, he added Pinot Noir, which now makes up roughly 50 percent

of production. Thompson has since passed on the torch to Coby Parker-Garcia, a San Luis Obispo local who became the Claiborne & Churchill winemaker seven years ago. "The quality of wines is what we're really proud of here. We are stepping up and making world-class wines, and at a great price point," says Thompson. "It's a fun area to be in, and I would have never thought it would be what it is today."

## ARROYO GRANDE VALLEY AVA

### 1230 VINEYARD ACRES

Some of the first vineyards one sees when driving north along Highway 101 are those of Laetitia in the Arroyo Grande Valley, just past Nipomo.

Laetitia's estate vineyards were first planted in 1982 by French viticulturists who felt the growing conditions were ideal for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. In addition to still wines, Laetitia is known for producing lively, competitively priced *méthode champenoise* sparkling wines.

The same year Laetitia's vineyards were installed, Don Talley, a farmer based less than ten miles away, decided to plant Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes in the steep hills surrounding his family's farmland. While the Cabernet was never released and its vines removed decades ago, Talley Vineyards has since built a reputation for producing world-class Pinot Noir and Chardonnay under the guidance of Don's son Brian Talley, who joined the family business in 1991. Every block of Talley's six vineyards is harvested and vinified separately, and the best lots make up the single-vineyard bottlings. "Dad wanted our wines to taste like the grapes that were grown here," explains Brian Talley. Over time, there have been changes stylistically, but the goal is always to embrace the flavors in the vineyards—"to make the wines taste like *this place*," he adds. ■■

**Louisa Lindquist, owner and Winemaker for Verdad Wines and Brook Williams, vineyard owner and manager at Sawyer Lindquist Vineyard.**



## TASTING NOTES



**Talley 2014 Pinot Noir, Rosemary's Vineyard, Arroyo Grande Valley (SRP \$75)** Rosemary's Vineyard—named for Brian Talley's mom, who lives on the property—is the coolest site on the Talley estate. The Pinot Noir is elegant yet structured, with subtle hints of cocoa, chaparral and anise lining a core of cranberry and pomegranate fruit. Lean at first, but it fills out in the mid-palate and continues to build momentum on the finish.



**Stephen Ross 2016 Albariño, Spanish Springs Vineyard, San Luis Obispo County (SRP \$24)** A vibrant nose with aromas of mango, melon, tangerine, saline and aloe. Juicy palate with similar flavors and hints of white flowers; lots of white chalk and saline on the finish.