

Laurie Daniel: The varied pinots of the Santa Cruz Mountains



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Posted: 04/14/2009 12:00:00 AM PDT

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Ideally, knowing the appellation, or geographic origin, of a wine should help consumers know something about that wine's characteristics. But in an appellation of this size and undulating terrain, there are huge variations in soils, exposures and microclimates, all of which affect the wines.

Now the appellation's pinot noir producers are taking the first, tentative steps toward identifying smaller, sub-regions and, in turn, the common characteristics shared by pinot noirs from each. They discussed the possibilities at a recent seminar during the Pinot Paradise, an annual event celebrating Santa Cruz Mountains pinot noir.

Local vintners, working with the Appellation America Web site, identified five sub-regions: Skyline, at the northern end, near Woodside; Saratoga/Los Gatos, which also includes vineyards around Lexington Reservoir; Summit Road, which has the highest-elevation vineyards in the appellation; the Coastal Foothills, which is mostly along the Highway 17 corridor; and Corralitos/Pleasant Valley, outside Watsonville. There's also a sixth sub-region that already has its own appellation status, Ben Lomond Mountain, where most of the vineyard acreage is owned by Beauregard Vineyards.

Thomas Fogarty Winery represented Skyline at the seminar, and winemaker Michael Martella poured a pinot from Block M, in the estate's Rapley Trail Vineyard. The vineyard was planted in 1981, so the vines are older than many you'll find in the mountains, and Martella thinks it's a good representation of the Skyline area. The 2007 Thomas Fogarty Rapley Trail Block M Pinot Noir (\$68) is intense yet supple, with lively, sweet cherry, a subtle earthy note and good structure. At the grand tasting, the winery was pouring two more Skyline-area pinots: The 2007 Estate Pinot Noir (\$30) is structured and still very tight, while the 2007 Windy Hill Pinot Noir (\$48) is very aromatic, with raspberry, wild thyme and firm structure.

The Saratoga/Los Gatos entry came from Mount Eden Vineyards. The vineyard was established by Martin Ray in the early '40s; winemaker Jeffrey Patterson arrived in 1981. Mount Eden's famed estate chardonnay has a distinctive mineral component, and that flavor shows up in the 2006 Mount Eden Estate Pinot Noir (\$48), too. It's structured yet silky, with cherry and raspberry flavors and a slight earthiness.

The Summit Road winery was Muns Vineyard, which, at 2,600 feet, overlooks the rest of the Summit Road vineyards. The grapes come from a very exposed site, which sits above the fog and gets intense sunlight during the growing season. The 2006 Muns Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$40) is dark and spicy, with black cherry, clove, cola, a hint of sage and firm structure.

From the Coastal Foothills, we tasted a pinot from Wines of Vine Hill, situated in the historic Vine Hill district off Highway 17, where grapes were first planted in the 1860s. The 2006 Cumbre of Vine Hill Raffaelli Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$59) is quite dark and intense, with a slight herbal note and firm tannins.

Steve Storrs of Storrs Winery showed a pinot noir from the Corralitos/Pleasant Valley area. This bucolic, lower-elevation area is where much of the Santa Cruz Mountains' vineyard development in recent years has taken place. The 2006 Storrs Wildcat Ridge Pinot Noir (\$40) offers a lot of fruit — black cherry, crushed strawberry — punctuated by notes of Asian spices and cola, wrapped around firm tannins. Storrs also has a 2006 Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir (\$36) that's not quite as intense but still very pretty.

Finally, from the Ben Lomond Mountain appellation, the 2006 Beauregard Bald Mountain Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$60) is intense, round and spicy, with black cherry and clove flavors and fine, ripe tannins.

Pinot drinkers may debate the differences between a pinot from Corralitos and one from Summit Road, but I think it's really too early to draw conclusions. Many of the vineyards are quite young, and a lot of winemakers are still experimenting to coax maximum expression from their grapes. What is clear is that there's been a general improvement in pinots from all the areas. And the number of pinots and pinot producers from the Santa Cruz Mountains is on the rise, too: There were 24 wineries pouring at the grand tasting for the first Pinot Paradise, in 2005; that number grew to 35 this year, and there are still more pinot producers who weren't at the tasting. Nearly half the vineyard acreage in the appellation is planted with pinot noir.

Corralitos/Pleasant Valley was the best-represented sub-region at the grand tasting. Many of the wines exhibit spicy notes ranging from Asian spices to sassafras and cola. A good example is the 2006 Windy Oaks Diane's Block Pinot Noir (\$45), which is bright and lively, with raspberry and cola notes and medium tannins. The 2007 Alfaro Family "A" Estate Pinot Noir (\$25) is a relative bargain, with its racy raspberry flavors, while the 2006 Alfaro Family Lindsay Paige Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$40) shows more concentration and structure. The 2007 Nicholson Vineyards Estate Pinot Noir (\$30) is spicy and structured, with cherry and cola flavors, and the 2006 Bargetto Reserve Pinot Noir (\$40) displays more sassafras and a subtle herbal note. The 2007 Soquel Vineyards Saveria Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$55) is a very pretty wine, while a wine from the same fruit source, the 2006 Loma Prieta Winery Saveria Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$50) is more racy and structured. The 2006 Pleasant Valley Vineyards Dylan David Estate Reserve Pinot Noir (\$85) is pricey but delicious, with sweet cherry and spice.

I didn't find a lot of common threads in the sprawling and diverse Coastal Foothills sub-region. The 2006 Heart O' The Mountain Pinot Noir (\$48) is robust, plump and supple, with bright cherry and vanilla notes, while the 2005 Clos Tita Estate Pinot Noir (\$36) is more spicy and structured with dark raspberry and white pepper. The 2005 Hallcrest Vineyards Vista del Mare Pinot Noir (\$42), on the other hand, is more refined and juicy.

Standouts from the Summit Road area included the 2006 Silver Mountain Winery Miller Hill Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$38), with its fresh raspberry and mineral flavors, and the 2005 Burrell School Vineyards Estate Reserve Pinot Noir (\$35), a bright lively wine with flavors of cherry and rhubarb. And from down the hill, in the Los Gatos/Saratoga area, the 2007 Black Ridge Vineyards Pinot Noir (\$39) is bright and spicy, with cherry fruit, firm structure and a supple finish.

As you can see, Santa Cruz Mountains pinot isn't cheap. Land is expensive, yields tend to be low, and farming many of the hilly sites is labor intensive. But the region offers some true gems.