

OUR **SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS**
SOMM CAMPERS DISCOVER THIS
SMALL YET ICONIC AVA



First There Was a MOUNTAIN

story and photos by Randy Caparoso



On top of the Ridge Monte Bello Vineyard: Dolphin Bay Somm Robin Puricelli of Pismo Beach and Montage Beverly Hills Somm Jesus Evangelista.

Santa Cruz Mountains. Seth Wilson of Chicago's RPM Steakhouse proclaims, "is vast and complex." Yet at the same time—as the contingent of 11 sommeliers participating in our Santa Cruz Mountains SOMM Camp discovered in April—this American appellation is as small and exclusive as the Silicon Valley enclaves surrounding it.

During his opening remarks as President of the Santa Cruz Mountains Winegrowers Association, which sponsored our three-day study, David Moulton told us, "The Santa Cruz Mountains appellation encompasses more than 322,000 acres, and is defined by mountain elevations starting at 400 feet, going up to 2,700 at the highest points. The total number of planted acres, however, amounts to barely 1,500 acres."

What blew Wilson's mind was how getting around underscored the appellation's uniqueness: "We rode in vans on stark, rickety roads threatening our demise, though the resulting experiences made taking that chance (with lots of Bonine!) absolutely worth it."

Mount Eden Vineyards overlooks Silicon Valley.



At House Family Vineyards, Santa Cruz Mountain Winegrowers Association Executive Director Megan Metz (left) leads sommeliers.

Opening Reception at House Family Vineyards

The 73-acre site of our opening night reception overlooks Saratoga and the entirety of Silicon Valley and is planted to Bordeaux varieties and Chardonnay on 24-degree slopes, at elevations just above 700 feet. The House Family Vineyards estate bottlings—notably a sinewy, herby 2012 Merlot and lemony, mineraly, Old World-style 2013 Chardonnay—are direct reflections of these steep, east-facing slopes.

The House property also sits near the center of the area historically known as California's *Chaîne d'Or*—a “golden chain” of mountaintop vineyards stretching from Woodside to Los Gatos. It is here that Paul Masson, in the 1890s, first produced his award winning “Champagne” from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir cuttings imported from Burgundy. On a neighboring hilltop, the legendary Martin Ray threw down a gauntlet of pure, uncut Cabernet Sauvignons and Chardonnay unlike any before their time (in the 1940s).

Further north along the *Chaîne d'Or*, in 1885, Dr. Osea Perrone terraced the limestone slopes at the top of Monte Bello Ridge near Cupertino to plant Cabernet Sauvignon. In the lower hills of Woodside, in 1883, Emmett Rixford established La Questa Vineyard in precise proportion to that of his model, Château Margaux. In the 1940s, Martin Ray culled La Questa Cabernet

Sauvignon cuttings to establish his Mount Eden property, and amazingly, two postage-sized blocks of Rixford's original 1880s vines still exist, now bottled as Woodside Vineyards' La Questa Cabernet Sauvignon.

Further south on the mountain slopes along Summit Road, David Moulton's Burrell School Vineyards was named for Lyman Burrell, who, in 1853, established one of the first vineyards in Santa Cruz Mountains. At the reception, Moulton poured a nervy, savory, herby 2012 Burrell School Estate Reserve Merlot that seems to epitomize the region's deep, unrepentantly austere approach to Bordeaux varietals. In a similar vein, the 2012 Martella Sauvignon Blanc may be the steeliest, most gleefully lip-stinging wine you will find outside Sancerre.

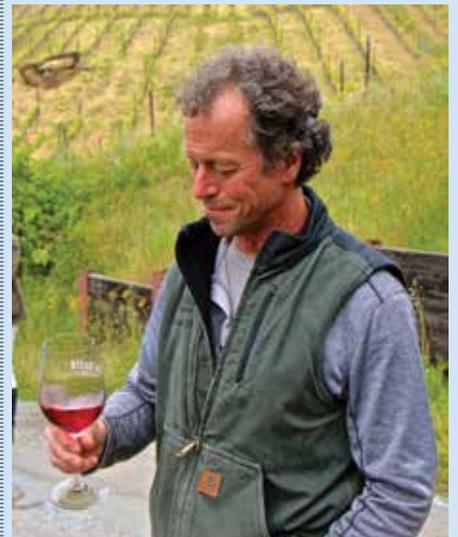
Among several razor-sharp, acid-driven Pinot Noirs shown by former sommelier-turned-winemaker Mark Bright, the 2014 Partage Lester Vineyard Pinot Noir stood out for its glorious amalgamation of cherry, strawberry and scrubby earth tones. Still another Santa Cruz Mountains miracle: the tautly wound, silken 2014 Thomas Fogarty Walker's Vineyard Nebbiolo, crackling with bay laurel, cherry, rose petal and asphalt.

Then there was the 2008 Kathryn Kennedy *Contra la Marea*: A brilliantly spicy, meaty, luscious blend of Tempranillo, Touriga, Garnacha, Monastrell, Graciano and Malbec, organically grown on the lower slopes of Saratoga.

Day 1

Mountain Cabernet Sauvignons, Chardonnays and Rhônes

Big Basin Vineyards. The morning of our first full day started at Big Basin Vineyards, surrounded by the 18,000-acre Big Basin Redwoods State Park. Owner/grower Bradley Brown talked about how he originally aimed for big styles of Syrah, Grenache and Roussanne. But as he got to know his mountain property, Big Basin wines evolved into leaner, more acid-driven, less oak-influenced styles, losing little in the way of intensity and sensory manifestations of this densely wooded appellation.



Big Basin's Bradley Brown.



Big Basin Rattlesnake Rock Syrah.

Brown demonstrated this progression with a field tasting. First, a silken, airy, red fruit-driven 2013 Big Basin Grizzly Grenache, followed by a barrel sample of amphora-fermented 2015 Grenache, bristling with cracked pepper-laced

strawberry, forest floor notes and a Bergamot tea-like zest. An edgy, flowery yet meaty 2013 Big Basin Rattlesnake Rock Syrah flashed woody, sagebrush-like distinctions in a terroir-influenced fashion we would experience throughout our Santa Cruz Mountains visit.

Mount Eden Vineyards. At 2,000 feet, the historic Mount Eden sits on one of the highest peaks of the original Chaine d'Or. Proprietors Jeffrey and Ellie Patterson treated us to a Chardonnay vertical of magnums from 1999 (lemony tart, shimmering, Puligny-like purity), 2000 (more fleshy and opulent), 2005 (ethereal as lemon meringue) and 2013 (coiled, creamy, concentrated), illustrating the ferocious intensity and longevity of their native yeast-fermented estate bottlings.

During lunch on the deck overlooking the fabled 40-acre property, we also tasted an exotically spiced (like peppercorns ground with lavender), sumptuous 2005 Mount Eden Estate Pinot Noir, plus the hugely concentrated (at just 12.5% alcohol) 2001 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, weaving blackcurrant and earthy, manzanita/chaparral-like sensations.

Ridge Monte Bello. How do you top a visit to Mount Eden? With a drive up Ridge Vineyards' Monte Bello, the highest point of the AVA. There, Ridge COO/winemaker Eric Baugher told us: "We are standing at about a 2,700 feet, in a Region I climate. The

cold climate plus limestone soil helps the grapes hold on to their acids. Picking often goes into November. In some years—like 1979, 1982 and 1983—Monte Bello is not even produced. Or they end up like the 1987, which was bottled but then recalled and declassified; in that year, the Cabernet was just 11% alcohol."

Cabernet Sauvignon Tasting. In a show-



We tasted a Mount Eden Vineyards Chardonnay vertical from 1999 to 2013 from magnums with owner-grower-winemaker Jeffrey Patterson.

ing of Santa Cruz Mountains Cabernet Sauvignons taking place in Ridge's tasting room, we tasted a 2005, 2013 as well as 2014 Ridge Monte Bello; both wines achieved the classic, musclebound, pungent licorice/anise and black tea-like characteristics associated with this California classic—the '05 with a little sweeter anise and cassis, and the '13 and '14 even more concentrated and harmoniously layered with cedar and strapping young tannin.

We also tasted an amazingly black-colored (for a 16-year-old wine), earth- and acid-charged 2001 Kathryn Kennedy Estate Cabernet Sauvignon alongside a more velvety yet equally concentrated 2012 from Kennedy's original 1973 planting. Another standout was the 2012 Mount Eden Estate Cabernet Sauvignon—gloriously perfumed with concentrated cassis, black tea and almost resinous dried herbs. On the more gentle side, the rare 2009 Woodside La Questa Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (from 1880s vines) expressed cedary blackcurrant and a scrubby, dried herbiness with zesty, medium-bodied finesse.

Sommelier Jenna Basaludu, of Sacramento's 58 Degrees & Holding Co., recalls, "I kept hearing the expression 'air-roir' thrown around during the tasting at Ridge—a concept I find totally rad." The floral yet resinous/woody, meaty, moderately weighted 2013 Lexington (by Thomas Fogarty) Cabernet Sauvignon seemed to capture that terroir-driven quality, as did the 2013 Burrell School Dean's List Cabernet Sauvignon's violet, blackberry and dried sagebrush-like notes. In the 2011 House Family Cabernet Sauvignon, cassis notes were tempered by a minty scrub-biness and unusually peppery (for Cabernet) spice, tucked into a steely medium body (13.2% alcohol). The 2013 Left Bend Fellom Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon—from a 2,400-foot elevation Monte Bello Road planting—was a little bigger (14.3%), retaining a savory wild scrub-biness embedded in humongous blackcurrant.



A view of Ridge Vineyards' Monte Bello, the highest point of the AVA. This photo was taken at the South Twin Peak.

Day 2

Pinot Noir Terroirs and Clones

Parsing Santa Cruz Mountains Sub-Regions. At 8:30 in our second morning, we gathered at Wrights Station Vineyard & Winery for a tasting of 14 Pinot Noirs representing a good range of Santa Cruz Mountains sub-regions. Foxx Viticulture's Prudy Foxx led us through each wine, bringing her 20 years of experience in the region—managing more than 60 vineyards for some 30 wineries at a time—to help us sort out the terroir related distinctions.

In our first flight we tasted Pinot Noirs grown in the loosely defined Chaine d'Or and adjoining Skyline areas. According to Foxx, "East facing slopes skirting the appel-



Mindego Ridge Pinot Noir.

lation's east side have always been desirable for their exposure to morning sun, especially for delicate varieties like Pinot." A beautifully flowery, delicate yet spicy 2014 Mount Eden Estate Pinot Noir from this fabled 2,000 elevation estate was compared to 2014 Mindego Ridge, the latter, a younger (est. 2009), lower elevation planting (700 to 950 feet) falling in the Skyline area, surrounded by old redwood growth that adds a sweetly woody flourishes to acid-mobilized red fruit. By comparison, a 2012 Kings Mountain Pinot Noir—from a more exposed, warmer site located at the northernmost point of the Chaine d'Or—came across as riper and less floral in fruit, more austere on the palate.

In our second flight we tasted Pinot Noirs from the mountainous area of

Summit—named for the tiny community along Summit Road, near Loma Prieta—with plantings as high as 2,600 feet. Grown on Summit's highest peak, the 2010 Silver Mountain Muns Vineyard Pinot Noir exuded super-strawberry fruit and great acid/tannin structuring. Both a 2013 Burrell School Principal's Choice Reserve and 2014 Silvertip Vineyards were similar—dense in phenols, acid-lifted red fruit and a redwood-ish earthiness—while a 2013 Wrights Station Arena Block layered meaty tannin with sensations of licorice and dried herbs

In our third flight we explored heavily wooded areas on lower slopes (800 to 1,800 feet) in the Scotts Valley/Soquel sub-region, epitomized by a 2012 Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard Vine Hill Reserve, replete with



The delicate, flowery, silken, zesty 2013 Sante Arcangeli Split Rail Vineyard Pinot Noir melds cherry perfume with subtle notes of redwood bark and crushed leaves.

cherry/strawberry and tight, steely acid. A 2013 Armitage Robert Reserve was similar in structure, with an herbiness suggesting sweet, minty pennyroyal.

Finally in our fourth flight, we tasted Pinot Noirs from the AVA's southernmost sub-region, called Corralitos/Pleasant Valley. At lower elevations (400 to 1,400 feet) strongly influenced by cool coastal air, sandy colluvium soils and close proximity (four to seven miles) to Monterey Bay, this area is described by Foxx as "its own world, apart from the rest of the appellation, producing more 'girly' wines—fragrant, higher acids, silky, delicate." The 2014 Big Basin Coast Grade Vineyard, picked at lower sugars (12.8% alcohol), was a Corralitos poster child—slightly herbaceous, but also flowery, lavendery, prickly with acidity and red

berries. The 2014 Sante Arcangeli Lester Vineyard was softer and more voluptuous in its floral strawberry/cherry fruit; while a 2013 Ser Winery Lilo Vineyard came across as sweetly spiced, with woody notes behind flowery red fruit.

Corralitos/Pleasant Valley Field Walks.

We spent the rest of our second day with Prudy Foxx, exploring the exciting, emerging area around the community of Corralitos. Our stops:

Bargetto Winery's Regan Estate Vineyards: 36.5 acres of mostly Mount Eden clones of Pinot Noir (plus Chardonnay, Dolcetto, Nebbiolo and Refosco) on a clay loam knoll (topping 575 feet) less than seven miles from Monterey Bay. *Highlight:* the extravagantly lush, flowery, fully yet



LIOCO Pinot Noir from Savaria Vineyard.

compact feeling 2014 Bargetto Regan Vineyards Reserve Pinot Noir.

Split Rail Vineyard—sourced by Sante Arcangeli Family Wines: an ancient lake bed (sandstone and clay over limestone) perched on a 1,500- to 1,700-foot slope overlooking Monterey Bay. Said Sante Arcangeli owner/winemaker John Benedetti, "David Bruce, for whom this vineyard was originally planted, always said that where you see giant madrones and redwoods together, you find a perfect spot for Pinot Noir.

Savaria Vineyard—farmed by Foxx Viticulture, and part of LIOCO Wine Company's single-vineyard Pinot Noir program—located on a gently sloped, 500-foot elevation sandy loam bench. *Highlight:* The sleek, coiled, slender, bril-

liantly transparent 2015 LIOCO Savaria Vineyard Pinot Noir's titillating herby-spiced fruit, at just 12.2% alcohol.

Study of Pinot Noir Clones. At Lester Family Vineyards—a Corralitos planting also farmed by Foxx Viticulture and sourced by up to nine producers each year—Foxx led a seminar on Pinot Noir clones with 2016 barrel samples presented by Big Basin's Bradley Brown, Rexford Winery's father/son team of Joe and Sam Miller, and Sante Arcangeli's John Benedetti. "It's important to know that clones exist," said Foxx, "but site always trumps clone. The introduction of Dijon clones helped make Pinot Noir popular, but we look upon these as 'gateway' clones, producing accessible Pinots. As your palate becomes sophisticated, you tend to look more at the heritage clones [such as Mount Eden, Pommard, Swan and Martini], which produce deeper, more complex wines."

Some highlights of the Pinot Noir clonal/barrel tasting:

Bradley Brown comparing three single-clone 2016s grown by Lester Family—a fragrant, sharp and linear Dijon 667 next to a higher toned Mount Eden cuvée, followed by a deeper, more structured, herby-spice scented Swan clone.

Joe and Sam Miller demonstrating the depth achieved by the use of heritage clones with three different field-crushed, co-fermented blends of 2016 Lester Pinot Noir: a fragrant, leafy, vibrantly acid-toned Dijon 667/115 contrasted by a more

brooding, fleshier 667/115/Pommard and an even fuller, jammy blue fruit scented Swan/777 cuvée.

Benedetti demonstrating impact of site with two 100% Pommard clone bottlings from 2016: a ripe, juicy, soft, almost candied black cherry-toned Pommard bottling from Hall Vineyard, located on a warm, exposed, 2,000-foot site straddling the Summit and Skyline sub-regions, contrasted with a leaner, savory, floral/cherry toned Pommard bottling from Split Rail Vineyard in the more coastal, cool climate-influenced Corralitos area

Finish at Alfaro Family Vineyards. Our second day ended with a fantastic farm-to-table dinner personally prepared by Alfaro Family Vineyards & Winery owners Richard and Mary Kay Alfaro at their home site, located in the southern end of Corralitos/Pleasant Valley, a little more than four miles from Monterey Bay. The Alfaros farm five separate contiguous vineyards, largely on sandy loam slopes.

Four standouts among the two dozen Alfaro-grown wines tasted: the wildflowerly, honeyed, acid-charged 2016 Ryan Spencer Vineyard Albariño; the razor-edged, lean, flowery, lime- and pineapple-nuanced 2015 La Playita ("little beach") Grüner Veltliner; a finely delineated, silk and rose petal-scented 2015 Mary Katherine Vineyard Pinot Noir; and the irrepressibly lush, lively, drippy cherry-infused 2015 Alfaro Family Vineyard Pinot Noir.

Day 3 Skyline Finale

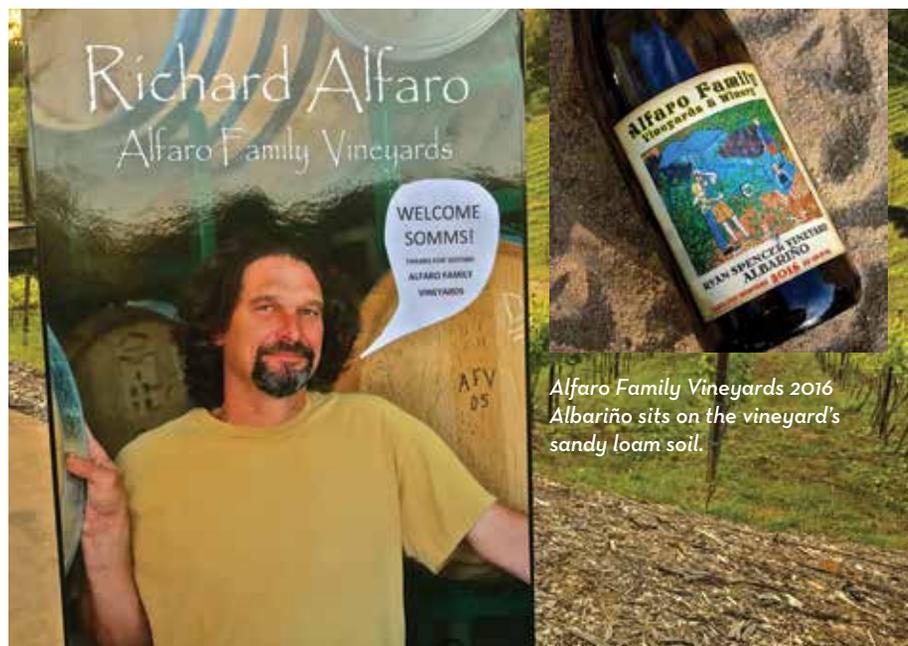
Rhys Vineyards. Our last day was spent in the Skyline sub-region at the north end of the appellation, dominated by high-elevation sites (700 to 2,400 feet) on both sides of the Skyline Boulevard (I-280) corridor, running just east and parallel to the San Andreas Fault.

At our first stop at Rhys Vineyards, winemaker Jeff Brinkman told us: "We started planting along Skyline Boulevard in 1995 because this is where you find the Pacific and North American tectonic plate turned up and laterally exposed, with millions of years of geology giving us the favorable soils for grapes like Pinot Noir and Chardonnay."

Few wineries go as far as Rhys to achieve Pinot perfection: Starting with exclusively estate-grown, small-vine, high-density (as tight as 2'x3') hillside plantings (five sites total) of heritage or suitcase clones (*no* Dijon selections for Rhys), plus organic farming, customized two-ton, temperature-controlled wood fermenters, evolution toward *massale* picking and foot-treaded whole cluster-fermentation, and strictly four-year air-dried François Frères barrels housed in caves dug into their Skyline Boulevard home site.

The 2014 Alpine Vineyard Pinot Noir—from a shallow, rocky 1,200- to 1,490-foot site—seemed to epitomize the high flying intensity and cohesion of all the Rhys Pinot Noirs, with its billowing fragrance, coffee spice, penetrating citrus and meaty texturing. Commented Brinkman, "We always find a pine resin marker unique to our Alpine Pinots; and a mix of red and black fruit with saline, chalky characteristics, which get more floral and spicy as the wine ages." That said, Brinkman poured a ravishingly lush, smoky-spiced 2006 Rhys Skyline Vineyard Pinot Noir, beamed up by almost ethereally light, pinpoint qualities.

Mindego Ridge Vineyard. Following our visit to Rhys, we caravanned on winding, narrow roads through canyons of towering redwood, madrone and buckeye to reach Mindego Ridge Vineyard—Pinot Noir and Chardonnay planted on south facing slopes topping 950 feet, strongly



Alfaro Family Vineyards 2016 Albariño sits on the vineyard's sandy loam soil.

influenced by marine air from the Pacific less than nine miles away. While planted strictly to Dijon clones, the 2013 Mindego Ridge Pinot Noir tasted strongly of its place—beautifully pert, airy, woody, floral perfumes with rose petal lilt and delicacy on the palate, tightened by a cool climate acidity.

Thomas Fogarty Winery & Vineyards.

At our final stop—Thomas Fogarty's estate, located atop a high point (2,000 feet) along Skyline Boulevard—we started out with a horizontal of 2014 Pinot Noirs, representing eight of this iconic producer's single-vineyard bottlings. Three highlights:

A concentrated 2014 Thomas Fogarty Razorback Vineyard Pinot Noir—a lower elevation (1,400 feet), often fog cloaked Skyline site planted to Swan and Dijon clones, typically exuding its surrounding flora of bay laurel, oak and madrone.

An equally meaty 2014 Rapley Trail, located just below the winery's Skyline estate—characteristically pungent with smoked peppercorn spice, incense and pine needle-nuances, reflecting its steep, windswept, south-east facing slope (1,650 feet), surrounded by Douglas fir.

In almost stark contrast, Thomas Fogarty's 2014 La Vida Bella Vineyard Pinot Noir—grown in the beach sand-like soil and more climate-influenced conditions of Corralitos, resulting in more floral, fluid, finely textured and leafy nuanced red berry character.

Mountain Style Chardonnays. Our final activity at Thomas Fogarty's was a tasting of Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnays typifying the mountain grown style of this varietal. Case in point: the 2014 Thomas Fogarty's Santa Cruz Mountains bottling, with its silky, compact feel (a moderate 13% alcohol), and tension built up by minerality and citrus streaming through the nose all the way into the finish. The native yeast-fermented, 1.5 ton/acre 2013 House Family Estate Chardonnay was a similar rendering of minerality, punctuated by creamy oak and citrus toned fruit; while the toasted brioche-like 2014 Silver Mountain Chardonnay flashed fainter notes of citrus and mineral amidst Hungarian oak influences.



The Somms Campers at Alfaro Family Vineyards & Winery, located in the southern end of Corallitos/Pleasant Valley, a little more than four miles from Monterey Bay.

2017 Santa Cruz Mountains SOMM Camp Sommeliers

Jeff Bareilles – Jeff Bareilles Consulting (CA)
Jienna Basaldu, CS, CSW – 58 Degrees & Holding Co. (Sacramento, CA)
Traci Dutton – The Culinary Institute of America at Greystone (St. Helena, CA)
Jesus Evangelista III, CS – Montage Beverly Hills (Beverly Hills, CA)
Rafael Garcia – L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon (Las Vegas, NV)
Alicia Kemper – fundamental LA (Los Angeles, CA)
Joe Lapi – RPM Steak (Chicago, IL)
Albert Letizia – The Bazaar by José Andrés (Los Angeles, CA)
Robin Puricelli – Lido Restaurant at the Dolphin Bay Resort (Shell Beach, CA)
Corinna Strauss – La Folie (San Francisco, CA)
Seth Wilson – RPM Steak (Chicago, IL)

2017 Santa Cruz Mountains SOMM Camp Wineries

Alfaro Family Vineyards & Winery, alfarowine.com
Armitage Wines, armitagewines.com
Bargetto Winery, bargetto.com
Big Basin Vineyards, bigbasinvineyards.com
Burrell School Vineyards & Winery, burrellschool.com
House Family Vineyards, housefamilyvineyards.com
Kathryn Kennedy Winery, kathrynkennedywinery.com
Kings Mountain Vineyards, kingsmountainvineyards.com
LIOCO Wine Company, liocowine.com
Martella Wines, goldenvineyards.com
Mindego Ridge Vineyard, mindegoridge.com
Mount Eden Vineyards, mounteden.com
Partage Winery, partagewinery.com
Rexford Winery, rexfordwinery.com
Rhys Vineyards, rhysvineyards.com
Ridge Vineyards, ridgewine.com
Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard, santacruzmountainvineyard.com
Sante Arcangeli Family Wines, santewinery.com
Ser Winery, serwinery.com
Silvertip Vineyards, silvertipvineyards.com
Thomas Fogarty Winery & Vineyards, fogartywinery.com
Waxwing Wine Cellars, waxwingwines.com
Woodside Vineyards, woodsidevineyards.com
Wrights Station Winery, wrightsstation.com