

The Los Alamos Valley: A Middle Ground Between Western Fog and Eastern Heat

By Matt Kettmann

For a region that lies between the cool Santa Maria Valley and even cooler Sta. Rita Hills, yet stretches east over the hills into the sometimes sweltering Santa Ynez Valley, it should come as no surprise that the Los Alamos Valley is able to produce wines that show off the climatic diversity of Santa Barbara County. From luscious Syrah and other remarkable Rhône grapes to promising Pinot Noir and celebrated Chardonnays to exciting plantings of Grenache Blanc and even Merlot, the Los Alamos Valley is a land o' plenty with a bounty found in bottling from throughout the Central Coast.

"It's versatile," said Louis Lucas, a Santa Barbara County pioneer who started growing grapes in Santa Maria in the early 1970s but discovered the Los Alamos Valley's potential in 1980. "It's right on the edge of being a cool district and yet it gets enough warmth to grow varieties like Nebbiolo, Barbera, and Sangiovese." So his Lucas & Lewellen Vineyard offers a wild blend of 16 varieties planted on about 300 acres, from Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chenin Blanc to Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Muscat Canelli, and Malvasia Bianca. "Pinot Grigio does exceptionally well there — it actually has some flavor and acidity" proclaims Lucas proudly, before adding, "But the Chardonnays and Pinots will surprise you in Los Alamos too. They're really good." He credits "heavy soils" for some of the characteristics, but explains that the valley "has a bit of tilt to it," so drainage remains optimal.

It can't be ignored that the bulk of the Los Alamos Valley's acreage is taken up by corporate wine houses, such as Beringer, Sutter Home, Meridian, and Kendall Jackson, who tend to focus on Chardonnay because of the favorable economics. Dale Hampton, who started growing grapes in Santa Barbara County with Louis Lucas in 1972, was responsible for planting most of that, and still maintains plenty of acres. "Los Alamos is a very good area to grow grapes," assessed Hampton, whose opinions are only hard-won. "You can have a mixture of stuff up and down that valley."

David Thompson boldly tapped into that mixture back in 1991, when he planted his family's Alisos Canyon property in Syrah, making it one of California's early acreages dedicated to the grape. In so doing, the Thompson Vineyard bucked the conventional wisdom that the Rhône variety must be planted in warmer climates, but his gut decision worked out. "There's a lot of little nuances and a whole mystery of terroir that makes a site," said Thompson. "For us, being on a hill with low vigor soils, the fog will burn off at the right time. Down the way, it stays foggier, and up the way the sun burns it off quicker. That just adds up over the summer." Today, Thompson grows 42 acres, most in Syrah, but also in Grenache, Petite Sirah, Mourvedre, Cabernet Franc, Pinot Gris, and Chardonnay, and sells his fruit to Jaffurs Wine Cellars, Tensley Wines, Dragonette Cellars, tercero wines, and Blair Fox Cellars, among others.

Over his 18 years of winemaking, Andrew Murray has grown fond of the Los Alamos Valley, particularly the Watch Hill Vineyard, where he sources one of his many annual Syrahs (and where distinctive Grenache is grown as well). “They might be sort of big wines as far as their tannic and alcoholic structure, but they have a semblance of cooler climate in the sort of aromas and flavors we get, the white peppers and the slightly floral note,” said Murray, describing the Los Alamos dichotomy. “It just makes a pretty Syrah, yet it’s a darn big Syrah.”

Another area that fits this dichotomy as well is the Cat Canyon area, just north of the city of Los Alamos. This area is home to both large and small vineyards, including Melville’s Verna’s Vineyard and White Hawk Vineyard, both home to many award-winning wines. Varieties successfully grown here include Syrah, Viognier – both Rhônes – as well as Burgundian grapes such as Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Places to Taste Wines from Los Alamos Valley

Andrew Murray Vineyards: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 2901-A Grand Avenue, Los Olivos; 805-693-9644; www.andrewmurrayvineyards.com; info@andrewmurrayvineyards.com

Bedford Winery: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 448 Bell Street, Los Alamos; 805-688-8664; www.BedfordWinery.com; TastingRoom@BedfordWinery.com

Gioia Wines: Tastings by appointment only. 805-689-7219; www.gioiawine.com; love@gioiawine.com

Jaffurs Wine Cellars: Tasting room open Friday-Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 819 East Montecito Street, Santa Barbara. 805-962-7003; www.jaffurswine.com

Lucas & Lewellen: Tasting room open daily; 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m. 1645 Copenhagen Drive, Solvang. 805-686-9336; www.llwine.com

Tensley/Lea Wines: Tasting room open Friday-Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 2900-B Grand Avenue, Los Olivos. 805-688-6761; www.tensleywines.com; info@tensleywines.com

Melville Winery: Tasting Room open daily from 11:00 am to 4:00 pm. 5185 E. Hwy 246, Lompoc. 805-735-7030 www.melvillewinery.com

Dragonette Wines: Tasting Room open Thursday through Monday from 11am to 5pm, 2445 Alamo Pintado Ave., Los Olivos 805-693-0077, or by appointment 805-737-0200. www.dragonettecellars.com