

The Happy Canyon AVA: Where Sunshine Powers Wine to Rival Bordeaux's Best

By Matt Kettmann

In the early days of Santa Barbara County winemaking, the pioneers planted plenty of Cabernet Sauvignon, then California's go-to grape. But to their dismay, much of the region proved too chilly for the Bordeaux varietal, and the resulting wines were embarrassingly vegetative, smelling of green pepper with a taste somewhat reminiscent of asparagus. The region eventually evolved into other grapes, locating the hot spots for Syrah and Sauvignon Blanc and cool zones for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Then, as if discovering a long-lost friend, growers realized that the Santa Ynez Valley's sunshine-soaked eastern end was hot enough to keep Cabernet and its Bordelaise sister grapes quite happy. Indeed, winemakers quickly discovered that not only do the Bordeauxs thrive, but they're distinctively elegant, and so in 2009, the area — officially known as Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara — was granted its own appellation.

"It's unique here," said Doug Margerum, who makes wines for Happy Canyon Vineyards and Cimarone Estate Wines. "There are days when you feel the heat of the high desert coming down the hill and swirl with the maritime breezes. It's a pretty special place, and very much deserving of its own AVA." Margerum, who's been involved in the Santa Barbara wine business for three decades, credits the climate, soil, and steepness of certain vineyards for the quality shown in the Cabernet Sauvignons, Cabernet Francs, Merlots, Malbecs, Petit Verdots, and Sauvignon Blancs emerging from the region. "What's amazing here, and what I haven't seen that much in California, is that the grapes become physiologically mature and ripe before they get a tremendous amount of sugar," said Margerum. "That's pretty neat. We're actually waiting on sugar and not our ripeness, which makes for more elegant wines." Because of that, Margerum — who recalls the days when no one thought Bordeaux varietals would ever succeed in Santa Barbara County — explains, "Everyone is back on the Bordeaux varietal bandwagon and we're all having a fair amount of success."

Of course, it all began as "one big science experiment," explains Mary Beth Vogelzang, whose Vogelzang Vineyard grows the red Bordeaux grapes as well as a famous Sauvignon Blanc, Syrah, Grenache Noir, Mourvedre, and Viognier. "We had to stop starting!" she laughs, recalling the days when they'd plant anything to see what worked in Happy Canyon. Like their neighbors, they realized that the Bordeauxs excelled. "The fog burns off earlier in Happy Canyon, so we have a longer day of heat," she explained. "The beauty is that the heat manages to burn off the vegetative quality that had once been found in Santa Ynez Valley Cabernet. It seems to have disappeared in our AVA." Vogelzang's juice gets made into wine by a Napa Valley vintner, who believes that the AVA's wine is "very much a Bordeaux that's more toward the French style." Because Happy Canyon does not have the cachet of Napa, Vogelzang is happy to offer a "value wine," but warns that could change one day. "As we keep working," she explained, "we're going to stand up against those Napa wines just as well as anybody else."

A newer kid on the Happy Canyon block is Grassini Family Vineyards, which was established in 2004, but winemaker Matthias Pippig understands the region's charm as well as anyone. When it comes to temperatures, Pippig explained, "We're almost identical to Calistoga, but we get a little more fog and cooler nights." The soil is also significant because it holds onto water fairly well.

“That’s important,” he said, “because Cabernet has such little berries that when it gets hot, they can turn into raisins rather quickly.” With the proper soil, Pippig believes they have the opportunity to develop a healthy root system that’s able to tap the water resources when necessary. Altogether, that allows Pippig to craft wines in a European style that “shoot for a bit more balance and a little more finesse.” And like the Euros, he’s not about to give away any secrets. “Just like in Bordeaux, we don’t really lock ourselves into 100 percent of one grape or a specific percentage each year,” he said. “What the vintage gives us determines what the blends are.”

Of the roughly 500 planted acres in Happy Canyon, Star Lane Vineyards occupies about 250, where vines span more than 1,000 feet of elevation and are planted on soils that restrict growth while ensuring intensity. So says Star Lane’s Kurt Ammann, who was formerly with Stag’s Leap in Napa. Describing how Happy Canyon’s late afternoon and evening warmth occurs during a significant grape growth period, Ammann explained, “If you don’t have enough of those peak point growing hours, you end up with wines that have a vegetal character. That’s not a good quality for a Cabernet or other Bordeaux, but unfortunately, it is the reputation that Santa Ynez has with those varietals.” Thanks to the new Happy Canyon AVA, Ammann said consumers can be confident again in Cabernets from Santa Barbara. And to the Napa veteran, Happy Canyon’s are even better, because of the “elegant acid structure” that occurs naturally. “We’re not having to add acid back to the wines like so many Napa Cabs have to do,” said Ammann. “That’s really going to be a distinguishing factor as the years go on.”

Places to Taste Happy Canyon’s Bordeaux Varietals and More

Baehner-Fournier Vineyards: Tasting available daily, 11 a.m.-7 p.m., at Wandering Dog Wine Bar. 1539 Mission Drive #C, Solvang. 805-686-9126; 805-688-7118;
www.bfwine.com

Cimarone Wines: Tastings by appointment only. www.cimarone.com

Dascomb Cellars: Tasting room opening spring 2010. 1659 Copenhagen Drive #2 C, Solvang. 805-691-9175; www.dascombcellars.com

Grassini Family Vineyards/Sanguis Wines: Tastings by appointment only. 805-693-9700;
www.grassinifamilyvineyards.com

Happy Canyon Vineyard: Tastings by appointment only or occasionally at Wine Cask in downtown Santa Barbara. 805-688-1028; happycanyonvineyard.com;
info@happycanyonvineyard.com

Star Lane/Three Saints Vineyards: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 1280 Drum Canyon Road, Lompoc; 805-736-0757; www.ThreeSaintsVineyard.com;
info@ThreeSaintsVineyard.com; www.StarLaneVineyard.com;
info@StarLaneVineyard.com

Vogelzang Vineyard: Tastings by appointment only. 1129 State Street, #3E, Santa Barbara. 805-568-0900; www.vogelzangvineyard.com; info@vogelzangvineyard.com