

Santa Maria Valley: Where Chardonnay Is Star for Old Guard and Next Generation Alike

By Matt Kettmann

Due to the ocean-cooled climate and arguably the state's longest growing season, there just might be no better place on the planet to grow Chardonnay than the Santa Maria Valley, where winemakers held a first-ever symposium to celebrate that reality this summer. Whether a proud veteran of the old guard — which has been mastering the grape since the late 1960s and achieved recognition for the region as its own appellation in 1981 — or an excited member of the region's emerging next generation, Chardonnay plays a starring role in the valley that's given birth to such now distinguished vintners as Jim Clendenen, Bob Lindquist, Bill Wathen, Rick Longoria, and Chris Whitcraft.

Since the Santa Maria Valley runs east to west rather than north to south, like the Sonoma and Napa valleys, and opens directly onto the Pacific Ocean, there's a strong sea breeze that kicks up every day by about noon, dropping daytime temperatures, keeping the evenings chilly, and assuring that the grapes take a long time to ripen, which leads to full flavor development. "With this type of moderate climate and long growing season," explains winemaker Denise Shurtleff of Cambria, whose Tepusquet Vineyard was planted in 1970, "once the grapes ripen, the maturation process is slow and consistent, so we don't have much acid respiring out of the grapes like you do in a warmer region. That leaves a lot of acidity, which really makes for good balanced crisp wines. They can be drunk on their own, but they're very food friendly."

Nicholas Miller, whose family planted Bien Nacido Vineyard in the early 1980s, agrees. "There's a lot of character in the fruit itself," adds Miller, whose highly praised vineyard is widely sourced by the biggest names on the Central Coast. "The fruit seems to really stand up against the oak, and really shines through without being overshadowed by the barrels."

Jim Clendenen, who founded Au Bon Climat Winery in 1982 and began working with Bien Nacido grapes in 1989, is the most vocal proponent of letting these already perfect grapes do the work for themselves. "In the Santa Maria Valley," explained the long-haired Clendenen, "when you pick the grapes, the wine comes out balanced and elegant and age-worthy in the same way as the great white Burgundies. There's good minerality and good acidity." He's the loudest critic of other California winemakers who have oaked the varietal to death, which he says prompted the ongoing ABC ("Anything But Chardonnay") movement.

As such, Au Bon Climat wines are actually more popular in Europe, where finesse is appreciated. "California celebrates a whole different thing, in which heaviness is power," said Clendenen. "To me, that's *inelegance*." In his unabashed opinion, that trend is dangerous. "It's destroyed American Chardonnay's image," he argued. "People stopped drinking it because they stopped liking heavily oaked Chardonnays that put them to sleep after lunch." He hopes that the annual Chardonnay Symposium will shine a light on how to do the grape right.

Luckily for Santa Maria Valleyites who rely on such perfect fruit, there's a whole new breed of winemakers who learned from Clendenen and his longtime associate Bob Lindquist, whose first wine ever as owner of Qupé was a Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay from Sierra Madre Vineyard back in 1982. The Burgundian style of Chardonnay-making that Qupé and Au Bon Climat have been touting for nearly 30 years is now being replicated by the next generation, including Lindquist's own sons, Ethan of Ethan Wines, and Luke of Tres Hermanas Winery. "The style of Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay that both Jim and I have made has been influential on a number of younger winemakers," explained Lindquist. "If they didn't work directly with us, they saw and appreciated the style. They saw the potential here for the Burgundian model, which is to pick grapes with balanced alcohol, good acidity, and lower sugar."

One such protégé is Gary Burk, of Costa de Oro Winery and Gold Coast Vineyard. "Those guys introduced me and so many people to not only wine in Santa Barbara County but the entire world of wine," said Burk, who's spent many a lunch with Clendenen and Lindquist opening bottles from throughout the globe. "It really taught me to take a more worldly view of what kind of wine I wanted to make. They really helped me define a style for myself." For younger winemakers like Burk, finding that personal spin on winemaking makes all the difference. "When you're making a boutique level of wine," said Burk, whose production of Santa Maria Chardonnay and Pinot Noir is about 6,000 cases a year, "you try to find an audience for yourself. If an audience can identify you with a style, then you can find a niche and be successful."

And the Santa Maria Valley is one of the best places to learn about Chardonnay for any up-and-coming vintner because of such teachers as Ken Volk who founded Wild Horse Winery and now runs an eponymous label, Daniel Gehrs, Lucas & Lewellen's first winemaker, Chuck "Mr. Chardonnay" Ortman of Riverbench Winery, and Ken Brown, who founded Byron Vineyards and now runs his own label. "There's great camaraderie amongst the winemakers," said up-and-coming winemaker Ryan Deovlet, another student of Au Bon Climat. "It's a community, and we're coming together to represent all of Santa Barbara. There's definitely competition, but it's more about everybody pushing each other to raise the bar."

Someone who helped first pick up that bar is Bill Wathen, owner and winemaker for Foxen Wines, a centerpiece of the Foxen Canyon Wine Trail, which is an offshoot of the Santa Maria Valley. Evidence that the varietal can be done in more than one way, Wathen makes three Chardonnays each year, one block designate from Bien Nacido, one fermented only in steel for a crisp Chablis style outcome, and one from his own Tinaquaic Vineyard, which is dry-farmed. Since he started working the vineyards with growers Louis Lucas and Dale Hampton in 1978, and then went on to found Foxen with Dick Doré in 1985, Wathen has seen a lot change in the valley, with more types of clones being planted, original rootstock being replaced, and more people making wine. "It was a shotgun approach back then in the '70s," said Wathen, explaining that people were experimenting with every varietal, from Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot to Gewurztraminer, Riesling, and even Gamay. "Chardonnay is the varietal that took hold, even before Pinot Noir. A lot of us had the feeling that it was going to fade with the whole ABC, anything-but-Chardonnay, movement, but people are still planting it."

Indeed, the more rootstock, clonal types, and winemaker names change in the Santa Maria Valley, the more the cool climate, harvest-perfect grapes, and communal nature stay the same. Together, those factors ensure that the region will remain a shining star of Chardonnay into the decades to come.

Where to Taste Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and More

Au Bon Climat: Tasting room at Taste of the Valleys open daily, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. 1672 Mission Drive, Solvang; 877-622-WINE; www.aubonclimat.com; info@aubonclimat.com

Brophy Clark Cellars: Tasting by appointment only. 805-929-4830; www.brophyclarkcellars.com; info@brophyclarkcellars.com.

Byron: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 2367 Alamo Pintado Road, Los Olivos; 805-938-7365; www.ByronWines.com

Cambria: Tasting room open daily, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 5475 Chardonnay Lane, Santa Maria; 805-937-8091; www.CambriaWines.com; info@cambriawines.com

Costa De Oro: Tasting room open Sunday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; Friday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. 1331 S. Nicholson and Stowell Road, Santa Maria; 805-922-1468; www.CostaDeOrowinery.com; info@cdowinery.com

Cottonwood Canyon: Sunday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-5:00 p.m., and Friday & Saturday 10 a.m.-6p.m. 3940 Dominion Road, Santa Maria; 805-937-VINE; www.CottonwoodCanyon.com; info@cottonwoodcanyon.com

Foxen: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. 7200 & 7600 Foxen Canyon Road, Santa Maria; 805-937-4251; www.FoxenVineyard.com; info@FoxenVineyard.com

Kenneth Volk Vineyards: Tasting room open daily, 10:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. 5230 Tepusquet Road, Santa Maria; 805-938-7896; www.VolkWines.com; info@volkwines.com

Qupé: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 2963 Grand Avenue, Los Olivos; 805-686-4200; www.Qupe.com; Bob@Qupe.com

Rancho Sisquoc: Tasting room open daily, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., and till 5 p.m. Friday-Sunday. 6600 Foxen Canyon Road, Santa Maria; 805-934-4332; www.RanchoSisquoc.com; sisquoc@RanchoSisquoc.com

Riverbench: Tasting room open daily, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. 6020 Foxen Canyon Road, Santa Maria; 805-937-8340; www.riverbench.com; info@riverbench.com

Sierra Madre Vineyard: Tastings by appointment only. 2570 Prell Road, Santa Maria; 714-630-0299; www.sierramadrevineyard.com; doug@sierramadrevineyard.com

Tantara: Tastings by appointment only. 2900 Rancho Tepusquet Rd, Santa Maria; 805-938-5051; www.TantaraWinery.com; info@TantaraWinery.com

TAZ Vineyards: No tastings. 805-349-9927; www.TazVineyards.com; tazwineinfo@tazvineyards.com

Toretti's Family Vineyard: Tastings by appointment only. 805-714-0622; www.torettisfamilyvineyard.com; info@torettisfamilyvineyard.com

Zaca Mesa: Tasting room open daily, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. 6905 Foxen Canyon Road, Los Olivos; 805-688-9339; www.zacamesa.com; zmail@zacamesa.com