

The Santa Ynez Valley AVA: Experienced Region Now Siring Serious Sauvignon Blanc

By Matt Kettmann

Though often considered a new guy on the California wine block, the Santa Ynez Valley boasts nearly four decades of winemaking experience, and the early years of experimenting with different grape varietals are finally paying off in big ways. That's especially true when it comes to the skyrocketing ascent of the region's Sauvignon Blanc, a grape that thrives in the valley's hot weather and proves delightfully intriguing by relaying distinctive flavors from vineyard to vineyard.

Few people know the appellation as well as Jeff Newton, who's been planting and maintaining the valley's grapes since 1984 as the owner of Coastal Vineyard Care. Overseeing more than 2,000 acres of vineyards, Newton has watched Sauvignon Blanc — which has been cultivated here since the late 1970s — slowly emerge as one of the region's world-class wines. "It's always been kind of an underdog and, in a lot of ways, it didn't get the respect that Chardonnay does," said Newton, but he confirms that there is an "extraordinary" *Sauv Blanc* "universe" extending from Happy Canyon in the east to Ballard Canyon in the west. "Within that universe, there are some very different wines, but that's where you find the greatest propensity for Sauvignon Blanc," he explained. "We've planted it further west, but the strength is really in that zone."

One of Newton's earliest clients was The Brander Vineyard, which also happens to be one of the first vineyards in the entire appellation. Fred Brander's family planted the property in the heart of the Santa Ynez Valley just east of Highway 154 in 1975. Three years later, the original vintage of Sauvignon Blanc won a gold medal at the 1978 Los Angeles County Fair, making Brander to be the first vineyard in Santa Barbara County to win top honors at a major wine competition with the 1977 *Santa Ynez Valley Winery* Sauvignon Blanc, made from Brander Vineyard fruit (by Fred Brander – SYVW's winemaker at the time). With the upcoming 2010 vintage marking the 33rd Sauvignon Blanc from Brander and 9,000 of its 15,000 annual cases still dedicated to the varietal, the winery and its 42-acre vineyard show no signs of slowing down on the grape, which it employs in seven distinct bottling each year, from single vineyard designates to intriguing blends.

"There are so many different styles of making Sauvignon Blanc," said assistant winemaker Fabian Bravo, who left a career in engineering to become a winemaker a few years ago and lucked out when Brander agreed to take him on as an apprentice. Bravo quickly learned about why Sauvignon Blanc does well in the valley's climate, explaining, "There is long heat during the daytime, but it still cools off every night, so it doesn't over-ripen the fruit." While Brander's estate wine offers a bigger bodied, rounder representation of the varietal, Bravo said the wines from the Mesa Verde Vineyard tend to be grassy, like those from New Zealand, and that the higher elevation Purisima Mountain Sauvignon Blancs feature a noticeable minerality. He also uses Sauvignon Blanc as a base for such blends as Cuvee Natalie, which uses Riesling and Pinot Grigio in a nod to Alsace; Cuvee Nicholas, which throws in 20 percent Semillon and some oak barreling for a spicier take; and Uno Mas, which sets a leaner, citrusy Sauvignon Blanc against the fuller bodied, orange peel nature of Grenache Blanc.

Another Santa Ynez Valley old-timer that offers a number of Sauvignon Blanc interpretations is Buttonwood Farm Winery, which has been a working farm since Betty Williams founded it in the late 1960s but became a vineyard when her son-in-law Bret Davenport started planting grapes in 1983. “Sauvignon Blanc grows so beautifully here,” said marketing director Sherrill O’Neill. “It has such a distinct and strong character. It can be very aggressive and very acidic, but Sauvignon Blanc from the Santa Ynez Valley has a wonderful tropical quality to it.” Of the 8,500 cases made from Buttonwood’s 39 acres each year, the meticulously farmed Sauvignon Blanc plays a starring role in three: the winery’s signature estate bottling, in which the highly acidic, tangy juice is balanced with a touch of Semillon; the “Zingy,” a 100 percent Sauvignon Blanc that is whole cluster pressed and presents hints of grapefruit and guava; and the “Devin,” which picks up a creamy toastiness thanks to the 42 percent Semillon and oak barrel aging.

Just up the road at Carhartt Vineyard, the same strong sense of family ties and hands-on farming power another strong Sauvignon Blanc program. There, on the small remaining slice of what was once the sprawling Rancho Santa Ynez, Mike Carhartt — a descendant of the Carhartt clothing company who left the insurance business to save his family property — runs the vineyard while his wife Brooke makes the wine and son Chase prepares to enter the business by finishing up his viticulture studies at Cal Poly. “We farm pretty intensively. I think that’s why our fruit is what it is,” explained Mike. “It makes a nice wine, but why? I guess I’d have to throw it up to the heavens and say that the climate is right. That’s how quality fruit is grown.” Like many vineyards in the Santa Ynez Valley, the Carhartt property also features plenty of other varietals, including Merlot, Syrah, Grenache, Sangiovese, and Petite Sirah, and all of their wines can be sampled at their intimate tasting room on the northern end of Los Olivos. Even with all those grapes, the Carhartts make a mere 2,500 cases a year, ensuring that utmost care is given to the vines. And he doesn’t sell any of his grapes. “We make it all,” laughed Carhartt.

Also on Alamo Pintado is Lincourt Winery, where their Sauvignon Blanc — which is fermented solely in stainless steel, boasts a nectarine nose, and tantalizes the tongue with cantaloupe and kiwi — is touted as the “locals’ favorite.” The quaint country home tasting room is surrounded by about four acres of vineyards, which were once planted in Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. But the vineyard managers recently decided to graft all of those vines over to Sauvignon Blanc, revealing that the white grape is excelling enough to bump other popular varietals.

To the west in Ballard Canyon, John Falcone makes wine for Rusack Winery, which produces a Sauvignon Blanc that blends grapes from the Rusack estate, the Valley View property near the Santa Ynez River, and the McGinley Vineyard in Happy Canyon. “The Santa Ynez Valley covers a pretty nice climate for a spectrum of Sauvignon Blanc,” said Falcone. “It was somewhat one of the forgotten varietals that is just now starting to get noticed.” Falcone explained that the Santa Ynez Valley’s first winemaking attempts nearly 40 years ago cast a shadow over the region because the area’s pioneers were experimenting with which grape worked where. “It all comes down to the right variety in the right place,” explained Falcone. “Santa Barbara kind of got a bad rap in the older days because a lot of the wrong varieties were planted in the wrong place, like Cabernet in too cool of a location.”

The rise of Sauvignon Blanc, then, is a definitive maturing point for the Santa Ynez Valley, whose winemakers and growers are now experts on what grows best where. Once the optimal growing spots were figured out, the vintners followed suit, allowing the grape's best qualities to shine. "More and more, people are just producing Sauvignon Blancs very clean, very crisp," said Falcone. "They're just pretty wines here. It's a good spot."

Where to Taste Santa Ynez Valley Sauvignon Blanc and More

Beckmen Vineyards: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 2670 Ontiveros Road, Los Olivos; 805-688-8664; www.beckmenvineyards.com

The Brander Vineyard: Tasting room open daily, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. in the summer, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. in the winter. 2401 Refugio Road, Los Olivos; 805-688-2455; www.brander.com; info@brander.com

Buttonwood Farm Winery: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 1500 Alamo Pintado Road, Solvang; 805-688-3032; www.buttonwoodwinery.com; info@buttonwoodwinery.com

Carhartt Vineyard: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 2990A Grand Avenue, Los Olivos; 805-693-5100; www.carharttvineyard.com; info@carharttvineyard.com

Dragonette Cellars: Tasting room open Thursday through Monday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. or by appointment. 2445 Alamo Pintado Avenue, Los Olivos; 805-693-0077; www.dragonettecellars.com

Gainey Vineyard: Tasting room open daily, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 3950 East Highway 246, Santa Ynez; 805-688-0558; www.gaineyvineyard.com; info@gaineyvineyard.com

Great Oaks Ranch: Tasting by appointment; 2450 Calzada Ave., Santa Ynez; 805-686-0895; www.greatoaksranch.com; nancy@greatoaksranch.com

Lincourt Wines: Tasting room open daily, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 1711 Alamo Pintado Road, Solvang; 805-688-8554; www.lincourtwinest.com; info@lincourtwinest.com

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

Rideau Vineyard: Tasting room open daily, 10:30 a.m.-5 p.m. 1562 Alamo Pintado Road, Solvang; 805-688-0717; www.rideauvineyard.com

Roblar Winery: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. 3010 Roblar Avenue, Santa Ynez; 805-686-2603; www.roblarwinery.com; info@roblarwinery.com

Royal Oaks Vineyard and Winery: Tasting room open daily, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 1651 Copenhagen Drive, Solvang; 805-693-1740; www.royaloakswinery.com; info@royaloakswinery.com

Rusack Vineyards: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 1819 Ballard Canyon Road, Solvang; 805-688-1278; www.rusackvineyards.com; info@rusackvineyards.com