

## **Daniel: Warm end of Santa Ynez Valley vineyards comes into its own**

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SANTA YNEZ - As recently as 2000, wine reference books talked about the "vegetative" properties of cabernet sauvignon and merlot from the Santa Ynez Valley in Santa Barbara County. True, these grapes were sometimes planted in too-cool sites or overcropped, so they didn't ripen properly. To make matters more confusing, the Santa Ynez Valley is more than 25 miles long, with significant temperature variations from west to east. Is it a warm appellation or a cool one? The answer: It's both.

Now, following the lead of the Sta. Rita Hills at the cool western end of the Santa Ynez Valley, vintners at the much warmer eastern end are applying to the federal government for their own American Viticultural Area, Happy Canyon. And they're out to show that Bordeaux grape varieties can thrive in Happy Canyon's warmer climate.

Sauvignon blanc is currently the biggest star from the area. "The sauvignon blanc is spectacular," says Seth Kunin, who makes wines from Happy Canyon for Westerly Vineyards. Vintners and growers also have high hopes for merlot, cabernet franc and cabernet sauvignon. Rhone grapes such as syrah and viognier also are planted.

The origins of the Happy Canyon name are still something of a mystery. Some think it was named by miners who found gold in a creek there. Another local legend links the name to the presence of an illegal still in the area during Prohibition: You had to go up the canyon to get happy. For years, the area was predominantly horse country. The hilly landscape is still dotted with paddocks and stud farms. Then Westerly Vineyard (now known as McGinley Vineyard) was planted in 1996 with sauvignon blanc and merlot. Since then, other vineyards - such as Star Lane (the biggest vineyard in the area), Vogelzang, Grassini and Happy Canyon - have been planted. Jeff Newton of Coastal Vineyard Care, who handles the farming for more than three-quarters of the vineyard acreage in Happy Canyon, estimates that about 700 acres have been planted.

Happy Canyon starts about 20 miles from the Pacific Ocean, so it's considerably warmer during the day than spots to the west. But there's still a small marine influence: morning fog that burns off quickly and breezes from the west that start up in early afternoon, cooling the vines. The high temperature on a typical summer day is in the 80s, though there are days that climb over 100. The nights are quite cool: Temperature swings of 30 degrees or more between day and night during the growing season aren't unusual. Parts of the terrain are fairly steep, with whites typically grown on the lower or flatter parcels and reds on the hillsides. The soils aren't very fertile, making them good for viticulture.

Although Kunin acknowledges that "people just aren't ready for Bordeaux reds from Santa Barbara County," he's excited about the possibilities, especially for merlot and cabernet franc. "People don't really realize what merlot is," he says, adding that it's a wine that should be more savory, not just a big, sweet fruit bomb. Happy Canyon wines, Kunin adds, "express the complexities of merlot and cabernet franc."

Cabernet sauvignon, which needs considerable heat to ripen properly, is a little more difficult. "From a growing point of view," Newton says, "we need to massage the viticultural landscape." Nevertheless, I tasted some outstanding wines that were predominantly cabernet sauvignon.

In general, the sauvignon blancs from Happy Canyon display bright flavors of citrus and white peach, along with some nice fleshiness. The warmer climate minimizes the pungent grassy and gooseberry notes found in many sauvignon blancs. The reds tend to have savory nuances like anise, black olive and sage. Kunin likens them to Bordeaux.

There aren't a lot of Happy Canyon wines on the market yet - in many cases, Happy Canyon fruit is blended with grapes from elsewhere in the county - and the current releases for those wines that do exist are in many cases sold out. But I tasted enough wines during my recent visit to get a snapshot of the characteristics that the area brings to the wines. I even tasted some older wines to get an idea of how well the reds are likely to age.

Doug Margerum, owner of the Wine Cask restaurants in Santa Barbara and Los Olivos, makes some delicious Happy Canyon sauvignon blancs under his Margerum Wine Co. label. The **2005 Margerum from Westerly Vineyard (\$18)** is crisp and creamy, with white peach flavors and some wet stone undertones. The **2005 from Vogelzang Vineyard (\$24)** is even racier, with citrus, green apple and some creaminess. The **2006 from Vogelzang**, which will be released this spring at **\$28**, is a beautiful wine, with tropical notes and a lovely texture.

The **Westerly Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc (\$18)** is more pungent, with white peach flavors, a hint of grassiness and some creaminess. The Ojai Vineyard will release its **2006 sauvignon blanc from Westerly Vineyard (\$30)** in about a month; it offers plenty of juicy melon and citrus, some creaminess and a hint of new-mowed hay. The **2005 Fiddlehead Cellars Happy Canyon Sauvignon Blanc (\$24)**, which uses fruit from Westerly and Vogelzang, is crisp and citrusy with creamy and smoky accents.

"I get great acidity - and I get ripe fruit," says Fiddlehead owner/winemaker Kathy Joseph. "To me, that's what sauvignon blanc is all about."

Margerum is also the winemaker for Happy Canyon Vineyard, which sells wines under the Barrack, Piocho and Chukker labels. I love the **2004 Piocho (\$30)**, a blend of mostly cabernet franc with some cabernet sauvignon and merlot. It's dark, aromatic and firmly structured, with black cherry flavors and notes of black olive and anise. The **2004 Barrack "Brand" (\$40)** blends merlot with a dash of cabernet franc and cabernet sauvignon for a wine that's brimming with sweet cherry and berry flavors and hints of anise and coffee. In the **2004 Barrack "Ten-Goal" (\$60)**, cabernet sauvignon is dominant; the wine is quite aromatic, with bright flavors of Bing cherries, chocolate and spice wrapped around a firm core of tannin. (I also tasted the **2005 versions of Brand and Ten-Goal**, and both are extremely promising.)

**Hitching Post** wines, best known for pinot noir, has produced a dark, savory **2004 merlot from Westerly Vineyard (\$25)**, mostly to pour at the Hitching Post restaurant in Buellton. The wine offers ripe black cherry fruit, firm acidity and notes of anise and sage. (There's a certain irony to this merlot that's noted on the wine's back label: The Hitching Post restaurant and wines rocketed to stardom in the movie "Sideways," a film that famously bashes merlot.)

From **Foxen Vineyards** comes a **2004 cabernet sauvignon from Vogelzang Vineyard (\$50)** that's available only direct from the winery. The wine, which really opens up in the glass, displays lush, sweet cherry fruit and firm structure. Coming this summer is the **2004 Foxen Alegria (\$35)**, a blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc from Vogelzang and Westerly that has bright cherry fruit, some savory notes and very firm tannins at this point.

The structure of these reds suggests that they should age. That was confirmed when I tasted some older wines from the area. The **2001 Babcock Vogelzang Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon**, for example, was still amazingly youthful, ripe and dense, with black cherry and black currant fruit, a hint of anise and polished tannins. Also very good was a juicy **2001 Westerly Estate Reserve Merlot, Lot 18**, with its bright, concentrated cherry flavors, a hint of tar and long finish.