

FEATURE ARTICLE

Climbing the Peaks: Santa Cruz Mountain Pinot Noirs

Welcome to the Geography of Flavor.

by [Clark Smith](#)

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Pinot Noir vines are neatly landscaped to exploit the terroir characteristics of the Santa Cruz Mountains hillsides.

On October 22nd, 2008, the *Best-of-Appellation*™ panel attacked the most complete collection of [Santa Cruz Mountains](#) Pinots ever assembled. We knew we were in for a treat. And our expectations were met.

The [Santa Cruz Mountains](#) are the source of some of the most intense and distinctive wines on the planet; and [Pinot Noir](#) is their king. And unlike other regions, it's almost all single vineyard wines. Since multi-vineyard blends are in a decided minority, we were treated to a wonderful opportunity to look for patterns. Thanks to the tireless efforts of Mary Lindsay, President of the Viticulture Association of the Santa Cruz Mountains and ace



Early spring at Muns Vineyard offers a sweeping vista of Silicon Valley beyond.

viticulturalist Prudy Foxx in mapping out these tiny patches on Google Maps, and the generous cooperation of local wineries in completing our extensive, nosey Product Information Forms, we got a chance to enquire here in great depth into the geography of flavor. I had also crammed for the exam, getting to know many of the personalities of the region through the fine writing of Regional Correspondent Laura Ness.

I've already chronicled the unusual topology, climatology and history of the region in my recent article on the [Chardonnays of the region](#). The characteristics that one finds in the bottle are a product of three influences. First, the native terroir, which derives from climate and soil. Secondly, the viticultural choices applied to the site, principal

among which is clonal choice. Third, the methodology each winemaker employs to fashion a product intended for a specific type of consumer.

These influences combine to form each wine's style profile. We determined four profiles, each practised throughout the AVA:

"Solid" - Clean, balanced wines with structural integrity and ageability. This style may be somewhat closed and

hard in youth, and can require sophisticated skill to appreciate their subtleties in youth.

“Ethereal” – *Seductive wines of great aromatic mystery, usually expressing complex perfume rather than fruit. These may be very light-colored wines, dense in aromatics rather than necessarily possessing much structure.*

“Impact” – *Here size matters. These wines impress more than seduce, with forward fruit, weighty on the palate and often with substantial alcohol, all intended to blow you away.*

“Distinctive” – *These are wines of place, grouped by no common thread other than their goal of expressing distinctive terroir features rather than pleasing the palate in any other way. They are “art for art’s sake” and, as such, they may possess unexpected characteristics and imbalances.*

It will be clear to you from perusing our assignments of these designations that a single winery will offer different style profiles in different years. Nature apparently trumps nurture in this region, and unlike most of California, vintage variation is a simple fact of agrarian life.

SEND IN THE CLONES

Since almost every vineyard is a mix of clones, it was not possible to gain a primary understanding of clonal differences from the tasting by itself. Likewise, I realized right away that my own experience with clones in the [North Coast](#) and the [Santa Rita Hills](#) didn’t translate very well to the way they express themselves in this unusual terrain. Prudy Foxx drew a key distinction between the newly available Dijon clones 114, 115, 667 and 777, which possess clean, rich fruit, perfume and solid structure but lack the earthy truffle funk and exotic sandalwood of older selections. Laura Ness shared her notes on clones of the region, generalizing from her years of experience:

Clone 114: Cranberry aromas, clove, citrus, good structure, nice backbone, coffee brandy finish (very nice!).

Clone 115: Lively cranberry, orange oil, furniture polish, cran-raisin, cloves; bright raspberry, light body, guava, strawberries, lots of electricity.

Clone 667: dark, brooding, intense, earthy blackberries, licorice, quite tannic, a hint of orange peel. Good structure and lush texture, raspberry, blackberry and cedar - like Big Foot.

Clone 777: Bright, spicy, guava, persimmon, hints of citrus, spritely raspberry, cherries, bright acid, raspberry, sarsaparilla and coffee.

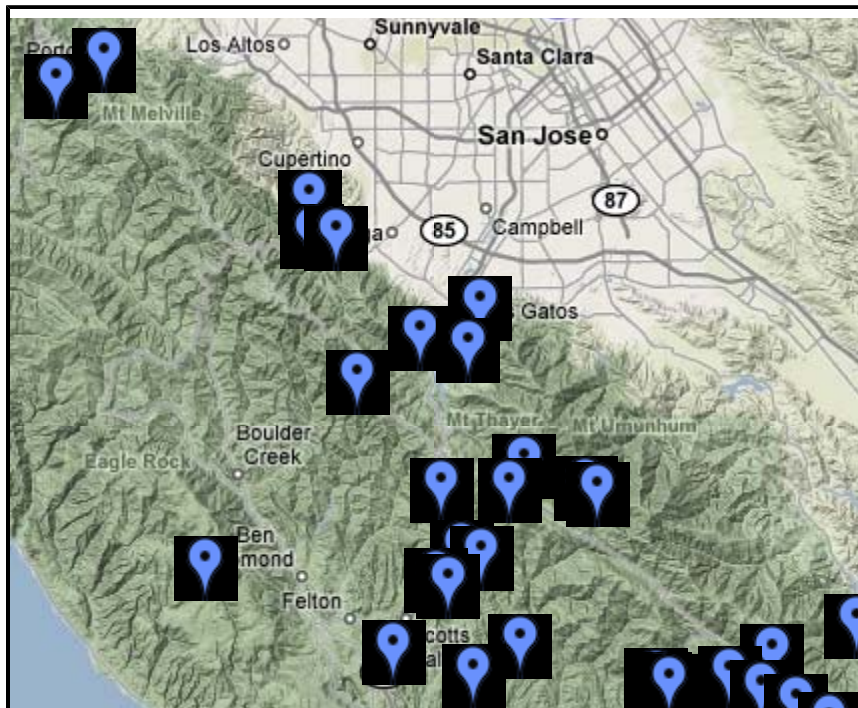
Clone 05: (Pommard) Complex, good tannin, earthy, rich texture, intense, very knitted together: the most Burgundian of all. Big, smoky, dense, root beer, cloves, pomegranate, hazelnut and herbs.

Martini Clone (Clone 18) : Big, fat meaty and fruity aromas, quite appealing with some perfume; hints of nutmeg along with lush strawberry jam, nice texture and great acidity.

Mt Eden Clone (Clone 37) : light body, ethereal, musky, dusty earth, dried cherries, vibrant acidity, sandalwood and sage.



A MACRO VIEW OF MICRO-TERROIRS



[View Larger Map](#)

The Santa Cruz Mountains contain so much natural and winemaking variation that it is challenging to write a characterization which encompasses them all but also sets them apart from other California AVAs. Yet the general distinctions are clear, and I will stipulate that Pinots of this region are relatively easy to pick out from a blind tasting. The common characteristic is their brash masculinity. (When my notes below refer to femininity, it is a relative observation). These are edgy wines, full of frank, sometimes peculiar aromas of place, intense floral notes, complex red berry, concentration, and above all, a driving acidity and mineral energy which does not appear at all in most of the North Coast and is found only occasionally further south, except

with high altitude on limestone.

Although every site in this mountainous region is unique, there are clear trends which impart neighborhood personalities. We sorted our tasting into six general climatic zones within the region, moving more or less from North to South:

The northern extension along Skyline Boulevard. The coolest part of the AVA, and subject to vintage variation in color and structure. Very floral wines full of lavender and exotic spice elements, black cherry and earthy cocoa and tobacco. Tending towards substantial acidity unless hangtime is extended.

- **Clos de la Tech Winery**
2006 Pinot Noir Cuvee Domaine Lois Louise [Impact](#)
- **Thomas Fogarty Winery**
2005 Pinot Noir Estate [Solid](#)
- **Thomas Fogarty Winery**
2006 Pinot Noir [Ethereal](#)
- **Thomas Fogarty Winery**
2007 Pinot Noir [Solid](#)
- **Kings Mountain Vineyard**
2005 Pinot Noir [Distinctive](#)
- **Kings Mountain Vineyard**
1999 Pinot Noir Estate [Impact](#)
- **Kings Mountain Vineyard**
2003 Pinot Noir [Solid](#)



The hills overlooking Saratoga / Los Gatos. Moderately colored, graceful, feminine wines of great balance and depth. Cranberry aromas offset by sage and juniper. The truffled Mt. Eden clone is included in



most vineyard mixes.

- **Kings Mountain Vineyard**
2003 Pinot Noir [Solid](#)
- **Savannah-Chanelle Vineyards**
2005 Pinot Noir Estate [Solid](#)
- **Muccigrosso Vineyards**
2005 Pinot Noir [Ethereal](#)
- **Black Ridge Vineyards**
2006 Pinot Noir [Ethereal](#)
- **Ahlgren Vineyard**
2004 Pinot Noir [Impact](#)
- **Mount Eden Vineyards**
2006 Pinot Noir [Distinctive](#)



The high central hilltops and ridgelines near Summit Road. Taste

here the tops of mountains. Bright white cherry and pomegranate aromas set against a distinct peatiness and pronounced perfumes of drought-tolerant vegetation such as sage, bay, marigold and dandelion. Favored in years like 2005 with ample Spring rains and a cool growing season. The region's most uncompromising, intensely minerally wines, with a strong sense of place.

- **Muns Vineyard**
2005 Pinot Noir Estate [Distinctive](#)
- **Loma Prieta Winery**
2007 Pinot Noir Estate [Ethereal](#)
- **Silver Mountain Vineyards**
2005 Pinot Noir *Muns Vineyard* [Distinctive](#)
- **Silver Mountain Vineyards**
2006 Pinot Noir *Muns Vineyard* [Ethereal](#)
- **Silver Mountain Vineyards**
2005 Pinot Noir *Miller Hill Vineyard* [Solid](#)
- **Silver Mountain Vineyards**
2004 Pinot Noir *Miller Hill Vineyard* [Impact](#)
- **Burrell School Vineyards**
2005 Pinot Noir Estate [Ethereal](#)
- **Burrell School Vineyards**
2006 Pinot Noir Estate [Solid](#)
- **Muns Vineyard**
2004 Pinot Noir Estate [Ethereal](#)
- **Muns Vineyard**
2006 Pinot Noir Estate [Ethereal](#)



The Highway 17 corridor. This is the coastal redwood cloud forest west of the summit, with moist conditions and heavy fog influence, where vineyards are located in sunny pockets, tiny box canyons and sequestered balmy enclaves. Favored in hotter, drier years when the Summit area has problems.

- **Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard**
2006 Pinot Noir *Branciforte Creek Vineyard* [Solid](#)
- **Hallcrest Vineyards**
2005 Pinot Noir *Vista Del Mare* [Solid](#)
- **Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard**
2003 Pinot Noir [Solid](#)
- **Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard**
2005 Pinot Noir *Branciforte Creek Vineyard* [Solid](#)
- **Sarah's Vineyard**
2007 Pinot Noir *Rebhahn* [Impact](#)
- **Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard**
2005 Pinot Noir *Bailey's Branciforte Ridge* [Ethereal](#)
- **Clos Tita**
2005 Pinot Noir Estate [Solid](#)
- **Clos Tita**



- 2006 Pinot Noir *Hicks Family Vineyard* [Solid](#)
- **Vine Hill Winery**
2006 Pinot Noir *Raffaelli Vineyard* [Solid](#)
- **McHenry Vineyard**
2005 Pinot Noir Estate [Ethereal](#)
- **Hunter Hill Vineyard & Winery**
2005 Pinot Noir Estate [Impact](#)



The southern skirt from Santa Cruz to Corralitos. The warmest part of the AVA, mostly Region II, but with cool summers and a long season. In general, the youngest part of the region, full of young Turks using modern Burgundian ideas such as whole berry fermentation and extended maceration, and plenty of the new Dijon clonal mix, usually 10-15 years old. These are the balmiest climes, usually Region II and also the lowest altitude, commonly just above the region's 400 foot defining minimum. Wines are relatively feminine and comely, with lovely strawberry and maraschino cherry aromas, rosewater perfume, spinach leaf and exotic spices. Achingly dense oily flavors, full fine sweet tannins and substantial acidity. Complex and satisfying.

- **Storrs Winery**
2006 Pinot Noir [Ethereal](#)
- **Storrs Winery**
2006 Pinot Noir [Ethereal](#)
- **Sarah's Vineyard**
2007 Pinot Noir *Veranda Vineyard* [Impact](#)
- **Roudon-Smith Winery**
2004 Pinot Noir *Veranda Vineyard* [Ethereal](#)
- **Loma Prieta Winery**
2007 Pinot Noir *Saveria Vineyard* [Distinctive](#)
- **Hallcrest Vineyards**
2004 Pinot Noir *Terra Serena* [Distinctive](#)
- **Hallcrest Vineyards**
2006 Pinot Noir *Diane's Block* [Distinctive](#)
- **Hallcrest Vineyards**
2006 Pinot Noir Estate [Distinctive](#)
- **Bargetto Winery**
2006 Pinot Noir *Deverey Vineyard* [Impact](#)
- **Domenico Wines**
2005 Pinot Noir *Deverey Vineyard* [Solid](#)
- **Domenico Wines**
2006 Pinot Noir *Deverey Vineyard* [Solid](#)
- **Hallcrest Vineyards**
2005 Pinot Noir *Belle Farms* [Solid](#)



The tiny AVA of Ben Lomond Mountain, with its high altitude perch in sight of the Pacific. Dark colored, highly structured wines which can require substantial ageing. Rhubarb and strawberry fruit, with mustard and juniper accents. Packed with mineral energy, but warm and round. Only one winery currently labels Ben Lomond AVA wines.

- **Beauregard**
2006 Pinot Noir *Ben Lomond Mountain AVA* [Solid](#)

The Blends. As with the Chardonnays, the multi-vineyard blends often supply the best place to get started with SCM wines, offering a little more balance and a little less edge. Yet we found very distinctive wines as well.

- **Cinnabar Vineyard and Winery**
2006 Pinot Noir [Solid](#)
- **Hallcrest Vineyards**
2004 Pinot Noir [Solid](#)
- **Sarah's Vineyard**
2007 Pinot Noir [Distinctive](#)
- **Clos Tita**



- 2005 Pinot Noir [Impact](#)
- **Vine Hill Winery**
- 2006 Pinot Noir [Solid](#)



SHIFTING PARADIGMS

In his superb chronicle *Matt Kramer's New California Wine* (Running Press, 2004), the author calls Santa Cruz Mountain Pinot Noirs "problematic." While praising their potential as wines of "somewhereness," he argues that "the concentration makes it difficult to achieve the requisite delicacy that sets apart the best Pinot Noirs." I found, on the contrary, that these wines walked both sides of the street awfully well, putting sense of place foremost to be sure, but with grace, depth and ethereality which showed us new possibilities for what the best Pinot Noirs can accomplish. While they would certainly stick out on a wine list in Beaune, the good French sommeliers of my acquaintance would treasure their uniqueness and get darned busy in the kitchen finding uses for them.

In much old-school, stuck-in-the-mud wine journalism, varietal labeling still drives the quality discussion. I'm not just talking New World here - appellation labeling regulations in Europe are also a culprit when Burgundy equals Pinot Noir, and we channel our appreciation through that competitive global lens, creating a simple quality pyramid with a few winners at the top.



It's near harvest time at Muns Vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Hayden were great, but what about Charlie Daniels' "*The Devil Went Down to Georgia*"? Gotta make room for that, right?

Most pro teams end up losers. Who remembers the teams who lost the Superbowl? But thankfully, wine is not a sport. It's a consumer product. There's a winner's circle for every terroir if we can connect each fan with whatever turns them on.

These unique and exquisite Pinots point towards a different way to think about wine quality. Grape varieties are simply the instruments through which terroirs express their own liquid music. It would be truly silly for us to listen to music only so we can pick out the best pieces for piano, slide guitar or cello. We don't waste much time talking about the "requisite delicacy" that sets apart the best violin pieces. Mozart and Hayden were great, but what about Charlie Daniels' "*The Devil Went Down to Georgia*"?

Here's my invitation: Let's learn together just how to view wine first-and-foremost through the lens of place, celebrating diversity and grooving on the wild and the novel. Otherwise, don't cha know, we'll miss out on a pile of really good stuff. Screw requisite delicacy. If you need proof that life can hold unexpected grandeur, I am here to tell you that these wild beauties are the place to start.

***See the Complete List of wines advanced to the
Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir Best-of-Appellation™ List***

Photos of vineyard views by Mary Lindsay